

review music

this week's essential reading

'MS Understood' by T M Krishna, The Caravan

'The marketing of MS [Subbulakshmi] by her mentor, husband and business strategist, T Sadasivam ... was far ahead of its time. But to claim what he sold to the world was intrinsically empty is unacceptable'



!!! frontman Nick Offer performs in New Orleans. The band's latest album injects a healthy dose of humour in its lyrics. Erika Goldring / Getty Images

Laugh to the beat

The larks and snarks of the creatively named dance-rock band !!! make for engaging listening. **Andy Battaglia** compares their unusual use of humour with New Order's latest brooding sounds

A lot of factors can aid in the magical, mysterious process of making a funky song even funkier: syncopated vocal chants, a little whiplash in the bass, some added crackle and snap in the drums. Formulas and indexes of all the elements exist for the aspiring funk practitioner to consult.

But how about a new one for the list: jokes! Humour rarely has a place in music that isn't somehow written off as novelty music, that lowliest of forms. Spoof songs, parodies, goofy diversions – all are regarded, when they are regarded at all, as larks. But a sharp quip in a song here or a well-timed bit of wit there can add much more to music than mere amusement.

!!!, the excitedly named veteran dance-rock band based in New York, opens its new album, *As If*, in a typically brash and sassy fashion. The beat is up and bucking right at the start, as if the song *All U Writers* had already been in progress before the unsuspecting listener pressed play. "All you writers, get out your pens and write," goes a vocal refrain over a punchy punk-funk rhythm repeated over and over, sort of absent-mindedly. Then, after it's been said enough to seem ready to sneak past again: "All you riders ... get on your horses and ride."

It's not quite funny but counts as shiftily clever and weird – as if the singer is present enough outside the song to start mulling the sounds of words that are different and yet, with a little sense

of play, also interchangeable. The funny part actually comes next, when a falsetto voice swoops in and starts swooning about a girl. "She told me her favourite Beatles song," the voice declares, "was *Wonderwall*."

It just zings by – in no way is it held out for special attention as a punch line but, as any devotee of 1990s Britpop or recovering Oasis fan will recognise, the line is sly and wry and funny indeed. !!! specialises in such moments, and so expertly as to make them seem less like "moments" than part of the premise to begin with.

The name !!! is pronounced "chk chk chk" and traces back to *The Gods Must Be Crazy*, a film from 1980 set in Africa. Certain characters in it speak a language enlisting clicks – sounds made with clucks of the tongue – that are rendered, when written, as exclamation points.

Hence: !!!, the moniker adopted for a group that would be embodied by wild frontman Nick Offer and, from its founding in California in 1996, an expansive cast of musicians who alternate between electronic production and playing rock-aligned instruments live.

!!! remains on a shortlist of band names that are literally unsearchable on the web; type it into Google and it brings back precisely zero returns.

It works well for puns, though, as evidenced by the sterling 2013 album title *Thr!!!er*. The spirit in that, ingenious but also a bit darily dumb, carries through to



Music Complete
New Order
Mute
Dh25

much of !!!'s oeuvre, including in song titles that often wink and nudge to suggest some levity is always right for the occasion. Examples to make the case: *Me and Giuliani Down by the Schoolyard* (alluding to New York's old bully mayor), *All My Heroes are Weirdos and Station (Meet Me at The)*.

A sense of humour courses through the new album too, though never overbearingly. Jokes work best when in the midst of other moods and emotions, especially in a musical context. The bulk of *As If* is a rollicking joy of antic, energetic dance-rock – of the kind made popular by !!!, LCD Soundsystem, the Rapture, and others that emerged in New York around the turn of the 2000s – with an ear for anthemic choruses and hooks. *Every Little Bit Counts* mixes in rousing guitar reminiscent of New Order and

Johnny Marr's melodic riffs for The Smiths. *Freedom! '15* reaches upwards dramatically for a sort of gospel-streaked house-music cataclysm à la the great UK duo Basement Jaxx, whose influence looms.

It's so tempting to fix on the funny moments though, in large part for how unusual they are. How much modern music could claim to have even the slightest sense of humour at work in any aspect of it? It's so rare as to be a figment, even in theory.

That's not necessarily a bad fate. New Order, a band with which !!! shares certain affinities, couldn't be more humourless. But the listener goes to New Order for exactly just that: dour, moody music for brooding. It abounds on *Music Complete*, a strong and purposeful new album that finds New Order in their finest form in many years.

Singing at the front as he has since the start, Bernard Sumner is "restless" and "lost for words" in the ennui-intensive opener, *Restless*. *Singularity* follows with a fierce, fiendish dance beat that seethes, introducing a sense of menace that suits New Order's occasional wilting-flower tendencies well. Overall, there's an accomplished mix of modes and moods at play on *Music Complete*, the 10th studio album from a band that dates back to 1980. It's notable that Peter Hook, the creator of so many memorable New Order bass lines over the years, is now absent from the line-up. But



As If
!!!
Warp Records
Dh55

New Order sounds charged in ways both classic and new.

The ace song *Plastic* is a concise and condensed jewel, all precision and slickness in a manner similar to but distinct from the style that !!! favours. The beat shimmies and shakes, enough to make the "dance" part of dance-rock take command. But !!! would never produce a beat so gleaming and clean, like a piece of top-shelf machinery that doesn't get taken down from the shelf very often. Nor would !!! sing about a prospective paramour and deem her "so iconic" in a tone that is abundantly earnest and sincere.

!!! would find a way, instead, to ham it up. Back on their free-wheeling *As If*, the song *Till the Money Runs Out* starts out as a fantasy about a guy and a girl hitting the road and holing up in hotels with no need of anything be-

side one another's company. But then the words take pause to consider: "All these hotel room paintings – who even paints them?" Then comes a plan: "I ought to get myself an agent / stay here as long as we want / then drive to the next one and sell paintings right out of the trunk."

The album comes to an epic end in a nearly 9-minute track called *I Feel So Free (Citation Needed)*, another title for the annals of !!! In the tradition of long house-music classics in which a voice takes to chatting up the listener as the track arranges itself over time, words start to come at a casual, disarmingly conversational clip. At one point, referring to an imaginary studio scene filled with would-be stars, the voice goes: "I feel like it's just like a shower of Grammys in here" – referring to the apex of all music industry awards – "it's like I'm tripping on them and splashing in puddles of Grammys". He sounds happy for the situation. "I'll give one to Chris to give to his mother / Henrik's going to get the Swedish Grammy / Swammy? / Nah, forget I said that."

For reasons it's not so easy to explain, this proves somehow funny enough to make one think that jokes should maybe be mandated in all music from here on out. In any case, certainly a Swammy would be well-deserved.

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▶ the playlist three classics of the dance-rock scene

LCD Soundsystem
LCD Soundsystem
(DFA, 2005)



The debut album by this great fellow New York dance-rock band features another unusually funny turn in "Losing My Edge," a comic rant in the voice of an ageing music hipster whose command over all that is cool is starting to fade.

S.T.R.E.E.T. D.A.D.
Out Hud
(Kranky, 2002)

During the brief but spirited reign of Out Hud, members of !!! split time between the two bands. A sense of humour was shared too, as suggested by the song title "Dad, There's a Little Phrase Called Too Much Information".



Echoes
The Rapture
(Universal, 2003)

Another classic from the early-2000s dance-rock scene features its supreme anthem in the form of "House of Jealous Lovers." Its power remains formidable, and the live-wire energy that makes it all move shows no sign of diminishing soon.

