

Album Review – Protomartyr, *The Agent Intellect*

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Joe Mitchell

Protomartyr ***The Agent Intellect*** **Hardly Art**

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Written by: Joe M.

Detroit may be down, but it certainly isn't out. Far from it. In fact, it's off its back and rising to its knees right this second. It will be standing again in no time, shortly followed by flurries of roundhouse punches landing on the rest of the world as it shows off its re-found might. Forget the narratives of urban decay, a city abandoned, a city of blight. For every closed factory, there are more than a few stories of small upstart companies making national and international splashes: [Shinola](#); [Detroit Bicycle Company](#); [Great Lakes Coffee](#); [Detroit Denim](#); just to name a few. It's a list that could go on for pages. It will continue to grow into volumes in the coming years as Detroit is rebuilt and made robust again.

Music is making a comeback in Detroit, too. It no longer needs to look to the past and the legends it has produced: the countless Motown artists; the MC5; the Stooges; and the greatest semi-obscure band in music history – [Death](#). Nor does it need to look to current mainstream acts like Eminem, White Stripes, Insane Clown Posse, or even Sufjan Stevens for validation. There are tons of bands in Detroit right now that you haven't heard of that you'll be worshiping in a couple of years.

If you need a starting point for the current music scene in Detroit, look no further than Protomartyr. Formed in 2008 from the ashes of the Butt Babies, Protomartyr just released their third album, *The Agent Intellect*, at the beginning of October on Seattle's Hardly Art label. Yes that [Hardly Art](#).

However, before you go diving into the profound depths of Protomartyr, let it be known there are caveats. Like Detroit, Protomartyr are not just for anyone. Before you proceed, you need to take stock of yourself:

1) Stop right where you are, find the nearest mirror and take a nice long look into it. Look into your eyes. Is there a glint of optimism or glare of despair? Are there worry wrinkles on your forehead, or is it smooth and unfettered by the intrusions of the world's demands? Are there crow's feet under your eyes? Take a good long look at what you see.

2) Then ask yourself, "Did I see Jim Jarmusch's [The Only Lovers Left Alive](#)?" If you answer "No," then by all means, go see it immediately. Stop reading this, and go rent it from Netflix, or Amazon, or whoever. Pirate it from BitTorrent. I don't care. You must see it and you must see it now!

Watch the movie, assuming you haven't seen it already. Then, ask yourself, "Did I like it?" If you answer "No," stop right here.

Stop reading this review right here, right now.

Go no further.

Skip down to the underlined lines below marked by ***. Go to jail. Go directly to jail. Do not pass go. Do not collect \$200. Do not read anything between here and there. Go to those underlined lines. Read those underlined sentences and leave immediately.

Go away.

Far away, please.

It's for your own good.

Our liability insurance coverage dictates that we cannot let you go any further for reasons that are too delicate to discuss with you. Thank you for stopping by.

Bruno, please show these nice people the exit.

Are you gone "No" answerers?

Good.

Okay.

Thank you, Bruno.

Now, if you answered "Yes! I loved it and want to watch it over and over for the next two weeks so I can revel in the squalor and decay of Detroit and society in general, the blood lust, the violence, the wide open hopelessness of it all, the delicious tension that makes it feel like all of your veins are going to pop open all at once and drench the screen, bodies burned in acid baths, Tilda Swinton in all her pasty Scottish glory, the symphonic rock compositions of Tom Hiddleston's suicidal vampire, and the glorious animalistic unleashing of the darkest of forces right at the end that's like a revelation, incantation, excitation, and transformation all in one!" then good for you. Congratulations. You may move on to step 3.

3) Now that you have taken a good long look in the mirror in step 1 and passed the step 2 test, take a picture of yourself. One of those selfies you kids like so much. However, if you use a selfie-stick, you must skip down to the underlined lines marked by *** and get the hell out of here! Of course, you wouldn't do that, would you? Not a lover of the *Only Lovers*... ???

Okay. Post that selfie on social media. After **Protomartyr**, you and everyone you know will not recognize you. You will be changed, transformed, no matter how hardened you may think you are. That's how intense this band is. Like Detroit in a blizzard, **Protomartyr's** world is cold, hard, and full of hazards. If you want something positive and upbeat, reflections of an urban renaissance, you are in the wrong place. Please see the underlined lines marked by *** below. Of course, I think we've gotten rid of those people already. Okay. **Protomartyr's** world, as the name suggests, is a world of sacrifice for a cause- the first to die. It's bleak and violent. There are toil, trouble, and tribulations, but also the greatest of rewards if you survive their hostile landscape. Ask yourself if you are ready. If you are not, that's fine. I will understand. Even if you answered "Yes" to the *Only Lovers* question, you still have a chance to leave. See, the underlined lines marked by *** immediately below.

