

Punk 'Burn' dishes surreal sonic morsels

CD review

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It's hard to imagine, but punk rock used to be shocking. Oh, how times have changed. These days, top 40 radio is chock full of in-name-only "punk" rock that panders to 10-year-old sensibilities, played by musicians who wouldn't make a rebellious move before checking it out with a marketing expert.

What isn't dumbed-down pop rock is weepy emo nonsense tailor-made for the Abercrombie & Fitch crowd. I didn't get into punk rock to listen to weepy pretty boys sing about their girlfriends. I got into it because I needed a soundtrack to the exercise of bashing my head against the brick wall, otherwise known as daily existence. With The Blood Brothers new release, "...Burn, Piano Island, Burn," I think I've found that soundtrack.

Calling The Blood Brothers hard-core punk would be misstating the fact a little. It's more like Minor Threat smashed into a surrealist exhibition. The Blood Brothers grind away like the best hard-core bands but without the fascist devotion to screaming vocals and the same three chords used by everyone since Black Flag. There are melodies, often sweet ones, but they exist apparently only to keep listeners on their toes. After a vicious guitar assault, they suddenly switch to something that could have been written by Weezer (assuming Rivers Cuomo took some really strong acid), only to switch back and pummel you all over again. The lyrics are a pastiche of surrealist images, creating dark landscapes that make the pounding beats all the more upsetting. The band uses what seems like a stream of consciousness approach to song writing that's a little more clever than what you expect from rock.

The album kicks off in true punk fashion with "Guitar Army," a quick blast of rage that clocks in at 37 seconds. The title track is typical of the rest of the album. The dual vocalist Jordan Billie and Johnny Whitney sound like they spent the morning before the recording session coughing up their lungs. They screech and growl through the lyrics, almost incomprehensibly at times, then suddenly throw out some melodious crooning. "Every Breath is a Bomb" sounds like something out of a carnival sideshow, complete with Wurlitzer piano.

The album's centerpiece is "Ambulance vs. Ambulance," a song that simply sweats menace from its pores. It's also the album's first single, and the track is already burning up the college radio airwaves — and rightfully so. "The Salesman, Denver Max" is the quietest song on the album, practically a whisper compared to the rage expressed on other tracks, but uses this clarity to tell

a twisted story of child abduction. The band stretches its influences a bit with "Six Nightmares at the Pinball Masquerade," which sounds like Captain Beefheart revved up to maximum rpm.

"God Bless You, Blood Thirsty Zeppelins" speeds things back up again and even includes a scary-as-hell "la la la" section. The whole thing ends in fine fashion with "The Shame," a song that just builds and builds until its rather sudden anticlimax, leaving your brain feeling like it has been scrubbed with steel wool.

The album isn't easy to listen to, but challenging material rarely is. It stands up to repeat listening since there is so much to listen to with layer upon layer of sounds, images and ideas. While there are too many rough edges to The Blood Brothers, particularly in the vocals, for the band to ever be accepted commercially, they at least deserve to be noticed. And with the amount of noise these boys make, it would be hard not to pay attention.

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