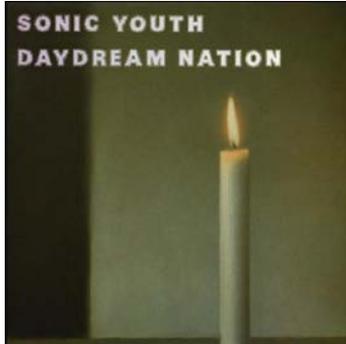


“Daydream Nation”--Sonic Youth (1988)

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Essay by David Browne (guest post)*



Original album



Original label (side 2)



Sonic Youth

In the mid '70s, punk rock altered the course of rock and roll, hurtling it back to its primitive roots. But once the first wave of punk died down or flamed out, another revolution lay ahead soon after: the birth of the sound and sensibility known as indie rock that would, again, reshape rock and roll for decades.

In its first incarnation in the early to late '80s, indie was less about punk slamdancing and hey-ho-let's-go beats—although traces of both could still be heard—but about merging punk with seemingly opposing styles like country, folk-rock, metal, even singer-songwriter balladeering. And during its first heady rush during the Reagan era, indie's grand statement, its coming-of-age moment, was Sonic Youth's sprawling, wondrous and magnificently murky fifth album, “Daydream Nation.”

Voted the no. 2 album of the year in the high-status “Village Voice” Pazz & Jop Critics' Poll, 1988's “Daydream Nation” capped an inspired decade in which “college rock” (as it was called at the time) arose and staked out their claims in small towns and cities around the country: R.E.M. in Athens, Georgia; the Replacements and Husker Du in Minneapolis; Yo La Tengo in Hoboken, New Jersey; and the Minutemen in San Pedro, California, among so many others. Built around a pre-internet network of indie labels and mimeographed fanzines, these weren't glossy mainstream-rock bands but scruffier, scragglier ones who expanded, humanized or even beautified punk rock.

When they recorded the album at a now defunct studio in New York's Soho district in the summer of 1988, Sonic Youth didn't necessarily see “Daydream Nation” as its crowning achievement; guitarist and sometime singer Lee Ranaldo would later say he preferred its predecessor, 1987's “Sister.” But Sonic Youth had been building to this moment from the start. Formed amidst the cruddy, junkie-strewn environs of downtown New York of the early '80s, Sonic Youth was centered around three people from different parts of the country who'd all converged on the thriving art and music scene below New York's Union Square—guitarist Thurston Moore from Connecticut, bass player Kim Gordon from Los Angeles, and guitarist Ranaldo from Long Island, New York. (Moore and Gordon were also a couple.) On stage and on record, Sonic Youth dismantled rock & roll right away, reveling in feedback, power drills as

instruments, and old, battered guitars with unusual tunings derived from downtown composer Glenn Branca.

Combined with Moore's and Gordon's voices, which would never approach "American Idol" polish, Sonic Youth always sounded a little head-scratchingly *off*, but in the most thrilling way: a mesmerizing tornado of sound heading your way. By the time drummer Steve Shelley from Midland, Michigan, joined in 1984, Sonic Youth had tightened up a bit, but their essential approach—proclaiming that rock and roll would no longer be rooted in blues or Chuck Berry riffs but instead in sonic textures and less conventional songwriting—stayed the course.

"Daydream Nation" nodded sneakily to conventions of the classic rock the band members had grown up hearing. (Rinaldo in particular was a Long Island Deadhead.) It was a two-LP set, more common in the '70s than '80s, and the mysterious symbols on each LP side alluded to Led Zeppelin's "IV." But the traditions stopped there. The songs were coated with a layer of grimy scuzz rather than the lacquered studio polish of mainstream rock of the '80s. Its songs could start languidly with lazily-strummed electric guitars, then rev up into furious, wire-bristle thrashing before just as easily melting down into a vortex of noise. Moore's and Rinaldo's guitars wouldn't play "solos" so much as textures, like the moment their instruments turned into hammers in the cut "Total Trash." "Eliminator Jr." may have been inspired by what Shelley called a "half-learned riff" from Texas rockers ZZ Top, but the brittlely intense song sounded nothing like Top's "Eliminator" album. "Hey Joni" referenced Joni Mitchell and "Hey Joe," the '60s garage-band standard, but its half-sung, half-recited bashing owed nothing to either influence.

The music, which could pull back and unleash in jarring, unpredictable but exciting ways, was a result of the band's unique writing method. Rather than having one member show up with a finished song that the others would have to learn to play, the band would spend hours or days playing instrumental music again and again. The mountains of sound would be shaped into finished songs, and the band's three front people would then pick and select which ones they'd write lyrics for and sing.

On "Daydream Nation," the references to rock icons like Mitchell, Led Zeppelin and ZZ Top were another aspect of Sonic Youth's burgeoning influence. Pop-culture devotees, they reveled in ironic (or sometimes not) appreciations of mainstream music and movies; to confuse their fans, they could just as easily wear a Bruce Springsteen or Madonna T-shirt as a punk-rock one. (Gen X would run with that attitude in the '90s.) Gordon's lyrics for "Kissability" were inspired by horror stories she'd heard about lecherous casting-couch sessions during her time growing up in Los Angeles. Other times, the references weren't as accessible, reflecting Sonic Youth's roots in the downtown art community. "Eric's Trip" was based on a monologue from Andy Warhol's "The Chelsea Girls," and the cover painting of a candle was the work of German artist Gerhard Richter, largely unknown to the general public. Theirs was a world of high-brow and low-brow, crashing into each other just like their instruments would.

"Daydream Nation" wasn't an overtly political album yet was still very much of its time and place: a moment when both New York (which was enduring yet another uptick in crime) and the country itself seemed headed for economic and psychic collapse. The reference to "stormy

weather” in “Teen age Riot” alluded to that feeling, but so did songs like “The Sprawl,” its Gordon lyrics taken from overheard conversations of junkies and hookers around her and Moore’s Lower East Side apartment, and “Eliminator Jr.,” an elliptical retelling of the infamous “preppy murder” case in the city.

Sonic Youth’s imprint on the culture would only continue to grow after “Daydream Nation.” Among the many younger musicians and artists they fostered and mentored were Nirvana, directors Spike Jonze and Sofia Coppola, artists Raymond Pettibon and Mike Kelley, even actor Jason Lee (who was a skater punk when he appeared in their video “100%”). Sonic Youth would always be too weird to reap crossover success, but as “Daydream Nation” announced, simply subverting the mainstream was an equally vital legacy.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.