

# Kurt Vile: Bottle It In

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Kurt Vile has retreated further into his own head than ever or *Bottle It In*—or maybe his head's just further up his own ass than ever before. This is Vile in Mark Kozelek-circa-*Common as Light and Lovemode*, where an indie stalwart with a distinct style embodies and extends his craft to such an extreme that it scans as either self-parody or a logical endpoint to a slow and steady development. Those already skeptical may well be infuriated, but those who enjoy Kurt Vile's work for its endless peregrinations on laziness will find their hero's craft more intriguing than ever.

I'm biased: I love this shit, and I love when artists reach this degree of fuck-you auteurism. This record could easily have been self-titled, so completely does it embody what makes his music so distinctive in the crowded indie-rock world. It's not his best album—that'd be 2015's *Wakin on a Pretty Daze*, which laid the blueprint for his style—and it's not the best place to start unless you want to jump off the deep end and understand why people like his music so much, accessibility and concessions to newbie fans be damned. *Bottle It In* is, however, definitive.

Filling nearly the length of a CD *Bottle It In* is one of those albums that really deepens, and its ostensible pop songs ("Rollin' with the Flow") feel as much part of the rugged landscape as its most indulgent experiments ("Bottle It In," with Mary Lattimore's harp doing its best imitation of a guitarist ruminating on one string while flat on their back). This isn't an album that's interested in pop songs; it prefers to sprawl into the sunset. Lyrics from one song seem like they might have wandered into the next: "I was far away," "I was long gone," "I was running in my mind"...

Three 10-minute monsters take up a disproportionate amount of runtime. The first is the lead single, "Bassackwards," which reminds us that Vile's dedication to his sound is in no small part what redeems his noncommittal approach to lyricism and album structure. The stereo shimmer of his guitars is one of his most alluring musical signatures, placing him in the well-made rock tradition of titans like the Rolling Stones and Tom Petty who are otherwise much more involved in their lives than the cosmic drifter Vile plays. He puts a lot of work into sounding so care-free.

The other longer songs are where fans and newbies alike will suffer the ultimate litmus test. The title track and "Skinny Mini" sound half-

assed. There's no pearly, spit-shined studio work to show here; they could be demos. "Bottle It In" rides an unchanging, vaguely hip-hop loop that could have been recorded on an iPhone or worse for nearly eleven minutes. And on "Skinny Mini" the singer spends about five minutes trying to come up with the most ridiculous possible pet name for his wife before turning on the overdrive for some freak-noise guitar showmanship.

These songs are the rock 'n' roll equivalent of those mixtapes that are obviously just the rapper and their friends cueing up a hard-drive of beats and seeing what happens between prodigious blunt-tokes. The question is whether or not that matters. How much elbow grease needs to go into an album before it can be considered great? Is the half-assery part of the effect or do we only forgive his slacker screeds because he put so much love into building their platforms? Is this the best album he could have given us? Would a more fussed-over work even be better?

Vile says he worked on *Bottle It In* intermittently between touring and recording last year's sweet duet album with Courtney Barnett, *Lotta Sea Lice*, which, despite its friends-in-a-room camaraderie, was a more "solid" rock record than this one. Many of the complaints you'll hear about this album might be mitigated if it were sold as a compilation rather than as an album proper. But at least it's not a diminishing return. A Kurt Vile album-by-numbers, anyway, would have been lazier than a Kurt Vile album that finds the extremes of what those words can mean.