

Death of an indie man

Over the course of a career filled with flashes and feints, Destroyer's Dan Bejar has established himself as one of the best, and most reluctant, lyricists in rock. His songs are almost always searching and grand, restless in pursuit of elusive truths. He makes a powerful case for the use of words like "sublimation" and "hitherto" in popular music. His subject matter, however, tends towards the deflated, the hopeless, the bleak – states of malaise that would seem to call into question the entire enterprise of songwriting itself.

Bejar, an indie-rock laureate who started his ascent in late-'90s Vancouver, Canada, is a paradoxical sort of musical idealist. He likes it so much, he can't help but despair over how little music has come to mean, even among those in the "underground" who claim to take it most seriously. He walks among them but increasingly can't identify with their kind – which might mean that he hates music, actually. Either way, in song he's constantly poking and prodding, both himself and his compatriots within a fellowship he once dubbed "the music lovers". These are the people who have, at different points in their lives, subscribed to all the magazines, gone through big Bob Dylan phases, read up on the history of jazz, learned everything there is to know about Joy Division and the Smiths. These are also people who spend at least some of their time wondering what any of their pursuits have been worth.

All of that might seem like the province of mere indie-rock existentialism. But Bejar is more of a poet than that. His constituency

Destroyer has joined his cryptic lyrics to some of the most unfashionable sounds imaginable. The results are exhilarating, writes Andy Battaglia

includes painters, writers, readers, thinkers – in short, everybody who cares enough about culture to be disillusioned sometimes, or at least a little lost. It's easy to feel a little lost in the new Destroyer album, *Kaputt*. But it's just as easy to feel that one is in the presence of something big and urgent, on the tip of a tongue about to tell a secret. Bejar's songs tend to work like that: cryptically.

It's been the same more or less from the beginning, when the breakout Destroyer album, 2000's *Thief*, became the subject of a whisper campaign among those who heard it. (Two other albums preceded it, but *Thief* was the first to attract wide notice.) Since then it's been a strange ride through a discography marked by brilliance as well as numerous episodes of seeming self-sabotage. Bejar is no fan of attention. When another band he was a part of, the Canadian indie super-group the New Pornographers, became popular, he assumed a strange status as a "secret member" who would write and perform on albums but not appear on stage. And while he tours more regularly in his main guise, nobody could accuse Destroyer of being an opportunist.

Instead, Bejar invests in an interior songwriting world whose

concerns project outward just as well. Few writers of any kind can encompass as much about the state of his world in just a few lines. Take, for example, the following, from a song called *The Bad Arts* on the first truly great Destroyer album, 2001's *Streethawk: A Seduction*: "The world woke up one day to proclaim / thou shalt not take part in or make bad art / in these tough, tough times / friends like mine / would rather dash than dine / on the bones of what's thrown to them." Or this, from *Jackie*, one of Bejar's first songs for the New Pornographers: "Jackie, you yourself said it best when you said / 'There's been a break in the continuum' / the United States used to be lots of fun / back when the man and the myth / of the sands and the cliffs / composed a symphony to good works / and better business."

It's one thing to write such wordy and elaborate lines that evoke so much (the American Idea, historical rupture, bitter decay). It's another thing to perform them in a way that comes off. Bejar laces his vocals – delivered in a sharp, slightly nasal bray that is 90 per cent attitude and 10 per cent voice – with all sorts of pregnant pauses and polysyllabic trills. He makes his words work.

Yet the project they serve has changed, in large and small ways, with every album put out under De-

stroyer's name. With *Streethawk: A Seduction*, Bejar established his lasting role as a sort of impish cross between David Bowie and Stephen Malkmus from Pavement. Every subsequent record has ventured into something new. In 2002, the dark, languorous *This Night* seemed like an attempt to make an album composed entirely of closing tracks. In 2004, *Your Blues* took an inexplicable turn toward synthesised symphonic grandeur made

to sound deliberately chintzy and cheap. In 2006, the uncharacteristically taut and loveable rock album *Destroyer's Rubies* found Bejar a wider audience; he followed it up in 2008 with *Trouble in Dreams*, a spare and knotty record not especially interested in what a wider audience might want to hear.

