

Gary Numan: *Savage: Songs from a Broken World*

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9/24/2017

Gary Numan left post-Brexit Britain for Los Angeles only to find himself smack-dab in the middle of the Trump regime. Numan, who comes across as a sober man of science, seems mostly pissed that Trump's pulled out of the Paris agreement—so his new science-fiction vision, *Savage: Songs from a Broken World*, takes place in a world ravaged by environmental devastation and populated by scrappy bands of survivors.



This makes sense. After all, this is a Gary Numan album, and we don't go to Numan for nuanced discussions of global warming: we go for dystopian visions. It's hard to fault Numan for interpreting something so pressing and complex as little more than good fantasy fodder, because that's what Numan does naturally. Part of the charm of his most popular work, made when he was barely out of his teens, was the glee this kid took in boiling down his intake of Isaac Asimov and Philip K. Dick into silly, thrilling sci-fi pop.

But *Savage* falls flat on the worldbuilding side of things. The details are sketched out in broad historical anecdotes and worrying descriptions of a sandy landscape. We don't get any characters or specifics, just a general idea of a world in turmoil. There's an interesting undercurrent of Middle Eastern influence in the samples and artwork, but it's hard to tell whether it's because Numan's new world has any particular Arab influence—perhaps owing to the influence of refugees from the war-torn worst of that region—or just because “Arab” and “desert” fit together too well aesthetically for Numan to resist.

Worldbuilding usually works better through sounds than lyrics anyway, and the records that really open up and create their own universes are often electronic albums that contain few to no lyrics at all—Burial's *Untrue* or Luomo's *Vocalcity*, to cite two examples from a long list. Even *Replicas*, Gary Numan's masterpiece as Tubeway Army, did a better job capturing the chill of a computerized singularity with its creeping textures and stiff synthesizers than through Numan's stories about a post-human future.

The music here's no help. Numan's one of the biggest influences on the early '90s school of synth-rock aggravators—Nine Inch Nails, Marilyn Manson—and for the last 20 years or so his main mission seems to be to show the kids how it's done. But while those artists bring range, dynamism and flat-out fun to their work, Numan's music plods, built around big synths and bigger guitars underlining uninspired chord changes.

Numan's mostly known in the U.S. as a one-hit wonder for 1979's “Cars,” but in Britain he commands enough cultural cachet that *Savage* charted at No. 2, only behind the new Foo Fighters. Indeed, there's a sneaky chart-lust underlying these songs. They don't immediately come across as pop, but Numan can't say no to a sugary chorus, usually revolving around a few reliable, sentence-starting words: “when they—” (“Ghost Nation”), “everything I—” (“The End of Things”), “my name is—” (“My Name Is Ruin”).

But these songs are too long and plodding to really work as pop songs. In fact, it's hard to say what *Savage* does work as. It's not good chart music, it's not good science fiction, but I suppose if vague dystopianism tickles your fancy, it's a safe bet.

- Label:
BMG
- Release Date:
September 15, 2017