*** Taylor Swift, Katy Perry, or a number of other artists will gladly take you into their arms and give you sweet lolly pop lullabies to pass the days into night and vice versa.

[You may leave now, "No" person. Bruno will show you out.]

Okay. Is there anyone still left? Good. You are brave souls. I have met you before. I have seen you in the dark corners at clubs, wearing your black Joy Division *Unknown Pleasures* t-shirts or shirts with Ian Curtis's headstone on them. You may not wear black at all times, but you are a wee bit dark on the inside. Your guilty pleasures are [The National](#) [yeah, I know, they're like a hyper-melodramatic Joy Division wannabe] and seasons 1-3 and 5 of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. You think "[Doppelgangland](#)" is about you. It's okay. Shhhh.. Yes, I know. Willow is the shit. Yes. I had a crush on her, too. Yes. I wanted to be her lesbian lover, too. The musical? Oh yeah. "[You make me commmm-plete..](#)" Hee hee!! Shhhh!! It's our secret. I won't tell anyone. Mum's the word. We're thick as thieves here.

However, you're insanely proud that you have all the [Wedding Present's](#) albums, and [Cinerama's](#), too, and that you saw the [Tindersticks](#) live though it was your freaky-ass friend that convinced you to go, and you are so glad they did, and you've loved the band ever since. They're the only reason you stooped so low as to see [a movie with Vincent Gallo](#). You also love [American Music Club](#) and have an album of theirs floating around somewhere on your worldwide network of 3,000 Ubuntu and Mac machines.

But enough about you... let's step into the darkness, shall we?

The Agent Intellect is Protomartyr's second effort with Hardly Art, and it pretty much picks up where 2014's [Under Color of Official Right](#) left off – in a cold dark place of suicide, corruption, neglect, anger, homicidal tendencies, confusion, hatred, and all the other fetid detritus strewn along the Fluoxetine Highway.

Hell, indeed!

What better way to start an album than with a song about ol' devil himself:

*Before recorded time
In some suburban room, see
The devil in his youth*

*He grew up pale and healthy
With the blessings of his father
The devil in his youth*

And it's all backed by that somewhat twangy, often sonic guitar that reminds you so much of [David Gedge](#) in his prime. But there's something else blasting out of the cold room. It's anything but derivative. The guitar has some freakin' muscle behind it, coming to warm the place up. Heat it up! It could make it hotter than, well, Hell. All the while, Joe Casey's smoky, melancholic voice does its best to keep a window open to let in the harshest of January chills. "The Devil in His Youth" is as much overture as traditional rock verse/chorus song, and sets the tone for the whole album; a battle of sweltering heat and bitter cold. As the album moves on, the extremes get more and more intense, as heaven, hell, and earth roll back and forth and over and between each other like ice cubes in a giant cosmic cocktail mixer – shaken, not stirred. Whether the devil or God is your bartender is a matter up to you.

In "Cowards Starve" the roles are reversed. Casey's vocals hurl the heat:

*Suddenly it seemed
I had to take them to the sheltered eyes
I had to show them that the weakest hands
Can still make impressive fires*

*I'm gonna show them where the smoke is born
And spoken backwards then it shall form
I'm gonna show them that the field of bones
Will never never never be joined, right!*

while Greg Ahee's guitar blasts the cold in an effort to keep a battle-ready Casey from blowing up the album as it's just getting started:

*Wide-eyed sleeper
I'm gonna drown them in the breakers
Uh-huh
I'm gonna tear that mountain down
I'm gonna turn it out
And go out in style
Go out in style
I'm going out in style!*

Whoa there fella. You've still got ten songs to go after this.

Somehow, it all stays together and the band moves on to "I Forgive You" and its Pixies-esque quiet, loud; quiet, loud, and so on; as Casey goes off about Heretics, cheats, priests, judges, and assorted rakes and scoundrels all with:

"The Eyes of Kayrouz [are] upon You!"

Is he talking about [this billboard](#) and similar ones [throughout metro Detroit](#)? The ones with what the *Huffington Post* calls, "the face that launched a thousand lawsuits?" Man, that is one helluva a turn of phrase. And Casey, who writes all the band's lyrics says he's too old to be in a band... Thwwpppp!!, I say. Put a stop on your persiflage, my man.

