

## The Strokes *Is This It*: A Debut Worth Waiting For

by Robin Lyon

The Strokes, the now incredibly hyped New York band has finally released *Is This It*, which had become their highly anticipated debut album. Their 3 song EP *The Modern Age*, released in January 2001, received a great reception, and led to their sold out UK tour opening for Guided by Voices and the Doves. The U.S. release of their first full-length album was delayed even further when after the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, their song “New York City Cops” was removed.

After all the hype, waiting, and difficulties, we finally have their finished product, and they have lived up to the hype. *Is This It* is a refreshing, rock-n-roll packed album, reminiscent of a completely different time when this kind of escape from pop and highly commercialized, filtered fake rock wasn't necessary. The Strokes deliver a sound more like rock coming out of Britain the last few years, than anything the U.S. has seen, in a recognized way, for a very long time.

Lead singer, Julian Casablancas delivers strongly satisfying vocals, often laid back, gravelly and extremely expressive. This, along with an often very similar style, has lead to many comparisons to Lou Reed's voice, (I'd add one to Stereophonics' lead singer Kelly Jones at some of his more impassioned moments, especially on “Soma”), and in fact quite a few songs on the album, especially “The Modern Age”, combine these vocals with heavy bass lines and become very reminiscent of the Velvet Underground, though with generally more positive subject matter. Their songs vary from these more

laid back and gritty ones, to songs like “Someday” and “Last Nite”, with much more upbeat rhythms, and stronger drums, forming classic high-energy rock songs.

As might be expected from any indie-esque rock band, The Strokes’ songs contain much angst, loneliness, ambivalence, and talk of unclear relationships. The Strokes manage, however, to express these things without being old or cliché. They can express these very common emotions without the formulaic songwriting that seems to have developed as songwriters and record companies try to get a hold on what it is that draws people to this music and completely miss it. While some songs are of course weaker than others, they are all are very introspective, seeming very personal, and draw these often generic but very real emotions from specific situations.

In the album’s title track “Is This It”, Casablancas tiredly, droningly sings out, “Can’t you see I’m trying/I don’t even like it/I just lie to/get to your apartment/now I’m staying/there just for awhile/I can’t think cause/I’m just way too tired” and more energetically in “Someday”, “In many ways/they’ll miss the good old days/someday someday/yeah it hurts to say/but I want you to stay/sometimes sometimes”. These expressions of ambivalence and frustration in relationships are strewn throughout the album. The always present angst of youth is shown in both “Last Nite”: “Oh people they don’t understand/no girlfriends they don’t understand/yeah spaceships they won’t understand/and me I ain’t ever gonna understand”; and “When It Started”: “So you think things move pretty fast out here/well just wait my dear till you look up there/oh maybe some day you’ll know”. The band uses the context of specific situations and steer away from overly clichéd expressions in order to create songs that effectively portray perhaps overused but very real and honest things.

After a highly successful tour of the UK, which supposedly drew in Thom Yorke and Noel Gallagher and subsequent tabloid attention, and a long set of successful Philadelphia shows, the Strokes are now in the midst of their first widespread U.S. tour. This lasts through the end of November, coming through Cleveland on Friday the sixteenth at The Agora, where yours truly hopes to be. Following their U.S. tour, the band goes on to Japan in February.

Though the kind of press, attention and hype that The Strokes have been receiving both with the release of *Is This It* and their previous EP, is often the thing to ruin a band either by hurling them into the mainstream, placing too much importance on them, or generating a backlash, it seems here, in the midst of the current state of popular music, an incredibly good thing. So maybe they aren't here to save rock and roll, but it's definitely a step in the right direction.