

Paul Westerberg
"Suicaine Gratification"
 Capitol Records
 Grade: B+

The most affected group of Replacements fans doesn't read this newspaper: 35-year-old boys and girls of past and future drunken after-hours parties who acknowledge alike strangers while waiting in line at the grocery store.

Wearing wrinkly, 15-year-old T-shirts and holding a bottle of Canadian Mist or a 12-pack of Falstaff, they nod or quickly speak as if they were anonymous VW Bugs whizzing by each other on some nowhere gravel road.

"What's up?" one might ask another pseudo-rebel in faded Converse Chuck Taylors.

"Nothing much," the other would typically respond in slightly nervous stranger-speak.

These big kids are typically heart-broken, overcomplicated or mystified by their losses of love and familial connection, but still thirsting to pass up tomorrow for a good time tonight.

It didn't help the micro-generation of Replacements fans, a surprisingly large underground social group shaped by the 1980s, when it lost its voice to alcoholism and then sobriety. That voice was Paul Westerberg, and its youthful qualities that inspired so many will never be heard again.

Westerberg is rightfully changing with age and is now sounding a lot more like a sober John Lennon than a cocktail-swilling Johnny Rotten.

On Westerberg's new recording, "Suicaine Gratification," the songwriter still sounds like a walking struggle, but yet more at peace than ever.

Furthermore, the album is mostly low-fidelity recordings the Minneapolis singer made at his house. This simple and intimate approach is appropriate because "Suicaine Gratification" sounds like the songwriter taking a serious step away from his inebriated, overindulgent past.

At the same time, Westerberg hasn't produced mesmerizing, rocking, Replacements-like material since he

New Releases



quit his night job as the drunk poet laureate of the north Midwest.

Which brings us to an interesting question: Is it time to stop judging the songwriter in connection to the brilliant-yet-intoxicated discography he once wrote for his old group?

No. To quit referencing his past greatness would only cheat Westerberg of his future's worthy potential. It would only say that he can't write great songs without his now-defunct band and booze habit. It's not only a horrible take on the situation, but also now untrue.

On his new album, Westerberg hasn't sounded so real or artistically sure in over a decade. Is his latest offering another masterpiece, another "Let It Be" or even "Pleased to Meet Me?"

No, "Suicaine Gratification" is not his post-Replacements Mona Lisa. But it sure beats the smarmy take on pop-for-pop's-sake thing that he's been doing ever since the "Singles" soundtrack.

To its credit, "Suicaine Gratification" is the closest thing to Lennon's "Imagine" LP that Westerberg has ever done.

For instance, "Born for Me" is a strong, Lennonesque, unabashed love song aided by the back-up vocals of Shawn Colvin, known for her "Sunny Came Home" pop fame.

More importantly, the rest of the album represents Westerberg starting to find that compelling, new voice within his old one, that slight re-invention he's been aching to find for a decade now.

For instance, the album's 10th song, "Actor in the Street," makes good use of a synthesizer line that the songwriter wouldn't have touched in past efforts.

The lyrics, on the other hand, share similar, personal content with Westerberg's "13 Songs" and the last Replacements record, "All Shook Down." The new songs of wit and regret will be heartwarming to old fans because they are better written than anything he's put out on his last two albums.

"It's a Wonderful Lie" kicks off his latest record with a nice update on nothing new.

"Get up from a dream and I look for rain. I take an amphetamine and a crushed right brain. It's a wonderful lie—I still get by on those," he sings.

It's always interesting when a product of the '80s American punk scene goes the God-believing way of Johnny Cash on the subject of religion. And Westerberg shows more leakage of genuine spirituality than ever on "Suicaine Gratification."

The record's single "Looking Out Forever" sounds real in its soliloquy to a capital-G divinity.

"God, I know I'm going home ... he chased me with his kisses ... wasted me in my prime ... replaced me with another ... even me sometimes."

Pretty straight-laced stuff for the guy who wrote the lyrics to the 1984 EP "Kids Don't Follow"—a punk anthem that gave its mostly middle-class listeners the courage to give the middle finger to Mom, Dad and tomorrow.

Which leads us back to the in-his-younger-prime version of the rebel without a clue. Westerberg, in his fear, once postured with street smarts and alcohol to become the anti-hero of a black-holed, boozy pocket culture. But now, on "Suicaine Gratification," he proves that his talent and honesty were always more important than his liquored-up lifestyle.

The opening line to the new album's third song best shows that Westerberg is telling it like it is, and once again, accidentally speaking for a lost, micro-generation he's never met.

"I was the best thing that never happened," he sings.

Play explores harrassment

BY LIZA HOLTMEIER
 Senior staff writer

What begins as a typical student-professor conference escalates into a full-blown sexual harassment battle.

In the play "Oleanna," David Mamet explores the nuances of sexual harassment, presenting a no-win situation between two equally close-minded characters.

The play, directed by Patrick Lambrecht, opens tonight at the Lincoln Community Playhouse.

The play begins with Carol, a student, visiting her professor in his office for help with his class. Communication quickly breaks down between professor and student. By the end of Act III, the two are throwing accusations back and forth, trying to find out who said what. After an avalanche of verbal abuse, the characters move dangerously close to the boundaries of physical violence.

With spellbinding terror, the play traces the complicated gender relations between Carol and her professor. Mamet wrote the play in response to the Clarence Thomas-Anita Hill controversy. But though it addresses the volatility of sexual harassment charges, the play is about much more. "These two are pitted against each other the entire time, trying to see who will win," Lambrecht said. "They both have a strong case, but they're both incredibly stupid."

Lambrecht said he hoped the audience would come to an understanding about the lengths people go to protect themselves.

"Sometimes, we end up hurting ourselves," Lambrecht said.

The play also promotes speculation

about the course each character takes. Rachel Kornfeld-Lambrecht, who plays Carol, said the characters have a number of opportunities to take a different path throughout the play. The play asks, "What if John had not invited Carol back to his office? What if Carol hadn't gone?"

The play's complex conflicts are further complicated by Mamet's language. His characters constantly interrupt each other, speaking in machine-gun-fire sentences, rarely completing a thought or an idea.

"His people can go on for a page and really not have said anything," Lambrecht said.

"Shakespeare is easier to memorize," Nielsen added.

The struggle, Lambrecht said, is to make the language feel realistic and human for the actors.

In 1984, Mamet won the Pulitzer Prize for Best American Play for "Glengarry Glen Ross." His screenplays include "The Untouchables," "The Verdict," "Hoffa" and "Wag the Dog."

This production of "Oleanna" is part of the Playhouse's revived Gallery Season, which has been dead for a couple of years. The Gallery Season is the Playhouse's venue for more contemporary theater. Since the Futz Theater closed in April, Lincoln has been short on venues presenting cutting-edge theater.

"The Futz dared to do scripts that no one else will do," Kornfeld-Lambrecht said.

Cast members said "Oleanna" is a great way to restart the Gallery Season. Nielsen said you can't walk away from this play without a reaction.

"I want them to be disturbed," Nielsen said.

Theatre Preview
The Facts

What: "Oleanna"
Where: Lincoln Community Playhouse, 2500 S. 56th St.
When: 7:30 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday
Cost: \$7 for students and \$11 for adults
The Skinny: Play explores the gray areas of sexual harassment



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