

## The Strokes Don't Buy Into the Noise

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Call it the curse of the post punk-rock band in the Internet era: Play sold-out shows to die-hard fans; create buzz in the blogosphere; snag a huge record deal; land the coveted slot on "Saturday Night Live"; feel scorn from indie rock hipsters accusing you of selling out overnight.

The story could pertain to any number of bands: Franz Ferdinand, Arctic Monkeys, Jet. But this is the tale of a band that paved the way for the aforementioned groups: The Strokes. Ah, the Strokes. How the mighty have fallen. Or have they?

If the Strokes believed all the hype stoking their flames and listened to all the criticism beating them down, they'd likely lock themselves in a small room, frozen about what to do next.

But, instead, the "saviors of rock" continue to make music and tour at their own pace, not buying any of the noise around them.

"I don't care what people think or what they expected. It's what (critics) said, not us," Strokes front man, Julian Casablancas, said earlier this month from Atlanta on a day off from touring. "I always had a simple motto or goal, which was to always move upwards."

But upward isn't necessarily the direction the band has gone of late, at least not by traditional music-industry standards.

"Things happened so fast," Casablancas said. "In some ways, it's better to come in second at first because it humbles you and you end up being focused and work harder."

When the band's first album, "Is This It?" debuted in the fall of 2001, it was hailed as a liberator from the bubblegum pop then dominating the charts and went on to sell more than two million copies worldwide. The press labeled the Strokes - Casablancas, Fabrizio Moretti, Nick Valensi, Albert Hammond, Jr. and Nikolai Fraiture - the Coolest Band on Earth. There was major buzz for the second album, "Room on Fire," which debuted at No. 4 on the Billboard charts, but quickly cooled. The group's latest album, "First Impressions of Earth," which came out in early January, debuted at No. 4 on Billboard and No. 1 on iTunes, but, again, didn't compare with "Is This It?" in terms of sales or critical praise.

A mere bump in the road, they feel.

"It's a learning process, like growing up," Moretti said, moments after purchasing a new computer so he could keep in touch with his girlfriend, actress Drew Barrymore, while on the road. "The third album is only the next step - who knows what will come next."

That third album, while not a commercial smash, shows considerable growth in both songwriting and musicianship. "First Impressions of Earth" emits the Strokes signature sound, but in a more polished construction. That confidence is shining through on their current North American tour, according to reviews — and Casablancas' own opinion.

"A tour is the most intense, stimulating way to hear music; it's the best form to receive it," said Casablancas, who has said he'd rather play in a half-full bar than a huge sold-out stadium. "There's genuine excitement from people. I feel like we've stepped up a level."

Stepping up is the way the Strokes like it, a slow, steady approach.

"(Even) if this record bombs, it's just another obstacle we have to get over," said Moretti.

"Maybe we'll never reach that perfect zenith you imagine in your dreams, but I sure as hell will die trying."

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