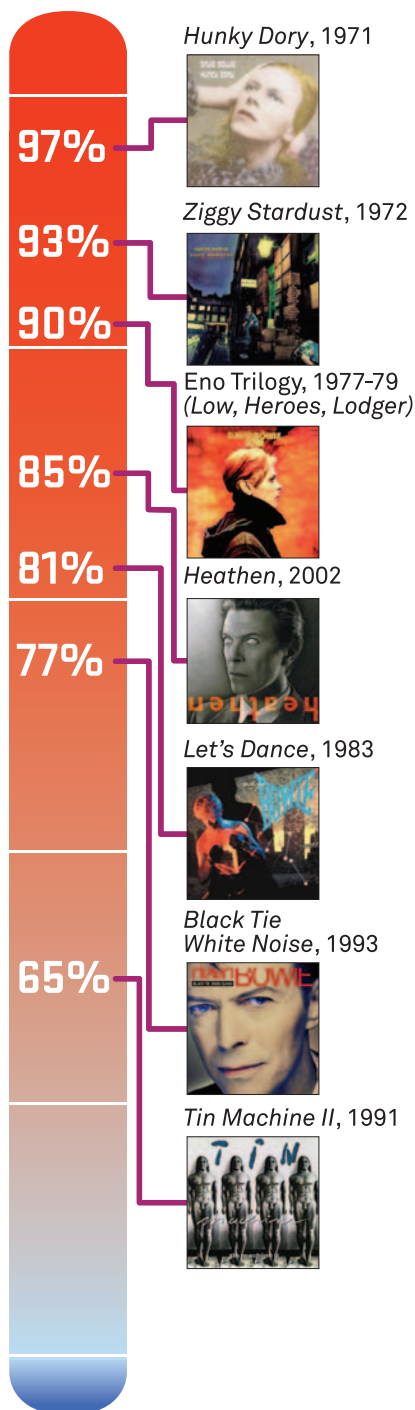


THE **F**TH DEGREE DAVID BOWIE

How does the current musical climate compare to the heat-seekers and frigid duds of yesteryear? Here, we pit the catalogue of an artist we all know against the *Filter* grading scale. Let this be your guide as we separate the hot from the cold.



ARCADE FIRE *Neon Bible*

91%

MERGE

IT SEEMS A WASTE OF TIME to talk about what's already happened. The Arcade Fire came in on a cold wind and warmed music—indie music, major music, music music—to the core. They brought us a wake and we threw them a party. Their *Funeral*, we knew, was only the beginning—never mind whether or not Win Butler, Régine Chassagne and the rest of the rag-tag gang of stage-climbing, chamber-popping, emotion-oozing Canadians ever rose from the tickertape pyre; we knew that what they started wouldn't stop any time soon.

But has music improved that drastically since? Have songs become that much more poignant? Have digital packets of audio information tended back toward that purported lost medium known as the album? Hard to say. On the other hand, there are certain non-musical variables much easier to take stock of: 21,000 more troops. Over 100 billion more dollars. An ever-growing death tolls. Civil war on three continents, an ideological one on our own, and the doomsday clock starting up as nuclear testing is once again explored by nations we've (once again) been told are evil.

And in the midst of all this, we have a sophomore album to consider where the words "eagerly anticipated" fall direly short in illustrating the truth. This is *not* to suggest that we are foolish for caring so much about what the Arcade Fire does; rather, that what the Arcade Fire does has everything to do with what's happening right now. Enter *Neon Bible*, a second album that carries with it as much weight and odd luminescence as the title would suggest.

We're immediately introduced to a darker, more measured Arcade Fire on "Black Mirror." Win's voice sounds deeper and heavier, his characteristic warble-wail sitting back in the all-percussive guitar/keys/drums undercurrent, while barroom piano and strings accent the song's trip out of the depths. His words suggest a clean slate ("I walked down to the ocean/After waking from a nightmare"), but soon they present a new quandary ("I know a time is comin'/All words will lose their meaning"), and eventually, in a Bowie vamp over hugely swelling strings, a plainly stated plea: "Mirror, mirror on the wall/Show me where them bombs will fall." Clearly, this will not be a celebration.

Heading into the tensely jaunty "Keep the Car Running," it seems that now more than ever, Win Butler is becoming the kind of frontman he looked up to as a youth: someone who understands the pageantry of emotion, yet

knows better how to bend its superficial aspects into conduits for the real thing. Luckily, he has a band that does the same. Here he's become Bruce Springsteen singing about action or death over a driving folk tune, while on the quiet, considered two-step anti-lullaby "Neon Bible," he's whispering apocalyptic truths with a near-rockabilly quaver. But it's on the fantastic "Intervention" where the Springsteen comparisons (and even Bob Dylan) truly trump the old David Byrne ones. A pipe organ lends the gravest of weight to a song about soldiers, money, family and church. These lyrics are not clinical abstractions of modern living; they are death-damaged and starkly poetic, crying for raw human emotion over the overstated blurry hurt of war ("Don't wanna fight, don't wanna die/Just wanna hear you cry").

Elsewhere themes seem more oblique, as water creeps back into the hulls of these load-bearing songs: Régine pulls Win toward the sea in "Black Wave"; in that song's shadowy partner, "Bad Vibrations," Win finds something more sinister there; the mildly surfy "Ocean of Noise" ties the metaphor to the miring static of city life; and "The Well and the Lighthouse" explores a tension defined by wanting to dive into personal comfort while feeling the need to tend a light for others.

But following another populist, working-man masterpiece, "(Antichrist Television Blues)," is the album's Rosetta Stone, "Windowsill." Over epic, choral wonder, Win sings: "I don't want to fight in a holy war/Don't want the salesman knocking at my door/I don't want to live in America no more/The tide is high, and it's rising still/I don't want to see it at my windowsill.../...World War III when are you coming for me? Been kicking up sparks, now set the flames free/The windows are locked now, so what'll it be?/A house on fire or rising sea?" And if a tear don't fall, then you've been living in a titanium tank for the last seven years.

Neon Bible is only 50 minutes long, and one of the 11 tracks ("No Cars Go") is reprised from the 2003 EP. And truly, there isn't anything here that comes close to achieving the anthemic, stomp-along, bombast of *Funeral*'s best works. But this is a different album, and a different Arcade Fire playing to their biggest strength: emoting. What's lost in immediacy is made up for in poignancy, particularly lyrically. Which begs the question: Will Win Butler one day become one of those heavy names he draws comparisons to? Time to talk about the future. CHRIS MARTINS