



Album Review by Nahlia Meyer

Intro - Who is Green Day?

Green Day is a pop-punk/punk-rock band formed in 1987 in California. The band's original lineup consisted of lead vocalist and guitarist, Billie Joe Armstrong, bassist and backing vocalist, Mike Dirnt, and drummer John Kiffmeyer. They called themselves “Blood Rage” and “Sweet Children” before deciding on “Green Day” in 1989. In 1990, they released their first studio album, *39/smooth*. However, before releasing their second studio album, *Kerplunk*, drummer John Kiffmeyer was replaced with Tre Cool. This gave us the well known power trio that made its way to fame in the coming years, boosted up by their breakout hit album and major-label debut - *Dookie*. They started small in the bay area punk scene, but have since become one of the most influential bands in the genre, playing a huge part in pulling punk-rock into the mainstream.

American Idiot - What does it mean?

Green Day's 7th studio album, *American Idiot*, was released in 2004. Unlike their previous albums, *American Idiot* was a concept album, following the story of the “Jesus of Suburbia” - A young lower middle-class anti-hero from, as implied by the title, America. The songs in the album weren't at all conventional to the band's style either, featuring long story-telling songs, connected songs that ran into each other, and else methods to convey not only the story - but also the theme of it.

The Theme - What were they saying?

Being a concept album, all the songs had some sort of shared theme that tied them all together. It's said to speak of the “disillusionment and dissent” of a generation that matured in an environment riddled with tragedy - such as 9/11 and the Iraq War, as well as other political events. It shouts at politics, big corporations, social dysfunction - but most importantly, it represents the confusion of primarily young adults at the time; including Billie Joe Armstrong. In his words, “Everybody just sorta feels like they don't know where their future is heading right now, y’know?”



The Making - How did it come to be?

As mentioned before, this album wasn't really 'conventional' for Green Day. As such, neither was the way they recorded it. They (obviously) wrote the songs first, renting a rehearsal space to write/play, smoothing out all the tunes - specifically so that they wouldn't have to change anything during recording, only having to worry about playing - which they would do completely in order, not starting to record the next song until the one prior was finished - not really their usual way of doing things. However, overwhelmed by the pressure of the workload, Armstrong went to stay by himself in New York for a couple weeks during the writing process - both to clear his head and to come up with ideas for more songs. Whilst there, he spent time playing with other musicians in bars, taking walks, and socializing with other songwriters. Spending a lot of time in Manhattan, many of his ideas came from his time there, such as the songs “Boulevard of Broken Dreams” and “Are We the Waiting”, not to mention inspiring a large portion of the album's storyline. Aside from that, some of the other songs were also created in a peculiar way. To create what became the songs “Homecoming” and “Jesus of Suburbia” (which they classify as musical suites), each band member took turns composing very different 30 second clips, each becoming more and more driven as they ‘fought’ to out-do each other. In the end, they would string the clips together, creating a song of about 9 minutes in length. It inspired the band, creating the mood of the songs being more than just songs on an album, but rather movements, scenes, chapters of a story. From this, the band decided on going in the direction of a “punk rock opera”.

Fun Fact!

Longtime producer Rob Cavallo encouraged Green Day to do a concept album because Armstrong had once said he wanted the band to have a “Beatles-like arc to their creativity” - but not only that. They also switched the order in which they recorded guitar and bass (guitar 1st, bass 2nd) as they heard that's how the Beatles did it!

The Songs

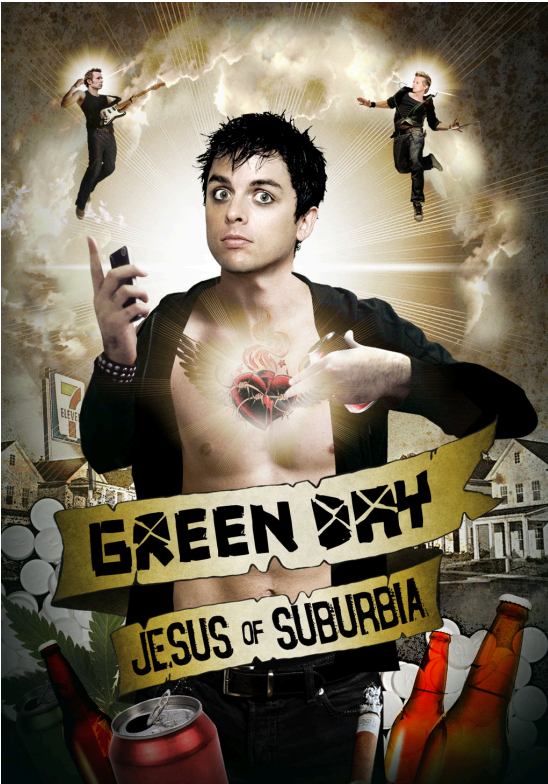
Their meanings & my opinion!

