

Patrick Olszewski

Good News: Mac Miller's Unfiltered Honesty with *Circles*

by Patrick Olszewski

“Good news, good news, good news, that’s all they wanna hear. / No, they don’t like it when I’m done.”

Expectations build the foundation for the lyrics on Mac Miller's first single off his post-humous album, *Circles*. “Good News,” was released on January 9, 2020, and the following album released shortly after on January 17th, 2020. The lyric is simple, stripped of any glamor and poetic imagery, and yet it still holds incredible, emotional and self-reflective weight. There is a reason why fans of Miller, old and new, resonate with *Circles*, despite the album not reaching critical and award-winning acclaim compared to other records that released in 2020. Some believe the popularity and cult reception to *Circles* comes from Miller's tragic and untimely death on September 7, 2018. Others say it is the unfiltered lyrics personal to Miller's own battle with addiction, or the stripped and raw instrumentation of each of his tracks. All these opinions are important and somewhat true, but Miller's success with *Circles* is not founded upon his own struggles and tragic passing. I do not believe that his death is the reason why this album reached the hearts of so many listeners.

It comes down to one thing, all in all: Mac Miller's artistic approach to his most experimental record. An approach of honesty, real reconciliation with one's inner demons, and the bravery of escaping comfortability.

The language of rap and hip-hop in the late 2010s, and now into the beginning of the 2020s, is the language of change and genre-bending artists. The New York Times writer Jon Caramanica says that rappers like Drake, Kanye West, and Lil Wayne, who evolved the hip hop scene by storm with their combination of singing, rap, and RnB rhythm, are some of the biggest examples of the first rappers who played with bending the genre. Now, in 2021, genre-bending is commonplace in hip-hop, with Childish Gambino leaning heavy into psychedelic eighties rhythm, Tyler the Creator wrapping his tracks in heavy synths and electronica, and even J. Cole and Kendrick, playing into jazz sampling and RnB grooves to lay down the foundation for their lyrical poetry.

Mac Miller in the final years of his life, especially after the release of his album *Swimming*, was among these artists who began to explore new avenues for hip-hop. Towards the end of *Swimming*, Miller wanted to experiment for his newest record, and make the music *he* wanted to create. The most crucial start to this endeavor comes from Miller's decision to collaborate with influential producer and studio musician Jon Brion, who has worked in various genres, and produced for many musical icons like Kanye West, Beyonce, and Rufus Wainwright.

This new avenue for Miller's music evidently made him nervous, and Brion saw something in Mac that only great artists really possess – the ability to be humble, honest, and nervous about failure. Miller was at odds with how his fans might receive the new album, and Brion made sure that Miller

did not fall into temptation and lose his artistic vision while battling fear of rejection and normalcy. In an interview from [Craig Jenkins](#), Brion remembered Miller asking, “Do these two things go together?” when trying to figure out the chorus for “Good News.” Miller often asked similar questions about whether he was making the right music or bending the right genres in hip-hop. Ultimately, Brion told him, “Yes. My point is your subconscious knows they do.... This is great.” Miller was constantly unsure whether his fans, let alone the music industry and hip-hop community, would like what he was making. But Brion told him to not care about that. It is often better to not look at the bigger picture to make true, raw art – to ignore what other people think.

In the same interview, Brion said that when he heard Miller's song “Everybody” for the first time, after Miller had passed away, he understood why Miller kept this song hidden, despite how great it was. It was a new and different styled song compared to Miller's other tracks, but it was clear Miller displayed nothing but prowess and expertise in a style he was relatively new to. Nothing about his new music felt surface-level or amateur. Brion said this about Mac in regard to finding his new style: “If he got interested in something, he'd really f***ing learn about it. It wasn't surface knowledge. I've worked with people who like hearing about a lot of things, but almost so they can name-drop it to themselves: *Look at how many different things I know*. They have learned things, but they don't actually absorb them. Mac was different. His curiosity was of the deeper nature.” Miller had a devotion to the craft which is hard to come by, and Brion took notice of Miller's devotion and drive immediately. It is exactly why Brion found so much love and intrigue in Miller as an artist. When artists are *that* devoted to their work – to their *art* that makes them who they are, their hard work shows regardless of acclaim or failure. Whether you like the music these artists create does not matter to them, and even though this concept was hard for Miller to fully accept while making *Circles*, the fellow musicians he collaborated with, especially Jon Brion, allowed him to feel comfortable enough in his own skin, driving him to finish writing his truths. *Circles* is a shining example of an artist sharing his world and experiences outright, without any fear or hesitation.

