

Real Emotional Trash from Stephen Malkmus & The Jicks

By Hiram Lee
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American singer, songwriter and guitarist Stephen Malkmus is approaching his twentieth year of making music. Best known as the lead singer and principal songwriter of the influential indie rock band Pavement, which got its start in Stockton, California, in 1989, Malkmus began his solo career when the group disbanded after 10 years of recording together.

Like Pavement, Malkmus's new band The Jicks has neither found nor sought much in the way of mainstream success. The singer nevertheless retains a large cult following. He is, for a considerable number of people who came of age in the 1990s, one of the major figures in rock music over the last two decades.

The latest Jicks album, *Real Emotional Trash*, reveals rather clearly both the strengths and weaknesses of Malkmus as a songwriter. Continuing in the direction begun on his previous albums, *Stephen Malkmus* (2001), *Pig Lib* (2003) and *Face the Truth* (2005), *Trash* has a strong pop sensibility, eschewing some of the noisier experimentation of the artist's past in favor of a more direct approach. Long melodic passages on guitar also take a central place, as the singer's music has increasingly been influenced by the psychedelic bands of the 1960s.

"Hopscotch Willie," the second song on *Real Emotional Trash*, is the first to make a strong impression on the listener. The song about a man accused of a crime he did not commit, while among the better tracks on the album, is perhaps a little too precious in its use of outdated film-noir slang—"the dick said to Willie, you're in the clink"—but certain aspects of the imagery are effective: The line "Do a little hopscotch, Willie, hopscotch" repeated over and over works well in expressing the fate of an innocent man completely at the mercy of the courts.

Malkmus clearly recognizes the seriousness of such

subject matter and has serious feelings about it—and it's not surprising that such a story would find its way into his work, considering the recent assaults on habeas corpus, Guantánamo Bay and other fronts in the Bush administration's attack on democratic rights—but Malkmus can't resist framing them in less-than-threatening terms. As a consequence, one tends to remember the flavor of the language more than the story itself.

"Cold Son," another of the album's best, gives us one of the most memorable lines of Malkmus's career: "Sometimes it feels like the world's stuffed with feathers, table-bottom gum just holdin' it together." The narrator describes himself as a "cold son" who sums up the direction of his life with the words "Face plant, stumble ahead." But even here, limitations similar to those of "Hopscotch Willie" emerge. As a lyricist, Malkmus is often capable of remarkable lines—remarkable images—but less often a large cohesive song or narrative which works through his subject matter. Simple portraits of alienation, no matter how vivid, only get one so far.

"Real Emotional Trash," the title song, at 10 minutes, goes on far too long, but also has something to offer. The narrator begs for some kind of deep truth and connection to someone: "Easy said but less often done, point me in the direction of your real emotional trash." After proceeding through a long and even mournful guitar interlude, the song picks up telling the story of a wild and reckless road trip. The very free last half of the song suggests that the reconnection sought by the narrator in the song's first half is indeed possible and even within reach. It is, finally, a hopeful song.

"Out of Reaches," the next song, in spite of its title, continues the theme of finding comfort in a closeness to others. Malkmus sings about the "thrill of loving

someone you shouldn't love" and "gale force intimacy." Perhaps not a major work or a song of earth-shattering impact, the track is nevertheless a warm departure from the kind of misanthropic attitude one sees too often in contemporary works.

If "Gardenia," coming two tracks later, takes things a bit too far, becoming too silly a "silly love song," it is at least an enjoyable one. And if Malkmus expresses here (and throughout his career) an adoration for the more gentle creatures he meets, he also holds sharp criticisms for the sort of people who would seek to snuff out that gentleness. In "Baltimore" he sings, "For all of your hustle, what did you win? Woe is the man with the Cheshire Cat grin." In contrast, he later sings, "I'm in love with the people, I'm in love with the saint, I'm in love with the soldier from Baltimore."

The song is genuinely moving. However, Malkmus leaves many things unsaid when he strays into broader social territory. To a great extent, he is limited in this regard by the conditions under which he developed as an artist.

By the time Malkmus/Pavement recorded their first album *Slanted and Enchanted*, the music industry was already well under the control of the "Big Six" (now Big Four) conglomerates. Eager to avoid what they perceived to be a thoroughly conformist, creatively moribund music world, and faced with the Reagan years of social reaction that left them pessimistic and demoralized politically, many underground or independent rock bands at times fell into the trap of adopting a self-conscious quirkiness or personal smallness in an effort to combat the big emptiness of corporate music. Pavement was never the worst offender in this, but they were never immune to it.

Consequently, Malkmus's songs about fame or corrupt corporate types often take on the form of individual "pot shots," or jokes at the expense of certain artists he believes to have sold out, and in this he is often woefully "cute" or playful. His work never rises to the level of the best satire. Social questions are often beyond his abilities.

But whatever limitations and difficulties his work may present, Malkmus has made some outstanding contributions during the last two decades. Pavement, in particular, produced some of the most interesting rock music of the 1990s. Not a few of their songs could be considered among the best of that decade. "Grounded,"

"Conduit for Sale," "Here," "Summer Babe" and many others are all meaningful works and rich compositions.

Malkmus is a welcome voice, often gentle—sometimes confused—but always human. He draws a stark line between those pursuits that he believes are free and fluid in life and those that inhibit and oppress them. *Real Emotional Trash* is a flawed album, but not a bad one by any means. Malkmus deserves to be counted among the most interesting rock musicians working today.

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