

Reading Time: 12 minutes

When you're down and out, I always find that music can bring you back up.

It was last year when Green Day finally took the whole 'Wake Up' October 1st swarm of posts to Billie Joe Armstrong, and used it to announce (slowly) a new album. After some borefests (Especially Uno, Dos, Tre, which I think was just done to roll off a release schedule), this was a proper Green Day album, bringing back the anger and passion for standing up for what you believe in, with one song which hit home. Dilemma. When you struggle with mental health and the 'easy self medication' options, this song felt like it was written directly for you. Ironically, I was supposed to see Green Day play in Edinburgh earlier this year, but I was back in an acute mental health ward. Despite being told that I could go (As I would be with someone), it just wasn't going to work out...

... Roll around to this year. Again, back in an acute mental health ward, but instead of Green Day, it was Linkin Park. As I write about in the first part of my autobiography (#ShamelessPlug), Linkin Park have been a part of my life for years. Reanimation was the first LP album I listened to (Still my favourite), and I was a part of LP Underground for years, redesigned and torpedoed a major LP Fan community site, and heck. I lost my virginity after seeing them play at Download 2007. I kinda wasn't interested when every Transformers movie had an LP soundtrack, and one of my biggest regrets in life is not going to see what was Chester's last ever live show, in the Birmingham UK. I lived 1.4 miles from the venue.

I wasn't even aware that there was a show, a new track or anything until about 3 days after it happened. When you're in an acute mental health ward, it's not a good idea to be lugging around your trusty MacBook Pro, for fear of it being damaged, stolen, or whatnot. When you're disconnected from the world to focus on yourself, you turn off notifications on your phone, and slip into a world almost isolated from everything apart from what you see on ITV news or whatever.

When I heard that 'the band was back together', I was sceptical. I didn't watch the live show first, but instead pulled up Apple Music and chucked on the only song from the new album, From Zero. I loved the name of the album, recalling listening to old demos from the Xero days, and settled into about 45 seconds of Mike Shinoda singing. I've always been one to say that Mike's singing voice is completely underrated, up there with Corey Taylor, where 99% of the general public think that their talents are x, but miss out the hidden gems within them. All good.

Then comes along this female voice. OK, something different. She has vocal range, a decent 'rough' style to singing, then come the words 'Let you cut me open, just to watch me bleed'. Tingles. Goosebumps. Holy fuck they've done the impossible. Look. Chester cannot, will not ever be replaced. There were about 63 different levels of emotion going through every note he sung, and there's never going to ever be anyone who can go toe to toe with him on his own songs. This though was like the opening chorus to American Idiot. Push those in-ear Sennheiser headphones in a little more, sit up and listen.

It was after I listened to 'The Emptyness Machine' song that I watched the live set. I'll be honest, at points, Emily Armstrong looked a bit like a deer in headlights. I doubt that until she started singing Linkin Park's back catalogue, in front of some proper diehard LP fans, that she really realised the role that had been imparted on her. It wasn't the best performance in the world, but it was solid. You could see just how much she understood the responsibility placed onto her shoulders, and the further into the set she got, she embraced it more and more. When I heard that there was a series of gigs to be played, including one in London, my interest was piqued, but... I was still in said acute mental health ward, with limited cash, and the O2's not the best venue for disabled punters.

I've watched a LOT of Linkin Park live shows over the past few months. LP fans have been one of the best in documenting live shows, and there have been some amazing audio and video recordings. There used to be a time when the band would actually record the sets themselves, mix the levels, then release to ticket holders a couple of days later. Not sure if they still are / will be doing on this tour, but it used to provide an unparalleled way of a fan seeing how the band perform live. I've listened to sets from London, Paris, Seoul, Columbia, Brazil... So have a lot of footage to go from. There's also the World's performance of Heavy is the Crown, where the stage backdrop designer should get an award. That hit amazingly.

