

PWR BTTM: Pageant

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PWR BTTM set out to make a safe space for young queer kids through their music and concerts. What's depressingly clear now is that they've, in fact, trodden into ours.

The copious sexual abuse allegations against band member Ben Hopkins – and the accusations of complacency against the other half of the band, Liv Bruce – sour everything that could have made their second album *Pageant* great. Their exuberant fuckable-ness comes across as jocky instead of empowering. A chorus like “Answer my text, you dick!” sounds possessive instead of channeling the great universal feelings of a loser in love. The cuteness of all those songs about emojis and getting your nails done seems as smarmy as some kid trying to play “Wagon Wheel” at a party to get laid. Their pretense as a mouthpiece for queer youth starts to feel as phony as Target shilling rainbow-colored stuffed bears for Pride Month.



And “Now Now”... God, it's almost too creepy to think about. It's PWR BTTM's celebration of themselves as a rallying point for queer kids to bond over. “When are you going to do that?” they sing. A massed crowd enthusiastically responds “Now!” in the same manner as their fans would at a show. Those kids sound so happy, so free, so comfortable, and you wonder if Hopkins doesn't just fill venues up with them to have more people to hump on after the show.

When PWR BTTM played at safe-space punk venue the Boreal in Eugene, Oregon on one of the last days of the Obama administration, it was like a Beatles show. The crowd screamed – not cheered, fucking shrieked their heads off. It was beside itself with admiration for these two genderqueer gods, so glam and so sexy. Everyone wanted to be them and/or fuck them. Ben Hopkins, drenched in glitter and sweat, went around to say hi and take selfies with everyone. People of all genders melted into ecstasy. They were the star, which means they had power. And we know some powerful people believe that when you're a star, you can do anything.

A safe space is not some magic circle that repels anyone it deems unworthy. Any given “safe space” in the world is probably full of secret bigots, abuse apologists, people who have done awful things in the past they would rightly be shunned for, people who will continue to do awful things without reprimand. What a safe space means is that when people sniff out other people's bullshit, they call them out on it. And what a spectacular calling-out PWR BTTM has received.

Pageant has been excised from stores and streaming. I'm not sure this is a good idea. I worry its rarity will become a selling point and that it will be coveted, perhaps even develop a cult. It should have been allowed to remain a festering boil on the face of queer punk. It should not be allowed to develop mystique, to become a collector's item. It's a simple fact that the allegations against Hopkins will not perturb many listeners. People will want to hear this record, and making it harder to listen to it will only give it a new selling point, as if it were the lost *Smile* sessions.

That it holds a Metacritic score of 85, preceding an unspoken covenant among critics not to review this record, will not help. I have chosen to review this album because I do not believe art and artist can be separated in this situation. *Pageant* has revealed itself as a hypocritical piece of art, because PWR BTTM's modus operandi is in part to empower marginalized music fans looking for an occasional feel-good in a world populated by... people like PWR BTTM.

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