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20 March 2019

Irish singer-songwriter Andrew Hozier-Byrne, better known as just “Hozier,” has finally emerged from his bog with a new album, five years after the release of his self-titled album in 2014.

And with a name like [*Wasteland, Baby!*](#), how can it disappoint?

From beginning to end, *Wasteland, Baby!* shows Hozier’s ability to write songs that each have a unique style, but still feel unified by his signature use of allusion and symbolism.

Wasteland, Baby!’s 14 tracks, which clock in at almost an hour of music, vary from a bold, determined protest song in “Nina Cried Power” to a folk song in a traditional Irish style in “Shrike” to a love song that almost sounds like it was recorded in a nuclear shelter (but in a good way) in the title track, “Wasteland, Baby!”

“Nina Cried Power,” the first song on the tracklist, which features blues and gospel singer Mavis Staples, is a strong start to the album, paying tribute to the American civil rights movement and protest songs. Originally released as the title track to Hozier’s 2018 EP, “Nina Cried Power” references Nina Simone’s 1956 song “Sinnerman” and other influential soul musicians like Billie Holiday and James Brown.

Following “Nina Cried Power” is another song that pays direct tribute to musical movements that have been closely tied with civil rights. “Almost (Sweet Music),” which was released as a single in January with *Wasteland, Baby!*’s announcement, is written almost entirely in [references to jazz standards](#).

By leading with two tracks that not only celebrate famous songs and artists that have influenced his style, but put musicians of color and activists at the forefront of that celebration, Hozier reminds us how to use inspiration in a way that is appreciative, not appropriative.

In a time where a lot of music at varying levels of popularity has clear influences from people of color, especially black people and black American culture, few artists take the time to thank the pioneers of those genres who had to work to gain respect, much less recognition, and whose art our culture relies on. Some will discuss their influences in interviews or on social media, but Hozier is unique in my experience for actually putting that influence front and center in his actual work, and refusing to let the struggles of the civil rights movement and the musicians who were part of it go uncelebrated.

Wasteland, Baby! touches on several heavy subjects, from the civil rights activism of “Nina Cried Power” to the United States’ current immigration “crisis,” referenced in “Be.” Although many of *Wasteland, Baby!*’s themes are heavier ones, Hozier approaches them with an air of hope.

While the verses of “Be” are about destruction and use biblical allusions, as well as references to current events, to imagine a desolate future, the chorus turns that around by asking the narrator’s lover to “be good to me” and bring a feeling of hope and freedom in a difficult world. The album art, which is not actually an edited photo but [an oil painting done by Raine Hozier-Byrne](#), Hozier’s mother, captures that sense of change and the underlying beauty in destruction.

The theme of destruction is present until the end of the album; it’s prominent in the lyrics to two of the last songs on the tracklist: “Would That I” and “Wasteland, Baby!” But again, both these songs use that fire and destruction as opportunities to find hope and love. “Would That I” subverts the traditional depiction of fire as a threat, comparing a new relationship to a flame that brings light and warmth rather than pain. Similarly, “Wasteland, Baby!” approaches the apocalypse as a place to find love and a new beginning.

It’s the throughline of using traditional symbols - mythical and biblical figures, nature, fire - in subversive ways that makes *Wasteland, Baby!* such a memorable album. The use of allusions and very poetic lyrics is a staple of Hozier’s songwriting, and while *Wasteland, Baby!* has a lot of differences from his first album, those elements do lend a sense of unity between the two albums, even spanning different genres and topics.

While I loved the album as a whole and enjoyed elements of each song, “Would That I” was my favorite. The tune and lyrics have an almost nostalgic tone to them that appeals to me, but what really stood out was that subversion of symbolism - it compares an old relationship to a tree and a new one to a fire, but the new relationship isn’t unhealthy. The fire brings light and warmth. Twisting such a classic symbol of destruction and despair to represent opportunity sets “Would That I” - and Hozier’s lyrics in general - apart even from other songs that use symbolism effectively.

“Would That I” is also an example of another overarching trend in Hozier’s music that makes it feel unique. The stories he tells in his songs are similar to a lot of alternative music love stories, but with one key difference: he shifts the power in favor of the woman. It’s a dynamic you don’t realize is missing in music until you hear it, and like so many of the other little things about Hozier’s music, it’s refreshing. It’s refreshing to see female love interests really loved, almost *worshipped*, and admired for their fire and passion rather than just their physical attractiveness. This dynamic isn’t new to *Wasteland, Baby!*; several songs on Hozier’s first album also had, for lack of a better term, strong female characters.

Ultimately, I thought *Wasteland, Baby!* was a very well-done album. With its variety of styles, there’s something in it for a lot of people, whether folk and blues music is in your wheelhouse or not, and fans of that genre or of Hozier specifically can enjoy the whole album. It feels authentically Hozier, but it also feels new and exciting. It’s a creative way to say that the world is confusing, but everything will be okay and there will always be an opportunity for something new to grow from the ashes. And that’s just wasteland, baby!

Rules for a Review

A music review really only needs to do one thing: answer questions about the piece of music. There are a few important questions any music review will answer, and many also answer others that are more unique to that particular release. In general, a good review will answer the following:

1. If the piece breaks any kind of record or charts really well, how quickly did it do that? How significant does it seem to be for the artist?

Reviews of popular music especially answer this question since those are the songs and albums that top charts in a matter of days, but some reviews of genre music also answer this with regard to a certain genre's charts or a certain country's if it's applicable. If an artist usually tops charts with new releases, this might only get a few sentences, but it might be focused on more if it's an artist who is usually less popular.

2. What's good about this release? How do individual elements add to the holistic quality of the piece?

This is the bulk of a positive review, and often talks about specific lyrics or songs and how they contribute to an album's overarching themes or a song's message. The discussions of what works well in the piece might be more technical, or they might be more about theme and impact the piece had, depending on whether the review has a particular angle it's addressing.

3. What's bad about this release? Does anything feel out of place or poorly done?

This is the bulk of a negative review, and talks about parts of the song or album that either stick out because they don't fit with the rest of the piece or because they aren't well-produced. In a very positive review, or a review that's focused on something specific like the piece's social impact, this part might be very short or effectively not present.

4. How does this release compare to previous work by the artist? Has the artist's style changed significantly?

If the release isn't an artist's first, a review will in some way compare it to previous releases. If there are musical or thematic similarities, they'll be pointed out, and if there are significant changes in style or genre those will be pointed out as well.

5. How does this release fit into today's music scene as a whole? Does it contribute to trends or stand alone?

If the piece fits snugly into the music scene, it'll usually get a sentence or two saying so, and judging whether that makes it feel too cliché or unoriginal, or if it carves out its own niche in that scene. If the piece is particularly unique in some way, then how it contrasts with other music in its genre or in general at the time is discussed.

6. What does this release say for the future of the artist? Does it seem to be indicative of future work?

If the release is a drastic change from the artist's previous work, then the reviewer might speculate whether it marks the beginning of a new era in which the artist will pursue that new style or genre, or if the artist's next release will be another big change.

Sources

[Carly Rae Jepsen - E•MO•TION](#) (Pitchfork)

[How the Jonas Brothers' 'Sucker' Breaks the Boy Band Mold](#) (Stylecaster)