

A bizzare joke, right?

Neil Young's 'Reactor' has evasive anti-new wave tone

By ED LEITCH

When a less talented songwriter releases a disappointing album, not much is lost over it. The performer will be forgiven and the fan, although saddened by the experience, will plug along happily through life and not worry much about it.

When Neil Young releases his weirdest album in more than a decade's worth of performing, however, things aren't quite as simple. Even die-hard Neil Young fans might acknowledge that their personal needs to reconcile conflicting feelings about *Reactor*. Yet, you can count on Neil to warp your mind even with a failure.

It could be, you decide, that Neil Young is playing a bizarre joke on his audience. It was getting late in the studio, perhaps, and he and his backup band, Crazy Horse, thought it would be hilarious to record "T-Bone." In "T-Bone," Neil repeats the lines "Got mashed potatoes" and "Ain't got no t-bone" over and over again, with Crazy Horse churning away behind him on the same primitive guitar line. This lasts for half of side one—pretty funny, huh?

Alternately, you may decide that one of the basic themes from Neil's

earlier album, *Rust Never Sleeps*—that, "it's better to burn out, than to fade away"—was apocalyptic for Young as a performer. Neil decided to fuzz himself into critical mass and explode, leaving nothing left of the star who wrote "Borrowed Tune" and other meaningful tunes except fallout. In other words, Neil decided to blow-up instead of fade away on *Reactor*.

You may decide from one of the basic themes on Neil's earlier album, 'Rust Never Sleeps,' that it's better to burn out than fade away. He decided to fuzz into a critical mass and blow up instead of fade away on 'Reactor.'

Then again, both of those interpretations are ridiculous. After all, this is a Neil Young album. There's always more than meets the eye.

Reactor is simply the hippie perspective of New Wave music, and Neil's fed up with it. Much on *Reactor*, "T-Bone" and the bizarre "Rapid Transit," for example, are songs Neil used to demonstrate, both musically and lyrically, that much New Wave material is sort of stupid.

In "Rapid Transit," Neil rolls the lines "Rrrapid Transit" and "Pppub-

lic Service" off his tongue to a backdrop of relentless pounding. He finally concludes, "Every wave is new until it breaks."

The packaging of *Reactor* is also designed with New Wave in mind. The striking red-on-black color scheme and the words printed in individual syllables are reminiscent of the New Wave genre. Also, appearing on the back cover is the

"Southern Pacific" deals with a retiring employee of that railroad who sees himself "left to roll, down the long decline." He has nothing to look forward to, except some proud memories. The furious guitar and drum parts capture the power and soul of the man's train, while Neil sings the lyrics with innocent feeling. When you play, "Southern Pacific," you don't just hear the train, you feel like you're driving it.

Neil sticks with the modes of transportation idea in the next song, "Motor City." Here, he turns his attention to Detroit:

*Another thing that's bugging me
Is this commercial on t.v.
Says that Detroit can't
Make good cars any more.
Motor City
Who's driving my car?
Who's driving my car now?
Who?*

Once you get it in your head what Neil is trying to do on *Reactor*, it becomes a decent album. Until then, remember that Neil has made a career of confusing, provoking music.

Ed Leitch is a staff writer for *The Daily Tar Heel*.

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