



The National

Boxer

05/2007

Beggars Banquet

A Decade in the Ring with *Boxer*

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Things fall apart, inevitably. The only remaining uncertainty is what you do when such a time arrives. Collapse is a constant companion on The National's 2007 album *Boxer*, a collection of twelve elegant songs strung together with nocturnal unease. The collapse may take many things: your friendships and relationships, your health, or your joyful adolescence, consigning you to a grey and unremarkable adulthood. All things, as they say, are on the table.

With a world-weary baritone, Matt Berninger traces this collapse through an opaque and surreal lyricism. He is joined by twin guitarists Aaron and Bryce Dessner, alternating reverberant swells and hocket-patterned hooks, and a propulsive, urgent rhythm section driven by brothers Bryan and Scott Devendorf. On *Boxer*, the band continues to explore a motif developed across its three prior albums. Each carefully crafted song a *cri-de-coeur* aimed squarely at middle-class neurotics discomfited from a dyad of small stakes and mounting pressures unexpectedly brought by a staid, white-collared life. *Boxer* is a platonic ideal of the form.

In *Boxer*, we find our protagonist—should you think him that—riven with doubt and a slave to his impulses. He is an empty suit at an open bar, a despairingly full mind on a deserted city street. He is trying to keep it together; he is, though only barely. And it is most certainly a *he*. While pop music has taken tentative steps towards a representative democracy of *Lemonades*, *Masseductions*, and *M.a.a.d. Cities*, the genre remains the home of mawkish young men speaking in three chords. While The National are not that, they are not so far removed.

The masculinity of *Boxer* enjoys neither the cocksure posturing found in more straightforward pop songs, nor the tender sentimentality of more emotive peers. It is something more tenuous, unreliable, and ultimately, darker. It grieves from a loss of potential and of self, retreats into isolation from friends and allies, and exists in uneasy cohabitation best characterized by cold war. It smooths out these rough edges with a dependence on wine, cigarettes, and bad sex. It shows up every day, and it gets things done, but isn't particularly sure why. A blind push towards middle-class respectability is no tonic to the impending collapse, but absent anything better, it will have to do.

This way of being is an odd and contradictory feeling to capture, much less identify with. Nothing is wrong. You belong to a world-historical comfortable class untroubled by need or want. The world smiles upon you, for it has been designed by those who look like you. Nothing is wrong. And yet, a barely audible hum haunts you in the quiet moments. Soon, it will grow to the din of a klaxon. What is wrong?

This discontent is driven by a fundamental tension that exists between emblems of youth and maturity: an untethered, solitary liberty and a dependable, if predictable, domesticity. On *Boxer*, our protagonist is weighted by these contradictory impulses. He travels the tracklist yearning for comfort and connection, only to be left wanting upon finding it. "Slow Show" retreats from the social expectations and disappointing realities of the *n*th apartment party to spend some time with a love it took years to find, and more

still to understand. By "Guest Room," the domestic promise is imperiled. The stability implied by a consistent partner and a dependable place has only led to an impulsive exit. This fundamental tension does not resolve; you've reached the end, the album begins anew, and you're left once more to try to figure everything out.

In the ten years since its release, the baroque, bourbon-soaked *Boxer* has become a part of my interior life. As with anything that arrives when you're too young and too impressionable, and remains long after you've become neither, it has become saturated with meaning and memory.

In 2007, I wondered if I would ever make anything of myself. Were that there was something I could wear on my sleeve-of-sleeves. In 2009, a new city welcomed me and so with it, the confidence that yes, I was surely moving forward. In 2010, a sharp rebuke as sickness and grief descended on me and mine like a cage. In 2012, in a freshly pressed suit, displaced, alone and at work in the most bureaucratic, unmagnificent world of adults. And now, as I write this, doing anything to feel alright, to stay out in front of a very dark year. *Boxer* has carried me from early ambition to overlong crisis, from a pocket square and a fitted shirt to a hollow-eyed burnout, from persistent stupor to an overdue resistance.

On its surface, *Boxer* is an instruction manual for people captured by a seedy romanticism. Go out. Look composed. Act removed. Get drunk. Wear your big, dumb heart on your well-tailored sleeve. Get entangled. Retreat. Repeat. Miss all implications of your behaviour. Understand, regrettably, too late.

Without the benefit of age or experience, my earlier self could be excused for drawing too much inspiration from the album's calculated detachment. I think I may know better now. As I navigate ageing, outrun poor decisions and poorer role models, and try to stay decent and kind in a time that rewards neither, previously unheralded phrases are brought into sharper relief. From the glowing young ruffian (though who am I kidding) of "Racing Like A Pro," I've become more the unsure narrator of "Apartment Story," leaning against the wall of all parties, striving for a meaningful connection, or in the least, keeping it together.

At a time of environmental disintegration, creeping repression, and too many wars on distant shores, it feels luxurious to mope around in the small-stakes sadness of *Boxer*. It is a sadness visited upon people who have run out of things to be sad about. This sadness is not the product of any of the countless tragedies visited upon people by an act of god or hand of man. It is benign and quotidian; the realm of largely white, middle-class men who drink too much and talk too little. It is a feeling I previously struggled to give form to and contend with. Why do you feel bad, when you can't find a reason to? It is a feeling that this album has helped me to understand, and ultimately accept.

Boxer makes a fin-du-siècle collapse bearable. It gives you and your big, dumb heart the empathetic space and grace needed to make sense of things and move on. It is a necessary antidote to a culture that hustles hard, keeps it 100, and stays *on* lest the underlying cracks begin to show. You may be a strange and nervous mess, but my god, you're not the only one of us and have you looked *outside*? There are wolves at the door. How else should you feel but strange, nervous? Go home. Get some rest. We'll see you tomorrow.

There is a body of work that says The National is embarrassing, their cerebral and barely contained songs indulgent. I think there rests the point. They are a salve for my big, awkward, and (often) dumb heart that feels too much. Yes, *Boxer* speaks of collapse, of a

heart unmatched to the demands placed on it, so often a victim to its own desperate behaviour. And yet, amidst all the cynical pretending and glassy-eyed coping, there is a core message that demands you *be better* on your own terms. The masculinity of *Boxer* is weird and graceless, but so am I. It asks you to get up each day and try to be decent almost in spite of yourself. To fail, regroup, and go forward once more. To tie your tie all by yourself, and to find yourself through the unmagnificent life of adults. And so I will.

I half-expected this album to fall away, as the other stalwarts of the last decade have. It hasn't, and I no longer expect it will. *Boxer* tracked the decade. A painful, vibrant, weird, and complicated decade animated by an over-sentimental heart and an overwrought mind. It has become part of the furniture: a safe, warm chair and late night drink by the fire. A place to reflect and regroup. The album—calculated, expansive, indulgent, and brainy—will continue to help me forward through the nonsense and joy, and will surely take on new meaning to match. *So worry not. All things are well. We'll be alright.*