Of course, there was Heavy is the Crown, then Over Each Other released within the space of a few weeks. I personally like this as a release schedule. Go heavy first, then draw into the more 'modern' LP sound next. Somewhere deep down, I think Emily was deliberate in only doing a 14 second scream. It was always going to be compared to Chester's in Given Up, and you don't try to unseat the master. More on that to come. Over Each Other in terms of being a melodic 'voice song' also showed a lot about Emily's personal journey. Mike said in the interview with Zane Lowe that that was the thing Emily was working on the most, and it showed. I love though how Mike asks her to put on her 'Shouty pants' in advance of Casualty.

I think the best way to assess Emily's performance as the new 'frontperson' of Linkin Park is through 3 key factors: Image / Presence, Studio, and Live.

Image / Presence

I'm not going into looks here. Emily's a blonde haired, female singer that could have been plucked right out of 1990s Nu-Metal culture. Heck, she's said that this is where she fell in love with Linkin Park in the first place. Whatever. It's how you mould into the band that's important.

Immediately, you could tell that Emily has a pretty good stage presence. It's mainly natural, and her little 'quirks' such as hand behind her back when singing (Something ironically, I do a lot), and her 'screamy pants' persona are fantastic. She does take a little from Chester with the foot on top of the monitor, but he wasn't the first, nor the last to adopt that pose.

I say mainly, as there's times when she does look like a lost puppy on stage, especially when Mike's in charge of vocals. Though she does add some of her own bars alongside his, Chester would do that a lot more, and Emily doesn't seem to have as much interaction, especially on the OG tracks. I know Live in Texas and Project Revolution live albums by word, especially the Chester interactions during Mike's rapping / singing, and that bit just isn't there yet. Will this change over time? Who knows.

Studio Sound

Look. You can make almost anyone sound good in a studio. Pick 95% of 'pop' tracks from the last 30 years, and my point is proven. This does go hand in hand with live sound, but there's a lot you can do to boost your 'persona' in the studio, without having to rely to bullshit like autocue and the like.

Having listened to From Zero as an album, and then isolated vocals, you can tell that Emily's voice is the real deal. As much as I love Green Day, Billie Joe's vocals have so many effects on them these days you almost lose sense of his real voice. Emily's vocals are not the most powerful in the world, but you can tell that she has passion, raw energy, and range. It sounds like a bad analogy, but the album almost feels at points like her debutant ball, except it's being presented to the world as the person taking over one of the hardest jobs in 'Nu-Metal' (Or however we classify LP these days).

I don't like the bits between songs when Emily and Mike 'chat'. It seems almost forced, and it's like they're trying too hard to tell a story that doesn't need to be there. It on one hand makes it seem as though the album was recorded in one day, and on the other makes it seem as though it took multiple attempts to get to where her voice needed to be. If there's a version of the album without that shit, then please let me have a copy.

What the album does well is showcase her talents as a singer / rock artist in as full a scope as possible. There's not a bad song on the album, though you do switch off a little during some tracks. As much as I like the song on its own, Over Each Other is a perfect example of this for me. It's not like I need 100% energy 100% of the time, but her vocals do seem slightly less impactful than... And here I go with the direct comparison... Chester's. I think A Day To Remember is my best comparison here. Jeremy McKinnon can hook you in and keep you listening, as he flits between the heavy and melodic stuff. Like Chester, his voice is unique, and he can keep you immersed in every part of a track. Without Mike, it's a lot harder to stay 100% focused on what's coming into your ears at points on From Zero, but this could be as much as a development issue as an Emily issue.

It's too easy to compare Emily to other, comparable female artists. I would put her between Lzzy Hale and Amy Lee in terms of pure talent. I am slightly biased here as Lzzy was my Autumn soundtrack at 2PM UTC every Saturday for so many years as she did the College Gameday open, and also possibly because Evanescence made what was 'our genre' 'pop genre', for reasons which would be obvious to many.

Live Sound

I need to start with Lost. If there's ever a way to H/T someone who came before you, this is it. Emily's raw energy, emotion and love in this song shines through in such a way that you can tell that she's not just 'the new lead singer' of Linkin Park, but a Chester fan through and through. If there was ever an Ode to Mr Bennington, this is it.