#1 - American Idiot

The first song of the album, as well as the title track. It is one of 2 of the most political songs on the album, alongside 'Holiday'. Billie Joe Armstrong was inspired to write it after hearing Lynyrd Skynyrd's 'That's How I Like It', disagreeing with nearly everything they were saying in the song, about being proud to be a 'redneck' etc. The song itself however, is about how mass media and propaganda can influence the public's view and opinions, for the worse in this case - and most commonly through fear. It also touches on the anger of not feeling represented by one's leader, which is likely why it stays so relevant now.

I love this song - it starts the album off with a bang, both lyrically and musically. It's fast, upbeat, and harsh, giving it a certain vibe that you find mainly in different subgenres of punk music. It's the first song I'd ever heard from this album, and one of the band's most iconic and recognizable tunes, which I don't find surprising in the slightest.

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#2 - Jesus of Suburbia

The second song of the album, and the track that introduces the main character of the album - Jesus of Suburbia. It's 9 minutes and 8 seconds long, consisting of 5 movements; Jesus of Suburbia, City of the Damned, I Don't Care, Dearly Beloved, and Tales of Another Broken Home. Due to this, it's been described as the 'punk-rock Bohemian Rhapsody of the future'. It talks about Jesus of Suburbia hating his town and the people in it, and wanting to run away to the city - which he does, in the end of the song. In the separate movements, Armstrong's guitar was recorded differently for each of them, and in Tre Cool's drumming, he would imitate drummers he looked up to in sections 1 and 2, and drummed his way in the last 3. Between the two instruments, this helped create the contrasting moods throughout the song.

I think this is one of, if not my favourite song in the entire album. The different movements throughout it keep you listening throughout all 9 minutes, and the wildly different tones of each one really give it the idea of having a story, almost feeling like different scenes in a movie. It's not quite as well known as some of the band's other songs, but I think that it absolutely should be.

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#3 - Holiday

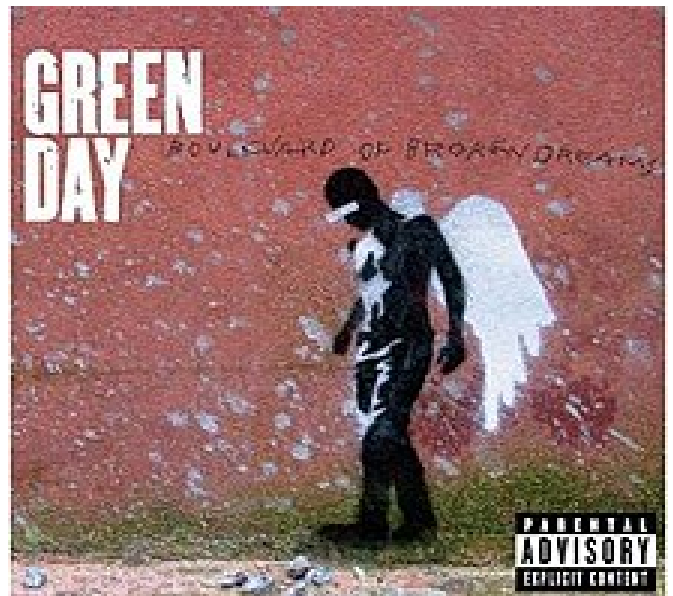
Holiday is the 2nd of the two very highly political songs in the album. It took Armstrong 2 months to write, never feeling like he could get the lyrics quite right. It's influenced pretty strongly by Bob Dylan, and takes heavy jabs at American conservatism as well as people being hateful for their own benefit. It was also a song against the American president at the time, George W. Bush, and despite theories, was anti-war, not anti-american. The idea of 'Holiday' represented the lack of concern from people about the issues of the world, especially ones that didn't affect them directly. As for the storyline, it continues to follow Jesus's life as he moves into the city, and feels the initial thrill or high of rebellion.

Another really popular Green Day song - though not as much as American idiot. Personally, I (generally speaking) prefer upbeat songs, so Holiday is definitely up there for me. It has the same punch of American Idiot - but almost feels a little more ragged? I find it has a bit more of a real, raw sound, which leads me to enjoy it even more.

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#4 - Boulevard of Broken Dreams

Holiday fades into the next song, Boulevard of Broken Dreams - which has been described as the hangover of Holiday. It has a slower, more solemn mood, in contrast to the previous song being upbeat and slightly angry, although the two songs are in the same key, allowing them to be put together more seamlessly. In this song, Jesus finds himself alone and crushed, conflicted on whether or not leaving his hometown was a good choice. Despite fitting into the concept, Boulevard of Broken Dreams was actually written prior to the production of the album - not necessarily having been made to fit into it. It's mostly about Armstrongs time in New York, and speaks to finding the strength in being alone, while fitting the theme Armstrong described as "going away and getting the hell out, while at the same time fighting [your] own inner demons". The name was taken from a painting by Gottfried Helnwein that depicts James Dean, along with 3 others, in a diner. Apparently, upon seeing a photo of James Dean walking alone with the name of the painting underneath, Armstrong was inspired to write the power ballad.



