

Music

WHITE STRIPES GET BEHIND ME SATAN (THIRD MAN/V2)

Antipathy for the Devil

The White Stripes drag their feet at the crossroads.

By Franklin Soultis

No band that emerged from the retro-rock class of '01 has done so qualitatively much with so quantitatively little as the White Stripes. The Strokes, the Hives, the Libertines, and a few others have been plenty impressive at collapsing rock history so that the Kinks' 1967 craft meets the Clash's 1977 kick. But Meg and Jack White's neoprimitive combo of drums, guitar, and no-bass collapses not just rock but roots as well, so that the Clash and the Kinks merge with Slim Harpo, Dolly Parton, and the *Anthology of American Folk Music*. On their first four albums they found the crossroads where all sorts of folk musics make turns into pop, but on their latest, *Get Behind Me Satan*, they make a tactical retreat. Recorded on analog equipment in 14 days at Jack White's home studio, the disc is rawer and sparer than almost anything else the duo's done, but they pay a price for that simplicity.

The most obvious drawback, as Sasha Frere-Jones noted in the *New Yorker*, is that the sound of the record is "muddy and obscured, as if recorded in a room covered with wet felt." What's more (or less), Jack White has matched that muffle by putting a damper on his talents. On the Stripes' last album, 2003's *Elephant*, his loud and wild electric guitar helped advance the group past their backwoods amateur shtick, but here he relegates his ax to only three cuts, trading it in for acoustic guitar, piano, and marimba, all of which he plays competently—but no more.

Even on the roaring "Instinct Blues," just when a burning lead should materialize, White plays a few tentative plucks and scratches. And the album's first single, "Blue Orchid," feels unnecessarily abbreviated, like it's begging for a bridge to carry its taut, suspicious mood home.



White Stripes

Frere-Jones called the sonic shortcomings proof of White's self-defeating adherence to the band's "thirteen-songs-in-fourteen-days malarkey." That "malarkey" is an essential part of White's ethos of immediacy—an ethos that's served him pretty well so far. *Get Behind Me Satan* knocked Mariah Carey down a peg when it debuted at number three on the *Billboard* chart, three slots higher than *Elephant* ever climbed. That success—the sort of success that lets you play a three-night stand at the Auditorium Theatre—is due not to White's desire to shoot himself in the foot but to his mastery of

song forms, and if you listen through the murkiness, White is more focused and ambitious than he's been since 2001's *White Blood Cells*. The approach he's chosen works because *Satan* is largely about romantic constraints, a theme that makes the group's musical restraint mean something. If this be malarkey, there's method in it.

Until now the Stripes' songs were exciting because they juxtaposed Saturday night and Sunday morning: the venal desire embraced by blues and confronted by gospel and the romantic innocence that's the stuff of country and pop songs.

"I'm Finding It Harder to Be a Gentleman," a minor ditty from *White Blood Cells*, neatly encapsulates this dichotomy in which the erstwhile gentleman vents his frustration by dropping his girl into the mud puddle he was carrying her across, a chivalrous act so anachronistic and quaint that it alone elevates the tune above the muck of most

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boy-disses-girl songs. *Get Behind Me Satan*, by contrast, has muddy shoes from start to finish—White's romantic innocence has completely collapsed into corruption.

So if "Blue Orchid" feels frustratingly truncated, that's probably the point—it sets the album's mood by answering the question "Will you still love me tomorrow?" with a spiteful "No." "You took a white orchid and turned it blue," White spits, hinting at the succubus accusation resorted to by self-disgusted men from Saint Augustine to the Taliban. The haunting marimba and casual mentions of murder on the next

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song, "The Nurse," make his promise "I'm never gonna let you down" sound like a veiled threat; and "Forever for Her (Is Over for Me)" suggests that betrayal cuts deeper than love. The pleasure of desire usually comes when his girl is absent, like in "My Doorbell," where he's waiting for her to ring it, and "Little Ghost," where she's not even real.

The dark lyrical mood seems to have sparked White's musical muse, and though the arrangements on *Satan* are simple there are surprising stereo separations, bizarre instrumental choices (marimba isn't exactly a blues staple), and subtle echo effects. A few songs misfire, particularly the wearying ballad "White Moon."

But most are either melodically inventive or so confidently classic in form that they feel like covers: "My Doorbell" is a 60s-style soul stirrer, "Little Ghost" sounds like a rip of John Prine ripping the Carter Family, and "I'm Lonely (but Ain't That Lonely Yet)" is Hank Williams by way of Mahalia Jackson. Many of the other songs have the soft-plucking, high-crooning, melancholy feel of *Led Zeppelin III* or the claustrophobic mood of Bruce Springsteen's *Nebraska*, two similar retreats.

But there's the rub. Zeppelin took a step away from the expected on their third album but didn't completely abandon it. The Stripes' step back is more extreme—none of the album's

songs is a full body tackle like "Immigrant Song" or even *White Blood Cells*' "Fell in Love With a Girl." And *Nebraska* and *Led Zeppelin III* weren't end points—just momentary shifts in focus that the artists followed with two of the biggest albums in rock history. *Get Behind Me Satan* portends no such return. The Stripes have dug in their heels—*Satan* is White's personal reaffirmation of his roots in the face of disillusionment.

It's also an artistic recommitment to the woman whose last name he took, his pretend "sister" and real-life ex-wife, Meg. Her skills as a drummer have been much criticized, but she's essential to the White Stripes' mission:

their live shows have always been powered by Jack's manic energy bouncing off Meg's coy implacability and brute timekeeping. She simultaneously plays the role of Jack's sister and his lover, a disturbing duality that's befuddled every critic who's tried to explain it. What Meg is, no matter how you slice it, is her brother's keeper. On the 35-second-long "Passive Manipulation," she's the voice of reason that counters his frustrated yearnings: "Don't just succumb to the wishes of your brothers. . . . You need to know the difference between a father and a lover." The song is unprepossessing as a whisper; where once Jack let his guitar ring as loudly as it could out the

windows of his little room, now he's turned down the sound and closed the windows to the outside world, just so Meg's voice can be heard.

It's still possible that a new foil might inspire Jack White to open those windows again—he's recorded an album with Brendan Benson as the Raconteurs that's set for release next year. But it's equally possible he and Meg might hunker down deeper to make good but minor albums that'll put them in a league with willfully weird boy-girl duos like the Moldy Peaches. For now, they've snatched a modest success from what could have been a DIY failure. But even the White Stripes can't call a retreat a victory. **B**

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