Taking my stage presence points from earlier into sound, I would like to see more interaction with Mike. Heck, if you're the lead vocalist for a band; fucking own the role. Break down songs to get more crowd interaction. Engage with the crowd more intimately than holding your mic to the crowd, and control the set. One of my favourite LP live songs is from Nottingham 2003, when Chester does his 'I

was feeling pretty fucking down. But you guys, you guys have fucking raised me out of the shithole I was in earlier today...', before pumping out one of his most aggressive renditions of A Place for My Head I've heard. Make it personal. Go beyond #LeadSinger101.

Talking of A Place For My Head, this is one of about 4 tracks I've used as a marker over the years for gig performance, and I hate to say it, when I heard Emily do the full song compared to Mike doing the first verse over the extended Bleed It Out instrumental... I was disappointed. This could be as this is my anger song, the song I use to bury all the hate and hell I feel about things, life, and fuckups all in one go... If there's ever one song where I want raw, unfettered, direct hell screamed into my ears... This is it. And I just didn't get it. It's not bad, it just didn't live up to what the song is.

It's obvious to many fans that older LP songs as a whole have been rekeyed for Emily's vocal style and range. This is natural both for bands having a different style range when playing live, and also when having different singers play the same part. Killswitch Engage is the first band that comes to mind with reworking their live keys to deal with different singers. What LP as a band have done here is make the songs different, but similar enough not to cause issues for fan engagement or losing 'the sound' of a song as I like to call it. I think that some of the 'newer' stuff (Anything from Minutes to Midnight onwards) seems to work better in this regard, but anything from Hybrid Theory and Meteora works as a general rule of thumb. Some tracks are better than others, and I'm still waiting to see how some of the 'lesser played' songs from these albums will fit into a more rotated setlist.

If you want to know just how much Emily's grateful for the opportunity, and just how much she truly has LP written on her sleeve, I just have one song from the first show they did: Waiting For The End. Holy fuck did she put everything on the line for that. There're actually two versions of this song from the live set. This is the one where she managed the entire song, and her almost collapsing at the end makes me, and likely every other LP fan out there to grab her by the hand and pull her back up.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nJWoEGgoaio>

The OG version is even more heart-warming. Not just the fact that she knew she couldn't take certain segments, but the LP Community taking over. That's the LP I grew up with, and if there was ever a point when we could say 'You've got it kid'... This was it.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zxR6kJQFWQs>

I think in some regards, the comments I made about stage presence are less Emily, and more the different stage designs LP used in their tour. I get the concept, but that should have been used in the tour coming up, not at the start of a new 'live band'. You can see how much more comfortable a standard stage is in later shows, especially with the rocking crowds in South America.

It's easy on one hand to say that things will change with time. It's easy to say 'well, they had plenty of practice time'. Here's the thing. I know first-hand the differences between practice, rehearsals, and live. I've lived it, done it and had to live in the moment. Not on a stage in a band, but as a commentator / host / analyst. You have to prepare for everything, and until it's 'real', you never know how things will plan out.

Conclusions

In short. Is Emily the right person for the job. Hell yes. It doesn't matter that she's female, it doesn't matter that she's got a different vocal style to Chester. You can tell that she moulds with the band, and along with Colin (Who by the way is owning it on drums and production), this is a band looking forward, but remembering from where they came. From Zero. From absolute zero?

No one can, or will ever forget Chester. I still tear up when I have Jay-Z's BBC Radio 1 Live Lounge performance of Numb/Encore come up on my playlist. I remember where I was, and just how I had the biggest gut punch ever when he felt he could take no more. Chester's memory, legacy and determination have to live on, and may God forever have mercy on his spark. What LP are doing today, is honouring that. By the greatest gift we as humans have ever found. Music.

It would have been so easy for Linkin Park to go down the collab route that Mike's done with Fort Minor and his solo projects. Having him carry on do this alongside Linkin Park reminds me just how talented the guy is, and he's the perfect mentor for Emily. I've not yet had the chance to listed to Dead Sara, but I will at some point. The touring schedule is different, and you can tell already that it's taking a minor toll on her, but she can still rock it night in, night out. No one can ever strive for 100% perfection. Doing the best you can, is what earns people respect, and she's earned mine.

Now, like a good marinade, let's see how things develop over time.

Peace And Love xx