I could talk about how much I enjoy the soothing synth pads and electric and grand pianos, the stripped production quality, featuring raw performance tracks with little tampering and interference. I could say these statements are the main reasons for why I love *Circles* the way I do. However, I would be disingenuous if I tried to write a conclusive statement for why this album means so much to me, and to Miller's fans worldwide. The record is different, unique and brutally raw. It is a genre-bending album that I had never expected to hear starting my new year in 2020, and it is an excellent record of modern genre-bending hip-hop. It is a gut punch for anyone who knows how their inner demons work, and how those demons might eventually destroy them if left unchecked. But like all art, it is meant to reflect our own humanity, whether we want to hear it or not.

Miller always knew that life had to be about good days and bad days, and towards the end of his life, a life tragically cut short, he began to live by that philosophy. *Circles* perfectly reflects this unending loop of life; do not just embrace the good days, embrace the bad ones, too.

The New Indie Scene: Lo-fi Artists

by Patrick Olszewski

As someone who grew up on indie rock and indie RnB music from an early age, I disagree when people say that “true indie music” is dead. It is true the era of bands like Radiohead, Smashing Pumpkins, Nirvana, Wilco, Weezer, Beck and many other alternative rock outfits with male singer headliners and grungy, punk aesthetics that fight against the mainstream pop and rock norms, is ultimately over. Some of these artists have even evolved with the times, such as Weezer, Wilco, and Beck in particular. But a new rise of indie artists like [Phoebe Bridgers](#), [mxmtoon](#), and [Clairo](#) still encapsulate the spirit of indie bands, even though people want to give these new indie artists (especially female indie singers) a hard time because they do not have the same appearances or the same sound as an angsty white guy in his mid-twenties.

The indie music scene is changing, and with this change comes a new appearance, a new approach to musical expression and a new aesthetic quality in bedroom pop artists and indie bands alike. One key theme that this new and up-and-coming generation of young indie artists share, reflecting a new era of indie music, is lo-fi production.

As someone who listens to lo-fi hip hop playlists while cooking, reading, working, studying, and to ignore the white noise of the fridge in my apartment, there are qualities to lo-fi production that perfectly encapsulate the essence of indie music. Many indie artists are also lo-fi producers and are often considered lo-fi artists. This is not a coincidence. Oddly enough, people *like* listening to lower quality music, and lower fidelity tracks. It is the same reason why people like listening to indie singers who scream their notes, sing flat or sharp, and have poor technique; it is genuine, unfiltered artistic expression, without any training or production involved. Lo-fi listeners enjoy hearing the snaps and crackles in poorly recorded snares, and lead vocals reverbed to oblivion, because the actual raw vocal tracks sound like they were recorded with a track-phone speaker. Both lo-fi listeners and indie listeners love hearing raw, unfiltered performances and production, which is why the two genres are starting to blend into a new, indie pop scene.

It is often said that the main reason people like lo-fi recordings and lo-fi artists is because of the nostalgic energy within their music – the aesthetic of being able to *hear* the room and the white noise, or the way some audio tracks do not perfectly mix, creating unclear, hazy pictures. It is true that lo-fi recordings are nostalgic in a way, but they also evoke authenticity and artistry in musicians who do not have the luxury to spend thousands of dollars in a studio session.

There is something amazing and special about hearing a debuting artist, listening to their first EP that was probably released using a distribution service like [CD Baby](#) or [distrokid](#), and realizing, “Wow, they probably made this entire EP with only \$100 worth of equipment or less.” And you would probably be right.

New indie artists have a strong determination in DIY production and making the music *they want to make*, rather than hiring a producer for thousands and thousands of dollars to tell them how they think their music should sound.