Dammit, we need more singers out there going all James Joyce and William Burroughs, ones with the daring and wit not only to whip out their poetic license from time to time, but horribly abuse it each and every day to the point that we are all begging for mercy. If Casey isn't quite doing this yet, he's well on his way, and it will be a beautifully bleak day, on par with the day "[The Beach](#)" was released, for us all when he does. You'll be able to burn your copies of *Ulysses*, *Naked Lunch*, *On the Road*, and all your Ginsberg and Ferlinghetti poetry. You won't need it anymore. The paradigm will have shifted. Casey will be sitting at the top of the heap, hailed as the King of the New Beats. Morrissey, Ian Curtis, and that lot? Surpassed.

As an aside, there's something in all these lyrics that tells me Casey is Catholic. Not just Catholic, but hardcore Irish-Catholic with all its quirks, weights, oppression, repression, sullied past, history, Latin Mass, guilt and all that. Joycian, indeed; *Portrait of the Artist as Not Such a Young Man*. Maybe he's no longer devout, and he's just purging what he was raised in. Hell, maybe I'm wrong and he's a Lutheran or something. Just a crazy hunch I thought I'd vomit here.

"Boyce or Boice" plays like a minor-keyed indictment of the internet. [Boyce and Boice](#), by the way, are demons that mess with electronic equipment:

“If something malfunctions, BIND UP these two demons, and command them to leave your equipment, in the name of Jesus”.

Okay– priests, the devil, now electronic demons...??? Hmmm....

Per Casey:

*Destroy the gateway
Bind them up
Break the circuit
Cast them out

Bind them up!*

I’ll concede this. Catholic or no, Casey is certainly well-read, and [I’ll bet he looks good in red](#), too.

So one of the best tracks on ***The Agent Intellect***– okay it’s my personal favorite, “Pontiac 87”, just happens to be about seeing the Pope at the Silverdome. That doesn’t mean anything does it? Nah. Lots of non-Catholics turn out to see the Pope, right? I’m not a Bruce Springsteen fan, but hey, it’s a pretty big deal when he’s in town. You gotta go see Springsteen or Willie Nelson or whoever. The Pope’s the same way, right?

But enough about Casey and the possible influences behind his poetic flourishes. Ahee’s guitar on “Pontiac 87” is sublime with a spare melodic riff floating over the verse, and searing breakout chords pushing the chorus like a tsunami as Casey growls:

*That fall from grace
Knocked me on my knees
Don’t tell anyone
That’s what I wanted
The god of change
Knocked me on my knees
Don’t tell anyone
That’s what I wanted*

No. That’s not evidence of Catholic guilt. It can’t be. Nah.

Man. “Pontiac 87” has so much going on – old folks rioting, money changing hands, a [famous] bar called Jumbo’s, new money, false friends, angry dogs in a manger – with a grant from the MacArthur Foundation and several pounds of freshly roasted coffee, any decent rock writer worth his or her salt could write a tiny tome about it. Dammit Lester Bangs, the world needs you now more than ever, but nooooooooooooooooooooo!

Jesus!

Oh... sorry.

We’re less than halfway through the album and I’m already spent. That’s just how insane of a ride it is.

“Uncle’s Mother” brings more great riffs from Ahee in the Joy Division/Wedding Present vein. I’m too scared even to make an attempt to grasp what Casey is singing about. Whatever it is – it’s pretty darn sinister. There may be child molestation or kidnapping, but shhhh!! I don’t wanna think about it.

And that’s just the midway point in the album, and **Protomartyr** have already surpassed most of the full albums released this year.

But, somehow, it keeps cranking.

There’s “Dope Cloud”:

*The dope cloud
That’s descending
On this town
Is blowing gold dust
Into the pockets
Of the undeserving;*

“The Hermit”, and “Clandestine Time” followed by the two songs Casey wrote about his parents who died during the recording of the album – his father from a heart attack, his mother of Alzheimer’s – “Why Does it Shake?” and “Ellen,” which is a love song to his mother from his father’s perspective.

It all comes to a close with “The Feast of Stephen,”

*The sun cracks open
Like a running egg
They found my body in your head

They found my body after a thousand years
How many babies born this year?
And can we all send them right back?
Fight them off and plan an attack?*

Then you turn around and listen to **The Agent Intellect** again and again; after a nice nap, of course; and you find more and more. It’s relentless, and on lyrics alone, it’s a classic. Add Ahee’s guitar, Scott Davidson’s bass, and Alex Leonard’s drums, and you might just look back on all the melancholy wrought by the likes of Joy Division, the Smiths, and countless other bands from Manchester, Leeds, or wherever, and realize they were just a harbinger of something truly great that was going to blast out of Detroit and reconstruct the world some 30-odd years later.

Welcome Protomartyr.

We have waited so long for you.

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