

Anyone's *Guest*: The New Pornographers Navigate Universal Experiences and Emotions in an Unfamiliar World

By Kim Windyka

Continue as a Guest, the ninth studio album from Canadian indie power-pop fixtures The New Pornographers, bridges the gap between the past and future of the band — while also exploring parallels with the “new normal” of the world at large, ushered in by the COVID-19 pandemic. Though the themes of isolation, boredom and oversaturation of media content are reflected in both lyrics and instrumentation, the resulting record is anything but monotonous. Instead, it's one that uniquely captures a strange and surreal moment in time, along with the general sense of ennui that plagues internet-dominated life in the 21st century; the album's title is a clever nod to a commonly-used prompt in online checkout portals.

Even 26 years into their career, the band experimented with several firsts for this effort — some by choice, and others by obligation. With much of the album created during the height of lockdown, each of the band members recorded their parts separately for the most part, though some sporadic in-person sessions were held when needed.

While lead singer and songwriter A.C. Newman has always been the unspoken ringleader of the band, he moved into a position of increased creative control here, with original member Neko Case handing over the reins completely to him for *Guest*. The ever-resourceful and creative musician made innovative use of some of the band's unreleased tracks, exploring backwards sounds and mixing and matching segments to assemble new songs. As a result, former member Dan Bejar received a songwriting credit on “Really Really Light,” which was pulled and repurposed from the recording sessions for 2014's *Brill Bruisers*. This was the band's third record without Bejar, who played with them from their inception in 1997 until 2017, and then briefly rejoined in 2021.

Amid this unconventional recording approach, Newman also pulled in various collaborators, including Sadie Dupuis from indie rock band Speedy Ortiz and saxophonist Zach Djanikian. It's perhaps somewhat surprising that this marks the first album with guest collaborators for the group, considering that they're a true collective in every sense of the word themselves, with several lineup changes and tour-only musicians, and every core member participating in side projects throughout the years.

The record opens with “Really Really Light,” a mellow, ethereal track that effortlessly eases into the band’s evolution with the classic harmonies of Newman and Case, and lyrics that set the ongoing tone of confusion and discomfort: “I am blurry here on this particular scene/That I’m trying to paint, if you’d sit still for me.” Newman’s lyrical approach has always been one that leaves messages and meaning mostly up for the listener’s interpretation, and that remains constant on *Guest*, a technique that works especially well here in terms of its ability to connect with a wide swath of fans (and human beings) sharing a common experience during the pandemic.

Both the soundscapes and lyrics throughout the album reflect the often extreme vacillations from hopelessness to happiness — and the gamut of emotions in between — but even songs that sound upbeat or optimistic often mask dark stories (and vice versa), making for a particularly compelling contrast.

It’s on “Pontius Pilate’s Home Movies” that the band starts to delve into slightly more ominous and textured sonic territory, from the subtle inclusion of Djanikian’s saxophone to the almost chant-like cadence of the verses, which fittingly deliver commentary through religious metaphors about the title character. The marked shift in mood is especially evident when comparing tracks like this against virtually any song on the New Pornographers’ first three albums, *Mass Romantic*, *Electric Version* or *Twin Cinema*, but it feels like a natural and expected transformation that’s spurred by the increasingly dismal state of the world.

The looping instrumental of “Cat and Mouse With the Light” takes on an almost hypnotic quality, cleverly lending itself even further to the concept suggested by the title of an ongoing chase, while “Last and Beautiful” serves as the perfect representation of old and new New Pornographers. It features a classic Newman-Case chorus, with a repeating, siren-like “whoop-whoop” percussive hook and a slightly jarring instrumental bridge.

The title track is an appropriately sullen and gloomy dirge — in which Newman resignedly declares, “It’s a sun/it’s gonna set/This isn’t quantum shit/I don’t even need a room/just want the view/that’s it”— that gives way to a trudging, crisp beat, replete with horns.

“Bottle Episodes” lightens the mood, infusing a bright and hopeful energy. However, it serves as an ideal example of the ongoing juxtaposition of words and music. Despite its sunny sound, sinister lyrics belie it ever so slightly. “But when you’re dancing with the devil,” Newman warns, “You don’t get to pick the song they play/As you’re swaying side to side/Underneath invasion lights.” This contrast also, perhaps, illustrates the tendency to put on a brave, happy face when facing the outside world, while quietly facing inner challenges and demons.

And while the whimsical, upbeat charm continues on “Marie and the Undersea,” it perhaps contains the most straightforward and direct lyrical references to the pandemic on the record: “You wake up, your nose still raw, and still out of place/And all the lines left from your mask tattooed on your face,” Neko sings, and later, “Where once you would see all the faces, now it’s only eyes/You keep pulling the line for some more air, but it’s only eyes.”

“Angelcover” is a bit of a return to the old New Pornographers form, with an infectious groove and playful, slightly mischievous vibe, the lyrics following suit. “Why’d you put your faith in a wild guest?” Nico asks, before answering the question herself — and repeating it: “Who knows?”

The dreamy “Firework in the Falling Snow,” penned by Newman and Sadie Dupuis, touches on the desire for a quick fix and instant gratification in times of stress and sadness, repeating “Whatever you’re selling, I’ll take it all.”

Guest’s closing track, “Wish Automatic Suite,” perfectly encapsulates the pandemic experience in just over five minutes. Beginning as a slow, sad ballad, it soon throws the front door open and runs out onto the front lawn on a sunny spring day — a satisfying, but temporary serotonin boost — before coming back down to earth and tempering expectations in the wake of reality.

Continue as a Guest achieves a rare feat for a record, musically and lyrically capturing the bleakness, uncertainty and melancholy of pandemic-era life, while offering glimpses into the occasional moments of joy, celebration and levity that inevitably emerge from the darkness. It also deftly documents those times in between, where we might be unsure of where or how to proceed; when we’re forced to decide whether we’re ready to take an official step to announce ourselves to the world and allow ourselves to be seen, or whether we’d rather remain an anonymous, transient visitor.

While it blazes new sonic trails for the band, stretching and meandering within tasteful boundaries, *Guest* still manages to retain The New Pornographers’ signature charm, magic and open-ended storytelling. When considering the turmoil of the world at large during the writing and recording process, it’s nothing less than a true triumph that has not only cemented The New Pornographers’ place as beloved power pop masters, but also reveals them as eminently, comfortingly relatable and human.