I really look up to this new brand of artistry. People resonate with the moody lyrics and emotional realism that lo-fi artists put on display in their music. [Spotify](#) released a statistical analysis of their listener's habits in 2019, and what they found was that sad song playlists are being listened to forty-five percent more year after year from Gen-Z and millennials. Indie music has never sought to shy away from raw emotion, and with this new generation of indie musicians, who lean into the raw and vulnerable more than ever before, the indie music scene has never been more honest and more "indie."

I am glad that new indie lovers are going to be able to grow up listening to artists like [UMI](#) and Phoebe Bridgers. I know from my personal experience that I never had a female indie artist to look up to as a kid – the only indie music that was "cool" to listen to were from prominently male dominated bands. But all of that is changing. Our new generation of indie artists do not care about traditions that have been in place for years, and they should not care. Why should the cover of indie music be a straight, angsty white male? And why should indie music cost thousands and thousands of dollars to make, when the music does not need high production to sound good, anyways?

The indie scene is not dead; it has just evolved into something more representative of our current artist's time. And our current time and social climate is founded on change and revision... with a tinge of nostalgia sprinkled on top.

Up and Coming Artist: Manwolves

by Patrick Olszewski

I am surprised the Chicago based hip-hop group [Manwolves](#) has not reached widespread acclaim and notoriety yet. I have never listened to another band that blends rock, hip-hop, jazz and RnB in the same way these young musicians do. Their sound is incredibly unique and their own in the hip-hop world, especially in the Chicago hip-hop scene. And what is more surprising is that their deep hip-hop grooves and mature, yet playful instrumentation comes from a group of young, individualistic kids, who have a deep respect and determination to play hip-hop music they are proud of.

The hip hop quintet originally started off as a small garage band in middle school. According to an interview from [Live Legato](#) on YouTube, everyone in Manwolves, before the group officially formed, all played in different bands in middle and high school. But every Friday, they got together and made music as friends for fun, playing various genres and styles. It was not until their sophomore year of high school, with Michael Werner joining the band as a trumpet player, that Manwolves really took off.

It was hard for the band to gain respect among the various listeners and venues in Chicago at first, seeing as they were all young, white, high-school jazz students playing hip-hop alongside older, already well-established local Chicago bands. However, Manwolves did not have to work hard to prove themselves as a hip-hop group capable of competing with the already wide array of incredibly talented musicians from Chicago.

Jamie McNear leads the vocals with his raspy, juvenile voice, capturing playful sensibilities that sound as if they were found in drunk, high school parties, and mellow hangouts on the couch with close friends. McNear's voice holds individualistic qualities full of personality, and his personality as both a wild and reserved vocalist draws me into his boisterous and mature lyrics. Eli Cohen plays the guitar, laying the foundation for the quick and solid rhythm for the rest of the band, while Ari Garfin plays keys, usually playing soft electric pianos and synths to give the tracks space and smooth ambiances. Above it all, however, Julian Freeman kicks off the band with his strong and deeply groovy drums, with hard-low end thumping kicks and playfully ecstatic high-hats.

The band records and produces all their music, releasing high-quality sounds and mixes ready to be streamed on [Spotify](#), [Soundcloud](#), [Apple Music](#), and other distribution services. It is beyond impressive to see a band such as Manwolves, made up of young and up-coming musicians without any prior experiences in other professional bands and studios, pull off such professional and genre-breaking sounds.

I have no idea if Manwolves should be classified as a rock outfit, hip hop group, RnB band, or something in-between. But I believe the quintet's genre-creating sound is the magic and essence of Manwolves; they are uniquely themselves. In their interview from [Live Legato](#), the band talks

about how they gain inspiration from their favorite artists like everyone else, but their sound comes from themselves just playing together as friends.

After all, sometimes playing with your friends and having a good time making music is what art is all about, and Manwolves takes that philosophy of having a good time with your friends to heart. It is almost as if you can see the smiles on their faces when you listen to their music – they are all just friends, having a good time.

Watching Your Favorite Artists Grow

by Patrick Olszewski

Do you remember the artists you grew up with during your childhood? The artists you listened to after school, on long car rides, or in between the little things during the day? The artists that were always on the top of your playlists? The bands, singers, and instrumentalists you stuck with for years and years, from middle school to high school, as if they were longtime friends you could always rely on? Do you remember those artists; the ones that meant the *world* to you?

