

CLAIMS Department



ARCADE FIRE

I love them. They are the single most hipster thing I love other than my little JP. Of course, no hipster has been into Arcade Fire in at least 15 years, but they took what was popular with the pork pie hat and kale set and caught on big with the masses. I can't explain why, nor do I have to.

But this issue will pretty much me trying to do just that

Now, this issue is following a difficult time in the world around me. JP has acquired clusterheadaches/migraines, and they're pretty bad. I'm fairly certain it's a post-concussion thing, but like with my memory issues, which have gotten slightly worse, no one wants to consider that as a possibility. It's always a vitamin deficiency, or sleep problems. Anything other than concussions. I do not understand why.

Otherwise, things are pretty OK. New *Journey Planet* out, the second part of the Chinese Science Fiction & Space issue (and there's a great piece on food in it!) *The Drink Tank* is coming along, and I'm writing more in general. Still no date for my book's release.

NEXT ISSUE: George Gershwin

ARCADE FIRE is not a video band.

I have seen them live, and watched several of their taped shows, and they're not great there either. They played my two favorite songs from *Reflektor* on *Saturday Night Live* and neither of them lived up to the album versions. There are bands like that. They've had music videos, and none of them are great.

But the HTML5 demo video for *We Used to Wait* is amazing beyond all comprehension.

It's technically called *The Wilderness Downtown* and it's a beautiful piece of interactive filmmaking/programming. It's not what I expected when I stumbled across it in an exhibit at MoMA in 2011, on my famous trip where I was, for a second, a hemi-semi-demi-celebrity on an airplane. In the gallery, seemingly ignored by ever'body else wondering around the exhibit, was a small desk with a keyboard and monitor. The attract screen was on, and it was so cool.



The instructions are simple: enter the address of your childhood home. You do that and the video begins.

It's *We Used to Wait*, one of the better songs to demonstrate the musical concept of Arcade Fire. It features the voice of Win Butler singing a song that reflects on his days as a kid growing up in the suburbs of Texas. Fun note: he was born in Truckee, California.

The first images are of a hoodied figure running through the dark, street lights occasionally popping up. After a bit of that, another window pops up, showing another view of the runner. Then more windows open. Birds flying against an orange background, scattering anytime you'd running the cursor across the window. After a bit, a Google Maps view pops up, showing the neighborhood around the address you entered at the start. More windows pop up with more views, and then it cuts to a Google Streetview of the house. That's cool, but the really cool thing is a window that pops up asking you to write a message to yourself when you lived there. You can type it, or use the mouse to write it by hand.

And when you write, the letters turn into tree roots.

The images that creates can make it hard to read, but it's hella artsy. So is Arcade Fire.

The piece ends and you're given a prompt to have the message you wrote eMailed to you.

This was designed as a demo for the soon-to-be-implemented HTML5. The history of computers and software is full of advances made because of demos. The first important computer game, Tennis for Two, was built for the open house at Brookhaven National Labs. SpaceWar!, was developed at MIT in preparation for another open house. AI Labs often created either games or musical compositions that allowed folks who had no idea what was going on at labs to see that work was happening that had 'real world' applications. MIT did a demo of a script-writing system to create a series of short western plays. These plays were created for the 100th anniversary of MIT television program. Bell Labs, the creation place for much of the early computer graphics, music and art, saw the invention of wire-frame computer graphics by Ed Zajack was done to show what was possible (the film In 1963 Edward E. Zajac at Bell Labs, Murray Hill, New Jersey, produced the first computer-animation, *Simulation of Two-Gyro Gravity-Gradient Attitude Control System. A Computer Technique for the Production of Animated Movies* was specifically to allow the brass at Ma Bell to grok what it was they were funding. Even the Oscar-winning short film *Ryan* was de-

signed to demonstrate the capabilities of the Maya software package. As a demo, this worked beautifully, and not just because of what it could do.

But because it often crashed the machine.

It required so much processing that it led to crashes. Today, more than a decade and four or five Moore's Law layers up, it's not overly taxing. I used to have a crash if I had more than two programs open or any other tabs. Now, with my ten thousand tabs and everything open, it still manages to play the entire video!

The video was made by Christopher Milk, a wonderful music video director who did an amazing job at Coachella in 2011 releasing LED-embedded beach balls to create kaleidoscopic images on the crowd. Milk worked with Google, and that allowed for access to the level of programming required for a piece that pushed the envelope for personal computing internet use.

The piece is incredibly effective, and the song, which I consider to be among the best of them on *The Suburbs*. Going with a mid-tempo piece that has a powerful beat with a long bridge only helped the piece to move and play with the audience.

