

**Your Band Sucks – What I saw at indie rock’s failed revolution (but can no longer hear).** By Jon Fine. New York, NY: Viking, 2015. [xviii, 302 p. ISBN 9780670026593. \$27.95]

Jon Fine’s debut book serves multiple functions: It is an entertaining memoir, it offers a case study of the complete life cycle of an indie rock band, and it is an effective (if not biased) primer on the genre. Fine is currently the executive editor of *Inc.* magazine, a regular columnist on media for *BusinessWeek*, and appears in several other publications of note. As a musician, Fine was a member of seven bands, most notably as a founding member and guitarist for the regrettably named Bitch Magnet (1986-1990, 2011-2012). For this book’s multiple functions, it is centered on what caused Bitch Magnet to exist, rise to some degree of consequence, fall unceremoniously (as is the indie rock way), and then eventually and predictably reunite (also the indie rock way).

Absent his participation in Bitch Magnet, *Your Band Sucks* would not exist. The band was formed by Fine with Sooyoung Park while both were students at Oberlin College (neither were music majors). Eventually joined by drummer Orestes Morfin, they released two well-regarded LPs and several EPs, and toured the U.S. and Europe numerous times prior to disbanding for the first time in 1990 – remarkably all pre-Internet. They played moody and aggressive music that employed a complete dynamic range, and occasionally explored longer song forms and odd meters. During the intervening years Park went on to have much greater success with the band Seam, and Morfin also enjoyed better fortunes with Walt Mink. Fine did not achieve the same level

of recognition with his subsequent projects, preceding his work as a columnist. When the acclaimed label Temporary Residence approached Fine about reissuing Bitch Magnet's recordings, the band elected to reunite to promote the releases. This afforded the band the opportunity to enjoy an increased profile due to the influence they had on many bands that followed in the 1990s, as well to make the most of social media. Their reunion tour featured select appearances throughout Asia, western Europe, and on the east and west coasts of the U.S.

Divided into three large sections, the story unfolds chronologically. Book 1 is devoted to Fine's early life through college, concluding with Bitch Magnet in mid-career. Book 2 advances the band's story through to its first demise. The section continues with Fine's subsequent band efforts, descent into bacchanalian misadventures, and challenges with maturing. Book 3 focuses on Bitch Magnet's reunion and Fine's settling down into stable employment and marriage.

Concurrent to Fine's personal story, he provides ample context – culturally, geographically, and socioeconomically – which is when this work is at its best as a primer. For the genre itself, *Your Band Sucks* is instructive on American indie rock's roots in the late 1970s, ascent in the 1980s, embrace by the mainstream in the 1990s, the music industry's chaos in the 2000s, and this music's quest for relevance in the 2010s. These portions are greatly enhanced by interviews Fine conducted with colleagues or associates prominent in that community (Laura Ballance, Andrew Beajoun, and Jenny Toomey in particular). The book's lack of an index is unfortunate given the important

artists, subjects, labels, movements, places, and other notable persons covered throughout who are relevant to the history of the genre. For any musician who has lived this life (or still is), they will read many familiar anecdotes, at times painfully so. For the uninitiated, these accounts are highly informative, with sufficient self-awareness and sporadic humor. Fine's prose is that of an experienced author and it strikes a balance between intelligent and natural, while maintaining a steady pace. (At no point does this work get mired in any single phase of life or over-examination of a topic.) He will occasionally provoke the reader, starting with the book's title, but he never devolves into settling any sort of cultural scores. However, *Your Band Sucks* does devolve into gossip a few times, relaying accounts that could damage the interpersonal relationships or reputations for some of his colleagues, and even friends. Perhaps fairly, Fine does describe in explicit detail his own lowest actions and moments, as well as anxieties and quirks.

As a memoir, Fine begins with his childhood in suburban New Jersey, and outlines a common and stable middle class life shared by many indie rock participants. Each of his meaningful intimate relationships are chronicled, especially how they suffer from his life as a musician or as a post-graduate slacker. Yet, the author contextualizes these accounts (and any resultant consequence) to each time and place for indie rock. Furthermore, Fine speaks of his current marriage with genuine affection, and readers may suspect that his part in the reunion with Bitch Magnet might not have been possible without his wife's emotional support.

Fine addresses every aspect of indie rock in great detail, relating most back to his experiences with Bitch Magnet (as originally conceived and then as reunited), along with his less enduring efforts, specifically Vineland and Coptic Light. Some of the topics are common to any genre of rock music, such as the necessity of a successful demo for attaining early shows or label interest; the opportunities born of networking; the financial dependence on merchandise; and all aspects of tour van life (even the seediest). Conversely, Fine also delineates topics more unique to the genre before the ubiquity of the Internet, including the triumph of acquiring college radio airplay; that certain fanzines could make or break a band; self-booking elaborate tours; and the general pitfalls of DIY. It is in the chapters that follow Bitch Magnet's initial run, where Fine best conveys the limitations of indie rock.

The appearance of this memoir is symptomatic of the aging of indie rock – many of its earliest or longest practitioners are advancing deep into midlife and beginning to gaze backwards, despite maintaining a Peter Pan outlook on aging. Carrie Brownstein's recent *Hunger Makes me a Modern Girl* (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 2015) is an example of a memoir by someone who is actively experiencing great success in indie rock – unusually with multiple bands and in multiple art forms – to the extent that she is something of an actual celebrity. Comparatively, Fine's writing goes deeper on the subject in general, and far denser in terms of details and criticism. Indeed, *Your Band Sucks* outlines the life that most of these artists experience, largely out of the spotlight. Andy Greenwald's *Nothing Feels Good – Punk Rock, Teenagers, and Emo* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Griffin, 2003) is actually more complementary, especially from the

perspective of fans, albeit those of the emo facet of indie rock. John Sellars's *Perfect From Now On* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2007) provides further primer content on the topic, although like Greenwald, is also written by a super fan, as opposed to Fine and Brownstein as practitioners.

This book has a place in any library supporting popular music studies or ethnomusicology. It serves as a memoir, case study, and primer equally, and is written by a respected author whose first-person account is viable and engaging. These indie rock memoirs may prove to be the last gasps of the genre, but Fine's *Your Band Sucks* may prove one of the more balanced and worthwhile contributions.

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