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Hurling Your Basic Rock at the Arty Crowd

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MUSIC
25 The White Stripes, an Adam
and Eve for rock 'n' roll.
By Joe Hagan

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THE White Stripes may not be what they seem. They bill themselves as a sibling act: Jack White on guitar and vocals, his sister, Meg, on drums. But if recent press reports are true, they are actually ex-spouses. The duo's spokeswoman says they are sticking to the sibling story. And that's good. The ambiguity lends itself to their aura, that of a kind of Adam and Eve in their own rock 'n' roll Eden.

Last month, these pale, handsome mid-20-year-old rockers — he head-to-toe in red, she in white — appeared on national television for the first time. In the middle of a raw, clanging two-chord rumble called "Screwdriver," they threw down a rock gauntlet: for nearly half a minute, they vamped on a single chord spiked with sharp stops. The thudding simplicity and reckless disregard for valuable air time resonated with power. Mr. White then signaled to his sister, and the drums fell away as he dipped unexpectedly into "Your Southern Can Is Mine," an old blues song by Blind Willie McTell. Fingering the chords, his mouth closing in on the microphone with a new intensity, he slurred the darkly ambiguous yet funny lyric "You might read from Revelation, back to Genesee/ you get crooked, your Southern can belongs to me."

Mr. White then returned to the brute two-chord riff, which crescendoed with him warbling, "I got a little feelin' goin' now!" over

**The White Stripes recall
a primitive sound full of
zeal. But they're self-
aware and clever, too.**

and over in a flurry of spit, cymbal crash and ecstatic rock triumphalism.

It would have been one of the most thrilling rock performances in television history — if only it had been seen by more than a few die-hards willing to stay up until 1:30, when it was broadcast at the end of "The Late Late Show With Craig Kilborn" on CBS. In 2001 rock music doesn't hold the cultural weight it once did in, say, 1964, when the Beatles appeared on "The Ed Sullivan Show." But with a stripped-down garage, the White Stripes, who recently released their third album, "White Blood Cells" (Sympathy for the Record Industry SFTRI 660), have achieved something uncanny: They have made rock rock again by returning to its origins as a simple, primitive sound full of unfettered zeal. On this new album, blues-metal, acoustic pop, punk, schoolyard ditty and piano-driven thrage are all brought to life by Ms. White's rudimentary drumming, Mr. White's soulful, unaffected voice and a low-fi garage aesthetic. (The band will headline a free concert on Thursday at Pier 54 on 14th Street in Manhattan.)

Over the last 20 years, blues-rock has become nothing if not passé, kept alive mainly by bar bands and high-minded stylists like the Jon Spencer Blues Explosion. Cranking up a stack of Marshall amplifiers and sweating out, say, "Whole Lotta Love," as Led Zeppelin did in the 1970's, has become something of an embarrassment for successive generations of rockers. Chalk it up to the urge to reinvent the genre and the slow creep of irony into the culture. In the last decade, rock music has broken down into a zillion niches, from clichéd acts like Bush and Matchbox 20 to arch nerd-rockers like Weezer and Ben Folds Five. There's been a little something for everyone but no longer one big thing for all. Having lost the

Joe Hagan's most recent article for Arts & Leisure was about outsider music.

power to one-up itself, rock has been trumped by hip-hop and electronica.

Recently, the five-piece English band Radiohead was hailed as the savior of rock by virtue of its album-length opuses, which modernize classic rock with themes of techno-dystopia and the avant-atmospherics of Pink Floyd. Led by the stuffy Thom Yorke, Radiohead has managed to wriggle free of cliché, but only by drifting away from simplicity and into the nonlinear blips and squiggles of electronica. The band makes art-rock, not rock rock, the difference being the basic fact that one can't really rock to blips and squiggles.

On the surface, the White Stripes would appear to be as clever and self-aware as any other underground rock act: a novel brother-sister conceit, kitschy outfits reminiscent of 1960's proto-garage acts and the use of just two instruments. As part of their stated call for simplicity, they gave their second album the pretentious title "De Stijl," recalling the Dutch Minimalist art movement of the 1920's. There's enough here to lure the buzz-obsessed world to its curiosities and enough pretense to ease the skepticism of the jaded indie-rockers who have embraced

them. At its heart is a mystery: Is Mr. White, a 25-year-old former upholsterer from southwest Detroit, concocting this stuff with a wink? Or are the White Stripes simply naive?

While the critics sort out the riddle, the two are freed to play blues-rock with a depth and feel completely incompatible with their image. Like so many icons of yore, Mr. White sounds as if he has struck a deal with the Devil. For beneath the arty facade lies one of the most cagey, darkly original rockers to come along since Kurt Cobain, capable of evocatively plain lyricism and chilling emotional turns.

Incidentally, Mr. White's sound seems an appropriate segue from Mr. Cobain's last recorded song, "Where Did You Sleep Last Night?" — a variation on Leadbelly's "In the Pines." On "The White Stripes," the duo's debut album, from 1999 — recorded in their living room and dedicated to the Delta blues legend Son House — Mr. White reannounces Robert Johnson's "Stop Breaking Down," Bob Dylan's "One More Cup of Coffee," and the 1930's standard "St. James Infirmary Blues," all with a believable patina that would sound brittle or stylized in

the hands of a less inspired player.

Having grown up in Detroit, a city that missed the economic high times of the 1990's, the White Stripes flaunt their sense of insularity from the culture at large: on "The Late Late Show," they performed with the flag of the City of Detroit pinned to the scrim behind them. They have also ignored overtures from major labels in favor of a local outfit. This provincialism could be a reason songs like the sweet, childish "We're Going to Be Friends," from the latest record, sound untouched by a modern climate. Lyrics like "Walk with me, Suzy Lee/through the park, and by the tree" aren't so much classic rock as traditional American music, the kind that can turn singsongy rhymes into the mysterious parables we associate with early blues recordings.

LISTENING to this music, one begins to realize that De Stijl art motif is less a pretension and more an earnest Midwesterner's idea of an artistic school aesthetic. Taken together, the patriotic color-coordination and blues roots sum up a sort of rock nationalism, a homage

to a time when the Rolling Stones could disrupt the status quo with a clanging, two-chord rumble. Mr. White's shameless simplicity is precisely his allure. As he sings on "Hotel Yorba," a porch-stomping pop rag, "It might sound silly to think childish thoughts like these, but I'm so tired of acting tough and I'm gonna do what I please."

Whether the White Stripes' brand of back-to-basics rock can subvert today's tepid corporate creations remains to be seen. Like so many "alternative" bands, it could remain a refined pleasure for a limited but studious niche of rock lovers. But if discovered by MTV, the very insularity that makes them so original will be tested. Belying any naïveté, the cover of the group's latest record depicts the anxious-looking Whites, both dressed in red and white, backed against a red-brick wall and surrounded by obscured black figures. Inside the CD case is the next frame of the story: the figures are paparazzi with cameras, and the Whites are now smiling, looking every bit the stars. Whether this is wishful thinking or a wry commentary on fame remains as it should, a mystery. □



Jack White and Meg White of the band *White Stripes*. The back-to-basics rockers from Detroit recently appeared on national television for the first time.