FUNERAL

ARCADE FIRE'S debut album, *Funeral*, was powerful, and while it was released in the middle of the Indy Rock revolution. The album was released in 2004 and it opens with an announcement: a tinkling piano with a drone in the back. I'd say that it was a hurdy gurdy. It's a very powerful piece, though it's nothing that hammers it hard. It's got Win Butler singing all sorts of scratch against the orchestration. It's a smart piece, but really, it's kinda a soundscape. It's the second song that makes the album as far as I'm concerned. *Neighborhood #2 (Laika)* is the second song I think of when I think of Arcade Fire. It's much more up-tempo. The song become guitar driven, even with the accordion



that inhabits so much of it. It's an excellent example of what Arcade Fire is capable of, by folding in all the instruments, but understanding the mix. That's followed by *Une Annee Sans Lumiere*, which is a slower tune that feels a bit more folksy. Then we get *Neighborhood #3 (Power Out)*, an absolutely rockin' tune that uses glockenspiel!

It's an album that has received almost universal praise, and it's much-deserved. In 2004, it felt incredibly forward thinking. It was the full step forward that music had been needing. It was the full recognition that quirky instrumentation could be combined with 1980s pop rock sensibilities to come up with something that felt fresh and referential at the same time. It's an incredible trick they anaged to pull off.

Rebellion (Lies) was the major single, and it's an unlikely single, but it's a great song that builds bigger and bigger until it's an absolute screaming work of multi-instrumentational rock. There's a touch of Talking Heads, but mostly, it's the kind of thing you would hear in Montreal in the late 1990s mixed with traditional America Indy Rock.

ARCADE FIRE followed up *Funeral* with an album that isn't quite as beloved, but I think it's actually the better album.

The best songs are just about the best of all Arcade Fire's work. *Black Mirror* is a good opener, but the album kinda kicks into gear with *Keep the Car Running*. It's an amazing and rocking song. It takes a lot of powerful playing. The lyrics aren't anything special, but it's a song that makes you want to get up and move around a bit! It's one that I've heard is good live, and I could totally see it!



Neon Bible is a down tempo piece, and it's somehow sweeter than I'd ever have expected. The simplicity is so much

more impressive considering the number of instruments.

Intervention might just be the best of all Arcade Fire's early songs. It's got a swelling organ line, and eventually turns into one of the best songs you'll ever hear! I also think their best songwriting happened here.

THE SUBURBS

ARCADE FIRE won the Grammy for Album of the Year for *The Suburbs*. It absolutely deserved to win.

The album is as good as any of the last 20 years. Better than almost any other that's hit the streets. I bought it at Rasputin Records in Hayward on the day it came out as I drove up to Linda's. I put it into the CD player of my car and from the first crash cymbal it's exactly what I didn't know I always wanted. It was like the first two albums, but with considerably more power and dancibility. It's Roxy Music and Talking Heads. The rest of the rock scene was finally catching up, with groups like Edward Sharpe & The Magnetic Zeroes hitting the pop charts. *The Suburbs* opened with the title song, which is basically a hootenanny, and it feels as if the entire album is trying to place them in position to move forward into a new mode.

But at the same time, they go forward with a more traditional rock 'n roll sound. After *The Suburbs*, it's *Ready to Start* and that's the one that seems to indicate that Arcade Fire is gonna break through. The description of the album being "Depeche Mode and Neil Young" is a pretty solid description. The idea that it's an album that is a sequel to the song *No Cars Go* from *Neon Bible* and that is a good thing because *No Cars Go* is a really rocking tune, and it's song like *Ready to Start* (which was nomi-

nated for a Grammy as a single) which largely populate *The Suburbs*, and that alone makes it a powerful statement. This is a band that has a sound, but knows how to let it evolve, not only over the course of a record, but over the course of years.

Songs like *Modern Man* hint at 1980s acts like Roxy Music or even Duran Duran. There's some of The Smiths in it all, but mostly, it's an understanding of instrumentation and tone.

The song *Rococo* is a really weird one, but it's also one that I love. You can only expect a song whose chorus is the repeating of "Rococo, rococo, rococo," from a band that understands what it means to come from an art school.

City with No Children and *Modern Man* are great because they're working in this brackish new mode, where there's a lot of *Neon Bible*, but mostly it's feeling out the edges. They fully go forward with *Month of May*, easily the most traditional power rock song they've done to this point. You can hear that they're opening a new door with it, and that alone makes it a worthy song. Win Butler's voice is interesting, I would say it's the voice of a young man who wants to be old before he's too far gone to enjoy it. There's some Johnny Cash in it, and a little Leonard Cohen. Hell, I'd say there's a lot of

Tom Waits in it if he hadn't gone off the deep end.

