



19 Revelations about the Current British Post-Punk Scene

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1. Rock N Roll is dead, thank God, and has been since the 1990's, when hip-hop captured the youth, and then the rest of America, and then the world, to become the most important art movement in human history. But this isn't about hip-hop. This is about a new art movement of the 2020's that only reluctantly calls itself rock music. Post-Punk understands that Rock N Roll is dead. It understands that the Rock N Roll worshipers who still listen to Led Zeppelin without several layers of irony, who are mad at new music and mad at the world, are old, conservative, stubborn, irrelevant, and probably racist. Post-Punk understands that nothing it creates is important or precious. It doesn't see itself contributing to a long great tradition or starting a movement. It revels in the now.

2. The current Post-Punk wave starts with a unified sonic aesthetic. Guitars don't play power chords—they play angular, monophonic riffs. They repeat these riffs over complex drum patterns. They form a groove. Not a groove you can dance to—no Daft Punk "Get Lucky" or club anthems, and no cathartic heavy metal headbanging either. A keep-to-yourself kind of groove: subtle head nods, maybe a tapping finger as you listen on headphones on the bus ride home. There's dissonance, off-kilter rhythms and rare time signatures, but you internalize the pattern. The groove is something to hold onto.

3. Then the soundscape expands. Rarely do Post-Punk bands limit themselves to the classic guitar-bass-drum set-up. Keys, synths, saxophone, violin, trumpet, flute, accordion, and mandolin give depth. Different melodic lines intersect until, after six minutes of weird head nodding to these hypnotizing rhythms (people giving you funny looks on the bus), you reach a climax. An instrumental break. A mournful saxophone line, or a blaring trumpet, or an ambient passage of plucked violin. Direct, transcendent beauty. You don't know how you got there. That's where the artistry lies: sneaking earnest emotion into oddball experimentation (e.g. the final minute of "Athens, France" by Black Country New Road).

4. The songs can include different movements, disparate sections, but are never a jam. Never Phish or the Grateful Dead. Artists carefully compose these songs before they reach an audience. Artists place every note intentionally. To suggest otherwise, that the artist is improvising, would be an insult, inaccurate, and ignorant.

5. It is understandable how fans would think the artist is improvising. The cohesiveness of their group performance builds on the legacy of jazz just as much as it does rock. Technically proficient musicians listen to each other as they play. They care about balance and continuity.

6. The vocals, sonically, are the least important aspect of the music. A lead singer talk-sings with a weird affectation, like the theatrical yelps of Squid's Ollie Judge, old-timey-auctioneer ramblings of Black Midi's Geordie Greep, or the tearful art-school confessionals of Black Country New Road's former lead Isaac Wood. They can't really sing. These vocal lines are distinctly non-musical. But they're perfect. They serve to complement and highlight the virtuosic musicianship behind them. The honest, naked display of their lyrics adds a new dimension.

7. Acts can, and the best acts do, evolve and deviate from this baseline aesthetic. These kids were raised on the incredible musicianship of Taylor Swift and Kanye West having different "eras" of their sound. In a similar way, musically, these bands aren't afraid to evolve quickly. So much so that the movement's founders, the two most popular groups who initially inspired this wave, Black Midi and Black Country New Road, can barely be considered Post-Punk these days. Black Midi has evolved more into prog and metal, with spazzy electric instrumentals, screaming, and ear-drum bursting live shows. Black Country New Road's latest album *Ants from Up There* (which is the single greatest piece of art to come out of this wave, and possibly of all music as a whole) diverted in the complete opposite direction, dropping the baseline Post-Punk aesthetic for a theatrical, baroque-pop, only occasionally emo masterpiece. Issac Wood is actually singing! He can't sing, but that doesn't matter. Point being: these bands evolve, and that's okay. These kids aren't beholden to a movement, to the "roots" of their original sound in the Windmill scene in Brixton.

8. These kids move quickly. Their entire movement exists within the 2020's. Lorde can wait four years between releases, Modest Mouse can wait six, Frank Ocean hasn't dropped since 2016, but Post-Punk bands stay busy catching lightning in a bottle, constantly touring, with a new album out every year.

9. I use the phrase "these kids" because these are kids. When Black Country New Road released their debut album in 2021, when the notorious British Press hype-machine was already calling them the greatest band of all time, the members were between the ages of 20 and 22—barely out of their teens. This makes the technical proficiency and taste with which they play their instruments all the more impressive. This makes the originality of their work all the more inspiring.

10. The youth of these musicians is the single greatest driving force behind their lyrics. Indie music and other pretentious rock genres attempt to link themselves with high art—literary, historical, philosophical references. Heady stuff. This new Post-Punk wave doesn't care. Their world-class musicianship and emotional compositions are their medium for making jokes about Billie Eilish. Pop culture references are fuel as Isaac Woods describes a break-up while referencing Nurtibulet, the Keto diet, lightsabers, Kanye, and Futurama. This only works, this isn't a gimmick, because they never wink to the audience. Pop culture is their life in a forever plugged-in generation. This is all in earnest.

