

Sick Boy

The Chainsmokers

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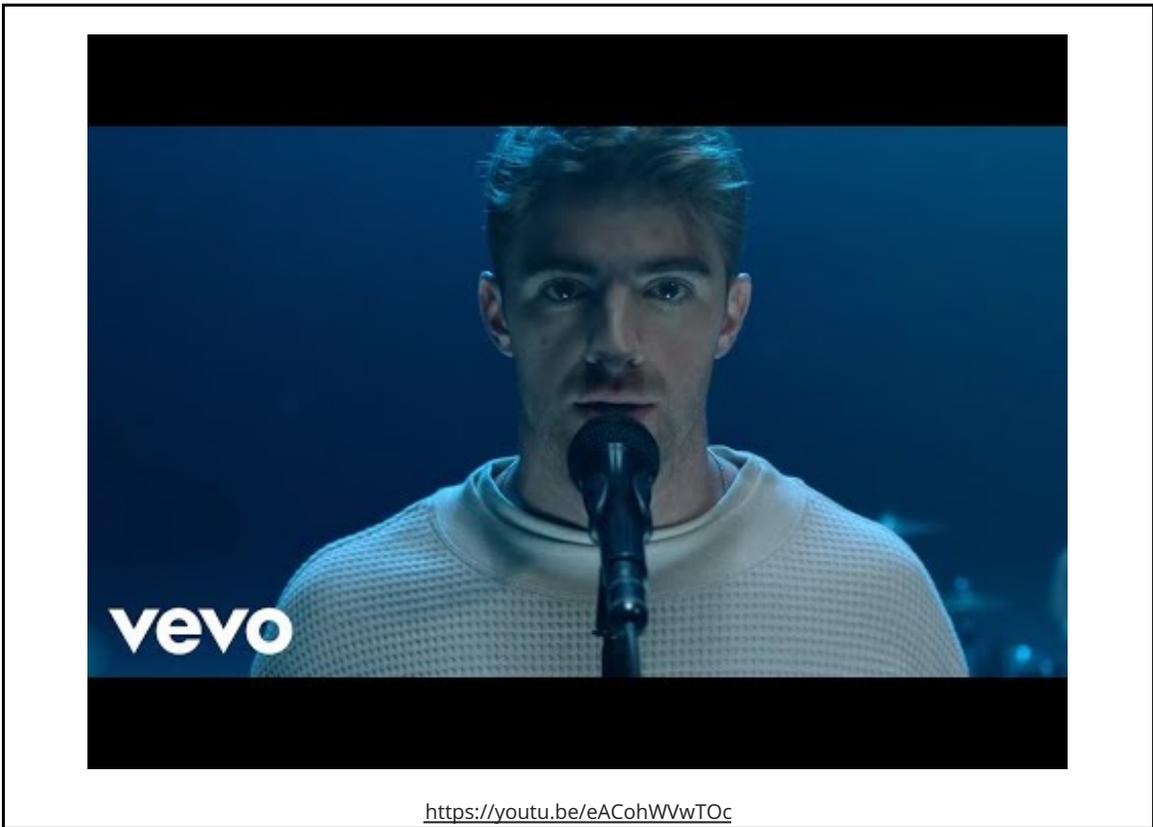
14 December 2018

The Chainsmokers's *Sick Boy* owes a lot to Justin Bieber's *Purpose*, not only in its chipmunk infestation and Axe-scented approach to pop but in how it's meant to be a mea culpa for personal transgressions. Bieber's *annus horribilis* of abandoned monkeys and egged houses was all but forgotten when he put out a record that was sort of about saying sorry but mostly about his ability to still make vital music. And Andrew Taggart's pop startup is as well-known for its product as for the boorish behavior of its bosses. Taggart and his partner Alex Pall, who seems more of a PR agent than a producer, admit that sex and cash are at least as much of an impetus for their project as the product. Their candid materialism skirts the line between refreshing frankness and open contempt for their audience.