Finally, my favorite Arcade Fire song up until that point, *Sprawl II (Mountains Beyond Mountains)* which is almost entirely a Régine Chassagne song. It's a synthpop tune, and it's almost like an Alphaville or Thompson Twins song. Régine's voice usually hides towards the background, but here, as in the next album, it's an impressive voice to let loose on the entire the entire song itself.

The Suburbs is a masterpiece, and it's got everything a great album needs to be great.



ARCADE FIRE goes disco.

That's an over-simplification, but it's very much announced by the opening eponymous song, *Reflektor* and while they do have several songs that are more along the lines of what you'd expect from them, it's an announcement of departure.

It's also their weakest album to date.

The feeling is much like *Remain in Light*, but it's also got the idea that they're again feeling out the edges of where their sound can exist.

But the album lacks singles.

Reflektor is a good song. One of the most free-form jams they've managed to capture. If anything, this album feels far more loose than the others, and that can be a good thing for individual songs, like *Reflektor* and *Joan of Arc*. In fact, *Joan of Arc* (with its incredibly catchy call and response of "Joan of Arc (Jeanne d'Arc)") is one of my faves, and it's one that I could see the solid influence of not only 1970s disco and 1980s synthpop, but a lot of the early 2000s LoFi stuff from bands like My Barbarian.

The album never fully comes together. There's supposedly a lot of Haitian music influence on it, and maybe I'm just not able to pick it

out because of my lack of music education, but I'm mostly hearing a lot of the Post-Punk bands of the late 70s and early 80s who started to revisit dance music as the 90s approached.

Like the Talking Heads.

Still, it's a Régine Chassagne song that get me: *It's Never Over (Hey Orpheus)*. It's an absolute groove and the disco is heavy in it and it feels like the *Stop Making Sense* version of *Burning Down the House*.

It's a good album from a band a lot of us have come to expect magic from.



ARCADE FIRE do not repeat themselves.

That's not entirely true, but they are always experimenting, and no album shows that more than *Everything Now*.

A lot of it has that Disco-y edge like *Reflektor*, or *Remain in Light* for that matter, but really it goes broader. It's the least baroque of the albums, with fewer Hurdy Gurdy and accordion songs, more guitar and keyboards. There's a great straight punk song called *Infinite Content*, followed by a song called *Infinite Content* that is what you'd think of when you think of an Arcade Fire song. They're both solid songs, both of them well constructed for the form they take, and a major thumbing of the nose at their detractors. They're repeating themselves, but also breaking from everything you think you now. I like that they're able to do that not just because they're out of better ideas.

Because this is an album of great ideas.

They're more cynical (*Good God Damn*) and nihilistic (*We Don't Deserve Love*) and playful (*Peter Pan*) and overall, that makes for an enjoyable album.

It's just not genius.

ARCADE FIRE moves one firmly into their 40s with 2022's *WE*.

It's also an album that had it come after *The Suburbs* would have been seen as a return to their earlier form. It's a great freakin' album, one that works in line with *Everything Now*, but much more mature in lyric and approach. They've felt out the edges, and now are settling into the idle. One song, *Rabbit Hole*, is given far more room than most of their songs in the post-*Suburbs* era, but it's a Men Without Hats style synthpop song, and it's glorious. It's one of those dance music pieces that you could either get up and shake your ass to, or just kinda zone and let it flow o'er you. It's a wonderful piece, and I can't get it out of my head.

There are two songs called *Age of Anxiety*, and it's clear this was influenced not only by the fact that this is a band who is moving well into middle age, but by the fact they recorded it while everyone sheltered during COVID. That may explain the most expansive, less orchestrated sound of the album as a whole, but the individual songs hit so much better than *Everything Now*.

End of Empire, in a way a suite of four songs stitched together like a WINGS song, moves the band through their stages, and it does it while building to an incredible auditory experience, and when you dig into the idea of

the lyrics, you find that this is clearly a middle aged couple writing about moving into and through time, staring at where they've been.

The whole album feels like it's had air enough, and even when they bring in Peter Gabriel, it still feels like their album in a way that none have since *Neon Bible*. They're established, which they had been since *The Suburbs*, but they're either comfortable enough with being Arcade Fire to just go out and do whatever the hell they want, or they've reached a place where what they want is to ride the wave of the ideas they've had kicking around more than pushing any envelope.





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Next Time - George Gershwin