11. Despite the cultural reference and often self-deprecating tone of lyrics, the current British Post-Punk scene should NOT be confused with the self-pitying, derivative, whining genre of Midwest Emo. Midwest Emo lyrics are gratuitous. "Confessional" singers beg for your emotional attention with so many references to self-loathing and drinking and masturbation that listeners become desensitized. Their dial of pity goes past authenticity into untasteful and exploitative ranges. Their yelping vocals all sound the same—the frontmen of Modern Baseball, The Front Bottoms, American Football, The Flat Stanleys, Chinese Football, Canadian Softball, and a dozen others are all interchangeable. The current Post-Punk movement plays it much cooler. The difference boils down to British self-deprecation versus American self-hatred. Post-Punk bands are motivated by craft and playfulness, and don't suffer from the false-illusion that their music is important for society.

12. We've covered the ways in which the current British Post-Punk Scene diverges from the genres of A.. Classic Rock N Roll, B. Jam Bands, C. Popular Dance Music, and D. Midwest Emo. The final distinction that needs to be made is a distinction from the original Post-Punk of the 1970's. Journalists brought back this term based on aesthetic similarities. Joy Division's Ian Curtis or Gang of Four's Jon King share the same spoken-word alternative bravado of many modern Post-Punk frontmen and frontwomen. Guitar parts invoke a similar off-kilter groove. The difference comes from these young artists living in the internet age. Influences expand, musicians aren't divided by genre pretensions, and the new Post-Punk sound exists in an increasingly genreless musical ecosystem. In a magazine interview, Black Country New Road praised Billie Eilish's "Happier Than Ever" and said that what she accomplished with that song was exactly what they were trying to accomplish with "Basketball Shoes." There are no more in-groups and out-groups. It's all just music. This opens up a vast, unpredictable soundscape. Bigger pop hooks are hidden in more radical experimentation. New bands push original Post-Punk's eccentricity even further. If Ian Curtis made it long enough to see YouTube, he would have done the same thing.

13. Critics might have the tendency to call the movement a "post-Brexit" scene, but these kids don't really talk politics. Not because they fear politics or are uncaring. They, like all young people, are just disillusioned. Disillusioned by the system of even performative activism; the system of pretending that making art has any impact beyond the personal. As such, the lyrics are absurd and facetious, often from unreliable narrators but without the express purpose of making a commentary. Always personal in the sense that these kids are making art for themselves.

14. The fact the current Post-Punk movement is British does not matter. The music resonates just as much with youth and hipsters in the United States. That is not to say, however, that the genre's development in Britain is coincidental. The geographic density of the island encourages competition, which is why soccer is so huge there. The base of competition and innovation for the genre can be traced to a single venue, "The Windmill" in Brixton. Black Country New Road, Squid, and Black Midi cut their teeth at The Windmill, outdoing each other with more and more ambitious presentations of their musical talent. In the future The Windmill will be a historical site, like Abbey Road is today.

15. Black Country New Road, Black Midi, Squid are the Holy Trinity of the current British Post-Punk scene. They got the ball rolling and have reached the highest highs since. Their album releases in 2021 can be seen as a seminal point, with Black Country New Road's *For The First Time*, Black Midi's *Cavalcade*, and Squid's *Bright Green Field* all defining the sound. Below them are a lineage of B-listers, less undeniable, but doing their own thing that people can latch onto and pick as their own favorites. Shame, Dry Cleaning, and Yard Act all have unique spins on the sound. Courting, English Teacher, and Opus Kink are even newer imitators, each seeking to be the next Black Country New Road.

16. If one were critical of the direction in which the current British Post-Punk scene is heading in, they could, hypothetically, rewrite the above item to say something dismissive like:

After an exciting start to the decade, with unmatched hype around the Holy Trinity and their unique experimentation, the current British Post-Punk scene is already showing signs of dying out. Members of the Holy Trinity have grown individually until they've transcended the genre. They've gone in different directions and become forces in rock music unto themselves. Now there is a slew of copiers, imitators, surface-level bands who try aping their sound but are unable to evoke the same excitement that the Holy Trinity evoked when this sound was new, three years ago. New indie record labels that specialize in this sound represent the soulless automatization of this once great movement, trying to pump out the next big critical Post-Punk darling for the festival circuit.

17. But why would anyone write that? That's just plain mean.

18. When the movement eventually does die down (may it be decades from now), that will be okay. Latching onto a single genre is close-minded, anyway. The secret to eternal youth is to keep up with new music. Keep an open mind, like the virtuosic rockstar composers of Black Country New Road who still listen to Billie Eilish. Because if you can't appreciate both Black Midi and Taylor Swift, then you don't truly understand the radical youthful ethos of the current British Post-Punk scene. You're just as conservative as the Led Zeppelin fans, balding, drinking light beer in their armchairs.

19. Be young, be fanatical, go crazy about a specific musical moment. New music is exciting and beautiful. Be in awe of the music. In the spirit of the current British Post-Punk scene, which lives in the contrast between irony and sincerity. Which lives in the mix of high technical proficiency and low culture references. Which lives in purposely abrasive noises followed by passages of transcendent beauty. The soundtrack of a generation marred by these contradictions. Then when the next fad comes around, fully embrace that, and discard Post-Punk with the other crap you listened to as a teenager (Panic! At the Disco and My Chemical Romance) because there are better things on the horizon. Be young and fickle. Have the next new music scene mean everything to you, read every interview, listen to every bootleg, because we're young and have time to obsess. But at the same time, in the spirit of the current British Post-Punk scene, never forget the one objective truth: it's all just music.

Header photo by Ben Iboshi

Black Country, New Road in Bologna, Italy
