

ALBUM REVIEW

A flat turn from a band known for edge



GARBAGE Let All That We Imagine Be the Light

★★★★★

/ STUNVOLUME / BMG
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Production gets in its own way on the latest release

BY [NICOLAJ ROOS](#) / PHOTO: JOSEPH CULTICE
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For the past 30 years, Garbage have managed to stay relevant—a feat in itself. Many listeners over 40 will likely remember their self-titled breakthrough best, featuring hits like "Only Happy When It Rains," "Stupid Girl," and "Queer."

Despite clear individual talent—Scottish vocalist Shirley Manson, multi-instrumentalist Duke Erikson, and guitarist Steve Marker—the band likely wouldn't exist in public consciousness, if not for Butch Vig. The former producer of Nirvana, The Smashing Pumpkins, and Sonic Youth has had an outsized influence on Garbage's sound and success. A quick skim through their discography reveals how rarely they've strayed from their core formula. Sometimes leaning into garage rock, as with *Bleed Like Me*; other times more studio-heavy and production-driven, like *Strange Little Birds*.

Even early on, Garbage were accused of borrowing heavily from British band Curve—the machine-driven drums, brooding guitars, industrial and noisy samples, and most of all, Toni Halliday's icy (aesthetic) and detached vocal delivery.

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But the timing worked in their favor. Garbage debuted in grunge's wake. Even though MTV wasn't the cultural force it once had been, it was still the highway to mass appeal for bands in the mid-'90s. Garbage's videos and visual style leaned into a frayed, pretty-punk, multi-layered Photoshop aesthetic that became a trend at the time—thanks in no small part to acts like Marilyn Manson, Nine Inch Nails, and Depeche Mode.

Their new album is, once again, flawlessly produced down to the smallest detail. But unlike their early work, it's lacking in memorable melodies. Time and again, promising melodic ideas seem bulldozed by the grandiose production—even though one doesn't necessarily have to exclude the other.

Technology may be part of the problem. While Garbage's earlier albums had a simpler focus and stronger melodic core, the later ones tend to drown in increasingly complex production.

Let All That We Imagine Be The Light is Garbage's eighth studio album, produced by Billy Bush (L7, Jake Bugg, Muse), who also happens to be married to Shirley Manson. The Egyptian mastering engineer Heba Kadry (Björk, Beach House, Slowdive) also joined the team.

Let me be blunt: the album's first three tracks are weighed down by rock clichés and leave little impression. It feels like Garbage trying to prove they can still rock. It's as noisy as a Hollywood trailer—and just as sleep-inducing. Garbage clearly aren't buying into "Quiet is the new loud." Thankfully, things get a bit more interesting further in.

With lines like "The city's on fire," "The world's on fire," and "The Earth is shaking," chaos is the overarching theme. There's little doubt the current political climate has shaped the lyrics.

On several tracks, Shirley Manson leans into a talk-sing vocal style that immediately brings to mind U2's "The Fly." After hearing it across multiple songs, it quickly starts to feel old. Her vocals are also frequently slathered in distortion, which wears thin just as fast. It all becomes a bit too cliché—a little too expected.

That said, there are moments where they swerve into unexpected territory. On "Hold," Manson briefly slips into falsetto, which suits both her voice and the track beautifully. On others—like "Have We Met (The Void)"—she drops into a deeper register, and it actually takes a moment to recognize her voice, which is a plus in my book. I would've liked to see more of that kind of boundary-pushing.

The title "Chinese Fire Horse" references people—like Shirley Manson—born in 1966. The song is her direct response to the rising ageism surrounding the band, especially her. The near-atonal shift from verse to chorus is what sets this track apart musically. And a barrage of "Wait a fuckin' minute's doesn't hurt, either.

Thankfully, there are more detours to come. "Have We Met (The Void)" features *Stranger Things*-style arpeggiated synths, whispery vocals, and solid bass work. It also hurls multiple "motherfuckers" at the listener, which frankly feels well-earned.

"Sisyphus," perhaps the album's most successful experiment, is an unusually synth-heavy track for Garbage—almost euro-synth in the vein of Pet Shop Boys. The airy backing vocals provide a welcome break from the endless Marshall stacks.

"R U Happy Now" comes in with its quantized bass synth groove and Bowie-style chorus piano (think "Ashes to Ashes"). It could almost pass for a Marilyn Manson track from the *Mechanical Animals* era.

One of the lingering downsides of Butch Vig's legacy is that Garbage have never fully escaped the '90s-favored formula (famously used by Nirvana and originally "invented" by Pixies): quiet verses, loud choruses. The most convincing songs on *Let All That We Imagine Be The Light* are the ones that break from this classic template. The ones that veer off the beaten path. And that doesn't have to mean going heavier. They've proven their rock chops a hundred times over. In fact, the band is most compelling here, when they allow more air into the arrangements. If more of the album had taken those kinds of risks, I'd be more enthusiastic.

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