Do you still feel the same way about those artists? Are they still there for you, clear in your mind – or have you forgotten about them, and moved on?

My own genre taste has changed immensely over the course of my life. But like everyone else, I have a select few artists that I play whenever I do not know who else to listen to, or if I simply want to go back to a familiar happy place. You know those artists – the ones that we call our favorites, the ones we might have seen in concert multiple times, or the artists whose songs we have memorized from top to bottom like an actor retreading through an old script.

One of my favorite bands growing up, introduced to me by my oldest (and much cooler) older brother, was [Death Cab for Cutie](#). I would play their albums on repeat for months, and for a while in high-school, I would even fall asleep listening to *Plans*, or *Transatlanticism*, simply because I was so familiar with these records and the happy memories they bring. More importantly, however, is how I *still* listen to Death Cab for Cutie and [Ben Gibbard's](#) soothing voice, years and years later. Death Cab, while not reaching the same popularity and acclaim that they once did in the 2000s, are still very relevant today, and that has to do with the band adapting to new styles and finding new ways to express their musicality. *Codes and Keys* is an album that represents their newer branch into happier, less melancholy tracks that the band was known for, and every other release since then reflects their emphasis on heavy production, high energy drums, and ethereal vocals and synths. Despite this new direction, Death Cab still sounds like Death Cab, which is why they are still a powerful musical force, even without all the fame and glory from their younger days.

[Childish Gambino](#) and [Daniel Caesar](#), while being extremely different artist than Death Cab for Cutie, have grown and changed in a similar vein. I started listening to Gambino with his first studio album *Camp*, and I continued to eagerly listen to him change his style and musical expression with each new release. His constant ability to adapt and change himself has made him a titan in the hip hop and music industry; no one can match the wide array of genres, styles, and changes Gambino as an artist has gone through. Daniel Caesar, while reaching popularity way later than Gambino and Death Cab, is still evolving and changing his RnB formula, but his roots in lyrical poetry, great rhythm sections, and soothing vocals is still prominent from his first songs to his latest.

The themes and relationships we associate with the artist we call our favorites, the ones that we consider our happy places, never change, even if they evolve their sound in new directions.

However, what about the artists that we do not listen to anymore? Why do we lose interest in them, stop listening to them and move on?

[Rex Orange County](#) used to be my favorite singer in high school, but now, I can barely listen to him anymore. I appreciate his drive to change his own musical expression with his newest album *Pony*, but it really was not for me. I did not feel like I was listening to the same Rex that I heard on *bcos u will never b free* and *Apricot Princess*, and that is not coming from a fan who always expects a perfect album to come out. I always go into albums with an open mind, no matter what, and in fact, I sometimes prefer an album that has blemishes and imperfections over perfect ones; the imperfections show we are still human underneath all the artistry and production. With *Pony*, however, Rex did not stick with me the same way he used to. It all has to do with how I represented Rex as an artist in my own head, and how the themes and emotions I had associated with him in high school did not resonate with me in his newer music. I loved the raw, authentic Rex he presented himself as with his stripped vocals and lo-fi production from his first two albums, but *Pony* is auto tuned, produced, and perfected to an almost annoying degree. I *love* a well stylized auto-tuned vocal, but hearing Rex sing with auto-tune felt like he was hiding himself from his listener, rather than showing his true colors. Not to mention that the themes and lyrics from *Pony* feel oddly less poetic when compared to his younger works, which was very jarring to listen to as a longtime fan of his.

We must tell ourselves that artists change, and the way we perceive artists change. Life, as we all know, changes no matter how hard we try, and our tastes in music and in artists are in constant evolution. Someday, I might stop looking up to my favorite artists. There is a chance I might stop listening to Death Cab for Cutie and Daniel Caesar one day, even though the thought of it pains me. We all move on from the artists we cannot click with anymore; but sometimes, an artist really can stick with us till the very end.

I wish Rex Orange County and other artists I have stopped listening to the best. They will find new audiences, and I will keep finding new artists, too. Regardless, if I am ever unsure of who I should be listening to, or if I have no drive to listen to any new music, I know there will always be a few bands in my back pocket who never let me down. Hopefully, you have a few artists in your mind you can always rely on as well. I think we should have that familiar happy place in music – the artists and bands we can always fall back on.