Each of the above remains excellent, in part for all of their shared challenges and jibes. Some of those jibes are threaded through the lyrics,



Dan Bejar: his new material casts him as a debonair lounge-lizard in the mould of later Leonard Cohen. Jason Stoff

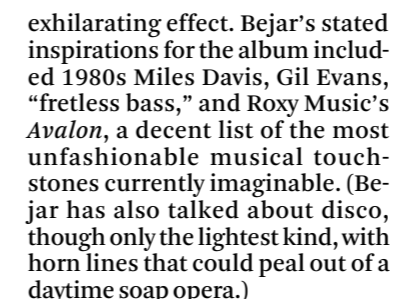
this week's essential reading

{ *'American Music Legends'*
by Jamie-James Medina,
Observer Music Monthly

A remarkable photo essay on rock music's surviving dinosaurs, from Little Richard, 77, to Jerry Lee Lewis, 74. Our favourite? An ageless Kris Kristofferson, 73, relaxing backstage in Connecticut



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Merge



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exhilarating effect. Bejar's stated inspirations for the album included 1980s Miles Davis, Gil Evans, "fretless bass," and Roxy Music's *Avalon*, a decent list of the most unfashionable musical touchstones currently imaginable. (Bejar has also talked about disco, though only the lightest kind, with horn lines that could peel out of a daytime soap opera.)

What Bejar seems to be doing, more plausibly than anyone would have guessed possible at the beginning of his career, is fashioning himself as a sort of debonair lounge-lizard, a literate lech with a dubious worldview and a thousand stately ways to express it. In that respect, he's coming on a bit like latter-day Leonard Cohen. It suits his writing, too, which on *Kaputt* has grown evermore impressionistic and abstract. Bejar has always preferred to approach his subjects obliquely, but there are stretches

of *Kaputt* where it is difficult to discern exactly what he means beyond the sheer sensation of the words he's choosing. In *Bay of Pigs*, an 11-minute song that ends the album in a mood of ambient-disco release, Bejar begins on a low note: "Listen, I've been drinking, as our house lies in ruin / I don't know what I'm doing / alone, in the dark / at the park or at the pier / watching ships disappear / in the rain." That's a pretty good distillation of something we can identify as despondence. But what about this, a little later in the same song? "Magnolia's a girl, her heart's made of wood / as apocalypses go, that's pretty good / sha la la / wouldn't you say?"

Listening to Destroyer sometimes entails letting go of words and just watching them float or fall to the ground. But there are at least as many moments when Bejar lasers in on a subject. In *Kaputt*'s title song, he winds his way back to a favourite old topic, music itself, when he makes a surprisingly rousing chorus of "Sounds, Smash Hits, Melody Maker, NME / all sound like to a dream to me". Those are some of the British publications that "the music lovers" used to celebrate, and Bejar sings remembrance of their romanticised glory days with a bright, rising melody that could work in a credit-sequence song for a Disney movie. It could be real pining, or put-on grief. Probably it's a little of both, plus a whole lot more.

Andy Battaglia is a New York-based writer whose work appears in *The Wall Street Journal*, *Artforum*, *Spin* and *Pitchfork*.

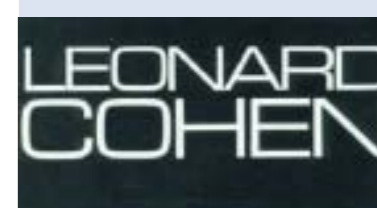
playlist

The fretless bass and the fretfully base: a smoother side to rock's jaded lounge lizards

Roxy Music

Avalon
Warner Bros (1982)

Brian Ferry was always the most urbane of the big stars to emerge in the glam era. With this, Roxy Music's last studio album, he left the spiky experiments of his Eno period behind and created a much-imitated adult pop sound that brought his crooning romanticism into sharp focus. Well, soft focus, anyway.



Leonard Cohen

I'm Your Man
Columbia (1988)

An abrupt turn into dystopian synth-pop for Montreal's gloomiest folk singer. Cohen had shown flashes of humour in the darkness on 1977's *Death of a Ladies' Man*, but here he seemed positively gleeful, intoning "First we take Manhattan – then we take Berlin!" over a cheerfully naff digital keyboard backing.

Scott Walker

Climate of Hunter
EMI (1984)

From the Tin Pan Alley pop of his Walker Brothers days to his recent, harrowing *musique concrète*, it's a rare fan who could endorse Walker's entire career. Yet no one seems to like this '80s album. Ominous lyrics and quasi-classical structures combined with fretless bass to uniquely offputting effect. The thing is, it's actually really good.



David Lee Roth

Crazy from the Heat
Warner Bros (1985)

Before leaving the party-rock juggernaut Van Halen, metal's most excitable frontman put out this EP of kitsch show-tunes. Slathered in saxophone and MIDI brass, it was clearly a put-on. Yet the "I'm so sad and lonely" refrain from *I Ain't Got Nobody* didn't seem so funny by the time Diamond Dave was in his lean period.