

THE YEAR OF THE STROKES: THE INFLUENCE OF NYC'S BELOVED BAND

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The absolute last place I should have been on New Year's Eve was Barclays Center in Brooklyn; when it comes to shows, though, I am prone to making some arguably unwise decisions. I woke up that morning just a bit congested and running on an embarrassing amount of sleep. I spent the four-hour bus ride from DC trying to nap through a packed vehicle, and drowned myself in energy tablets the second I stepped into Penn Station. Instead of staying in for the evening, I trekked the twenty minutes from my dorm room—through the blistering cold and past the already tipsy partygoers wandering the sidewalks—toward the epicenter of anxiety: the outside of an arena before a hometown Strokes show.

For weeks, this concert had been the only thing on my mind. New York began to look tainted as my third semester of college came to an end. It no longer felt like the city I had once fallen so deeply in love with. Be it the rigors of academia or the growing pains of getting older, but stress and isolation seemed to follow me everywhere. Music journalism especially looked like a lost cause. All of the interviews and album reviews felt pointless, and I often found myself wondering why I dedicated so much time to the craft in the first place. During finals, in one last attempt to regain some kind of passion, I reimmersed myself in the Strokes' discography. From the second I heard the opening notes to "Is This It," the soft drums and guitar working their way into my psyche, I was in. It was the kind of adoration that hit hard and fast; the kind you can't quite explain until you take some time to think about it. One thing was certain: I was high on the lost joy of loving a band so much that it hurt. I had faith in New York and the art that came out of it. I was immediately brought back to myself again.

That realization made seeing the Strokes my priority, no matter what it took. The grueling wait was worth it to get to be at Barclays Center that night. It was worth it to experience frontman Julian Casablancas' drunken banter in person, to witness Albert Hammond Jr.'s incendiary guitar solo in "Ize of the World," and to hear "Modern Girls & Old Fashioned Men" played for the first time since 2003 (featuring a sweaty, swaying Mac DeMarco). Hysteria ensued as the band premiered a new song called "Ode to the Mets," a hypnotizing, seven-minute epic that makes you feel like you're swirling in space. By the time the clock struck twelve, buckets of confetti streaming down, Hammond Jr. and fellow guitarist Nick Valensi wailing away on "Auld Lang Syne," I couldn't help but feel that something major was about to happen.

"2020, here we come," Casablancas said, addressing the crowd with a grin.

It feels only right to enter the new decade with the same confidence Julian exhibited in that statement. From the minute January rolled in, the Strokes have been serving up content like crazy; something shocking to see after they've spent so much time away. They started with announcing a string of upcoming shows around Europe and the West Coast, the ominous hashtag #TheStrokes2020 following suit. At a recent rally for Democratic candidate Bernie Sanders, the group premiered a new single called "At The Door," with an accompanying music video. Later that night, Casablancas announced that the band's sixth studio LP, *The New Abnormal*, would be released on April 10. It's their first full length record in seven years.

2020 is the only year that the Strokes can—and should—be making their comeback. It was over two decades ago that the band first got their start. They came of age at the turn of the century, in a city still recovering from 9/11, where a sense of fear was as present as the smoke still lingering in the air. They ran amok on E Houston and Delancey, the same streets that I find myself walking on to get to gigs. For as many New York-based fantasies and feelings of nostalgia that the group conjure, the Strokes still manage to create enough of a frenzy to swing themselves into the roaring '20s with ease.

Nonetheless, their return means more than millennial reminiscing and a handful of summer festivals. It's needed now, more than ever.

The Strokes rose to fame quickly; a journey that has been well-admired and sought after since people first got a taste of them. After gaining popularity in England with their EP *The Modern Age* (2001), the fivesome revived the seemingly dead and dreary garage rock genre. *Is This It* (2001), their debut album, went on to define both their career and the lives of music-deprived youth at the time. All eyes were on New York; this time for something much more than tragedy. Rock n' roll was returning to one of its gritty places of birth. Five albums later and the Strokes have gone on to be well recognized for their achievements, most notably by publications like *Spin* (Band Of The Year), *NME*, and *Rolling Stone* (two features on Best Albums of the Decade lists) during the 2000's and 2010's. Their reputation of being a generation's voice, however, might be their highest honor.

It was music that brought me to New York in the first place. My only notions of the city were through the songs, scenes and subcultures that were created there. New York was Greenwich Village as viewed through the eyes of Patti Smith, the Bowery as trampled upon by the Ramones, the depths of Williamsburg as played by nearly every indie band I followed. I still feel that romanticism constantly; the same aura that seems to follow the Strokes everywhere they go. That isn't always a bad thing, though. While it's essential to keep moving forward, looking back on the

past can be a helpful tool in getting there. Having something to hold onto as the years wear on—something constant and invigorating—is dire in order to muster through.

The Strokes served as a guiding light during their formative years and continue to do so today. That's why they've lasted this long: they forge an idea of what can emerge if you want it badly enough. They've inspired countless other artists to begin their own projects, including Arctic Monkeys, Vampire Weekend and the Killers. They also inspire people that aren't musicians. I was only a year old when *Is This It* made the world believe in rock again, yet their music makes me feel like I've been there since the beginning. It's the timeless guitar riffs, the fact that I can lose myself in every single song. They stir something inarticulable inside of me; something that makes me want to stay young forever, that encourages me to live my life with the same kind of optimism and sense of adventure that they did. Though the Strokes aren't the band that made me fall in love with New York City, they are the band that helped me learn to love it again.

The best part? I know I'm not the only one who feels this way.

It's hard to tell what else the Strokes may drop on us this year. *The New Abnormal* could be the worst album the band has ever released. It could be the one that crashes and burns in a pile of wishful thinking; the one that ends our heartfelt relationship for good. Whether that happens or not, I will always think back to seeing them on that frozen winter night, one moment sticking out in particular. Even from my seat in the nosebleed section of Barclays, where the band looked like specks against the spotlights, I could see it unfolding perfectly.

Somewhere around "What Ever Happened?" and "Someday" (the final and most anticipated song of the evening), drummer Fab Moretti stepped out from behind his kit to plow into bassist Nikolai Fraiture for a hug. The whole band joined in on the sentiment, taking turns embracing one another, paying no attention to the audience that cheered from beyond the barricade. For a brief second, I saw them as they once were: five kids brought together by a love of music, fueled by the same yearning to make something that lasts. Thanks to them, it's a feeling that I now know again as well.

I wasn't there to see the band back then, but I'm here now. We're all here now. We're here for the memories, the moments that will happen, and for the idea that the Strokes continue to evoke, transcending their borough and generation.

The idea that there's hope; that we'll make it, someday.