

Waving Hello Again

Far from washed up, **Smashing Pumpkins** balance past and present flawlessly on *Oceania*

by EMILY TRACE

TO SAY THAT The Smashing Pumpkins helped define an era would not only be an understatement, but also incomplete; when their game-changing new album, *Oceania*, releases on June 19th, it's very likely that the nineties were only the *first* era that they'll help to define. For the first time in a decade, singer/songwriter Billy Corgan truly has the floor, but he's not the man that many may remember; in a recent interview with Johnny Firecloud for *antiquiet.com*, he describes himself as a "weirdo that won't go away", and more himself than he's ever been before. Given The Pumpkin's massive success almost twenty years ago, few musicians could have more right to nostalgia than Corgan, yet not in this album nor in his interviews does he indulge in it. His long-term fans might expect a certain amount of disinterested vulnerability from the front man they knew, if it were accompanied by the corresponding post-punk defensiveness that characterized many of The Smashing Pumpkins' greatest hits. But the Billy we're about to reconnect with is not only as strident and present as the new songs, but also generously open and unashamed about how his life and work have developed in the last decade. After trying on many conceptual identities in the past, he says of himself, "Now I'm actually strong enough where I don't need a mask. I'm just myself. I'm fifteen pounds overweight, I've got crooked teeth, I've got a funny voice, but I'm f---ing good at what I do."

Now, in the spirit of journalistic honesty, I must admit what will initially disenchant many readers and dedicated fans: twenty-four hours ago, I didn't know who Billy Corgan was. I'm not a member of Generation X, but of the less notorious and significantly less popular Generation Y... reluctantly, if that helps. My history with this band began at four a.m. yesterday, when I played *Oceania* the whole way through without pausing, taking notes the whole time. And upon reading his interview, I was relieved and delighted to find that his statements about the album were syncing up with my ideas about what I was hearing. And this is perhaps is one of the most appealing things about *Oceania*: it is unrelentingly sincere, so much so that even someone in the most abject ignorance of The Smashing Pumpkins can pick it up, put it on, and ride the ever-cresting wave it initiates.

Equally appealing is the album's unique emotional content,



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which is disarmingly genuine and unadorned when contrasted with the band's wrenching grunge-era style. Corgan admits "it's really hard to produce great work if you don't open up that part of your heart that just doesn't want to be opened. It requires a level of honesty and vulnerability that's just really uncomfortable, certainly at 45." But while he says that taking emotional

risks for the album was one of the most challenging parts of the process, being conscious and making conscious creative choices sculpted that vulnerability to its best advantage. The album may prove to be a polarizing release among fans for this reason; in contacting fans that have been on board with The Pumpkins since their 1989 inception, I found the diverse reactions in line with the boldness of the band's development. Many are energized by the accepting, unafraid way that pain, love, and isolation are confronted in this album, while others miss the despair and frustration of the earlier days. But Corgan doesn't feel that the presence of hope negates the power of what's being said; "I was always offended by the idea that I could only write from a dark place or only the darkest stuff was worth listening to." He suggests that the identity struggle he and the band members went through during the recording process infused the music with recognizable angst and edge, but this time around, "the blues just feel a little bit brighter." Far from being overwrought, *Oceania* has too much to say to let decorative sentimentality pull them under; make no mistake, the sentiment is there, but is delivered with a simplicity that soars and an honesty that disarms. It is as if however dissatisfied Corgan may be with the world and the state of today's music, he is completely comfortable with his own restlessness, with the challenges that accompany an identity perpetually in flux. "I've had to take a very long, circuitous route through my talent and my obsessions," he observes, "To realize that there's some guy in there who's trying to



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get out.” And letting this internal discovery blend with his public persona must have something to do with Corgan’s vivid resolve to exist and create in the moment. Though the album does not, by any means, burn the foundation that The Smashing Pumpkins have invested decades building, it is committed to the present, to the cycle of impulse, reaction and artistic choice as it occurs from breath to breath. Corgan comments on how he and the band are committed to growth, saying that “if we’ve learned anything from playing as an intact unit now for over two years, it’s that unless we create our own sound and our own legacy, it’s a given that people will default to what they know; whether it’s my past or someone else’s.” This is not just crucial to the band’s plans for success, but to their integrity as well, as he goes on to say that they’re “not up there trying to pretend like it’s 1994. 1994 wasn’t that f---ing great either. The world has never been more dangerous than it is right now, and we have a limp, impotent artistic response to the situation.” As a newly made fan, I’m grateful that Corgan decided

to respond as he has; I was engaged by this album’s forward momentum, by the immediacy that pervaded even its most subdued and introspective moments.

It’s too soon for Generation X to be discussed in history classes, and no high school will have a Grunge Day for at least another decade. Even now as the twenty-first century has finally begun to assert its own identity, the dissatisfied dissonance of the nineties refuses to become a nostalgic memory, instead synthesizing its tried and trusted methods with new creative risks. Generation X is the most unknown generation to me because their heyday came and went when the edges of my world ended with school fences and 6 p.m. curfews. While masses of grunged-out teens and twenty-something’s were packed into stadiums for The Smashing Pumpkins, I danced to Aqua at heavily chaperoned school dances. But *Oceania* lets me to see how others remember the nineties, and understand the decade of my childhood in a way I couldn’t have known it before. The songs are rooted enough in the band’s history to churn with the restlessness of the era, but open enough to interact with in the immediate, passing moment. Without sacrificing either tenderness or momentum, the heartbeat of *Oceania* is not heard as an echo, but felt as a pulse. “Being in The Pumpkins will always be defined by what we can create from our hands and hearts right now,” says Corgan. “And I wouldn’t have it any other way.”