You might recall their performance of early single "Selfie" on *American Idol*, where they left the track idly playing as they raced around to snap selfies with elated crowd members. It's arguable that a lot of the disdain towards their music stems from their behavior rather than its actual quality, because the Chainsmokers actually beat a lot of their pop-EDM contemporaries in the songwriting department. Taggart and/or team have a knack for writing about the bad memories that gestate into good ones after enough time. But if we're to believe him, all that partying is really wearing on him, and he's worried people like him for those qualities alone.

It's hard to tell whether or not to believe him, because we're so used to thinking of the Chainsmokers as a con that even his moments of "honesty" feel possibly phony. It's even easier to be cynical amid pop's new emo moment, where—as its patron saint Drake predicted all the way back in 2011—skeletons in the closet get "hung up like Halloween decorations". Pop music in the early Trump era is inescapably sad. Sex, drugs, booze, and partying fuel paranoia and self-loathing rather than rock-star elation. It's hard to shake the feeling Taggart's stealing his sadness from somewhere else.



<https://youtu.be/eACohWwTOc>

On earlier singles, Taggart over-announced like a pop-punk poppet. Here, he adopts the pinched rasp favored by Brits like Sam Smith, Sampha, and James Blake, suggesting either a fondness for whiskey or chocolate milk. Elsewhere, as on the title track, he breaks into the half-flow of Twenty One Pilots' Tyler Joseph, just ominous enough not to scare off Christian teens. Even the thematic material is awfully similar to what we hear on Post Malone's *Beerbongs & Bentleys*. When Taggart sings a line like "paranoid beauty with a dark past", is the line really about the woman or the dark fantasy of beautiful, doomed, self-destructive relationships? How much does it differ functionally from "she's got seven personalities, and every one's a tragedy?" (The previous line is "red pill in my hand;" could he really be as clueless as Maroon 5 about the connotations of those words?)

Taggart's a better songwriter than he's given credit for, but he's incapable of stirring any sympathy for himself. Where *Sick Boy* works are in its more passive-aggressive moments, where the pop form itself grows fangs and fights back. The chorus of "Everybody Hates Me" delightfully subverts a classic rap trope: "Walk in the club like everybody hates me," he barks, before shouting the title as if inciting the crowd to chant in unison and affirm its loathing. He might as well be singing "gather round, all you clowns, let me hear you say..."



<https://youtu.be/SJOgTMP8cs4>

And "Sirens", against all the odds, is really fucking clever. He's in the middle of some kind of crisis; it's not really clear what. Maybe he's on drugs; maybe she's on drugs. But then he exclaims "I just want to hear the sound of the sirens... here they come, here they come," and the drop comes in, accompanied by sampled emergency vehicles. The drop is typically meant to be the peak of the party. Here, it represents the consequences as the ambulance comes and rescues him from the aftermath. This is the first song by the patron saints of uber-pop that would be unwise to play in a moving car. I'm reminded of Future crying "I'm trying to get high as I can" on "Hate the Real Me" at odd tempos as if discouraging crowds from singing along.

These are the best songs on the album because the contrast between the glitz and glamor of pop and the ugly emotions Taggart invokes makes the music sound more convincingly *wrong* than the chic sadness on the charts. They're depressing in creative and legitimately jarring ways, not ways we've heard better from every lean lizard and third-rate Drake acolyte on the radio. The Chainsmokers' cheerful phoniness was an asset on their 2017 debut album *Memories... Do Not Open*, which was trashy but refreshing in how it worked largely on the strength of its songs rather than the sordid details of its creators' lives or any pretense of "authenticity". *Sick Boy* is the reverse. The hooks aren't half as memorable, and what sticks isn't the music but its emotions, which aren't sharply drawn to begin with. Instead of conning us with a smile, Taggart looks at us po-faced, shoves this plate of music in our hands, and shuffles sheepishly away.

Rating:

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