Boulevard of Broken Dreams is another very well known green day song. While it's a really good song, and it's lyrics are heavily relatable to a lot of people, it isn't necessarily my favourite on the album. It has more of a somber mood, but to me, lacks the 'oomph' of some of the other slower songs - but that's more than likely just my personal preference and due to the excessive amount of times I've heard it.

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#5 - Are We the Waiting

Are We the Waiting is the shortest song on the album, but it's still effective. It's about feeling stuck, lost, and not knowing what the future holds - which is another topic that is very relatable to a lot of people. The feeling of being in a sort of limbo. Jesus in this part of the story is going through exactly this. He doesn't know what to do, and he's really starting to come to the realization that running away might not have been the right move - it feels like he's stalling, just waiting for something to happen. Alongside misty New York nights, it was also slightly inspired by the waiting in between shows for the band, the uncertainty and almost powerlessness of it. The theme of the song also fits into politics, as most of the album does, relating to the again, uncertainty and even fear.

Are We the Waiting is a song that I almost wish was longer. While being very effective as short as it is, I really enjoy the theme of the song. The lyrics are fairly repetitive, but since the song isn't long, it actually works well, and gives the song a really nice feel. It's definitely in my top 5 on the album.

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#6 - St. Jimmy

St. Jimmy is much more upbeat than **Are We the Waiting**, feeling nearly manic in comparison. It abruptly cuts off the previous song, breaking the solemn mood and symbolizing Jesus 'going off the deep end'. He becomes this persona, whether it was something he created or a personality that subconsciously came out, named St. Jimmy - a less vulnerable, stronger version of himself. Closer to what he wanted to be. St. Jimmy is more rebellious, the song mentioning him committing several crimes such as vandalism, petty theft, and drug use. The character is strongly driven by violence, likely created by Jesus's rage and anger toward the world, which ultimately causes Jimmy to be very self-destructive. The overall theme of the song is rebellion, especially within youth, and with such, can be really relatable to certain audiences. The band hasn't officially spoken on what inspired the song, but people think it was likely personal experiences and punk subculture.

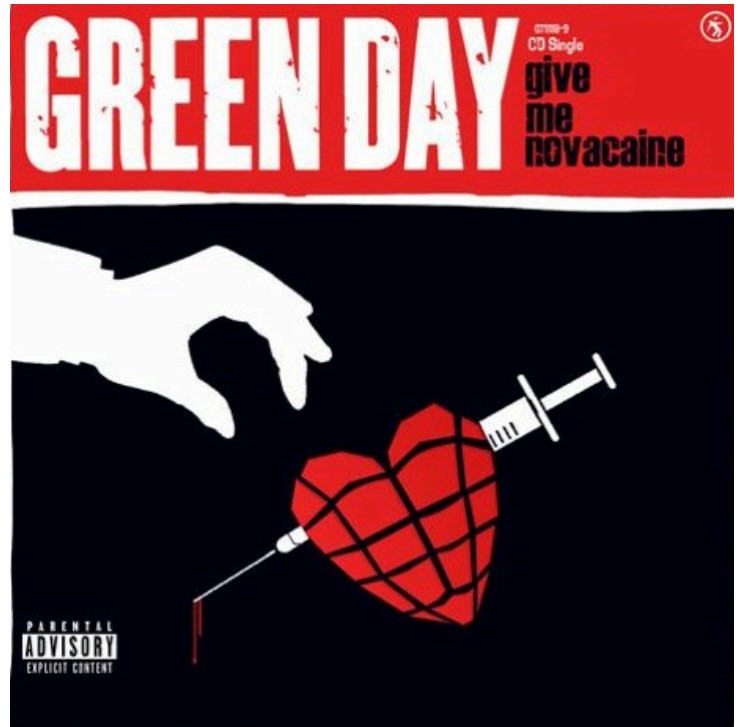


The transition from **Are We the Waiting** to **St. Jimmy** is a huge highlight of the album for me. Something about the sudden switch from solemn uncertainty to being upbeat and nearly frantic is so cool. The band did a really good job creating the feeling of the character just deciding "screw it" and throwing himself into the world head-first. Aside from that, I enjoy how upbeat the song is, and the unstableness of the mood. It reminds me of taking a running start, jumping off a ledge and hurtling downwards.

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#7 - Give Me Novacaine

In Give Me Novacaine, we return to the previous mood. Despite still following his influence, the high of this new persona St. Jimmy has worn off, much like the high of the new city did earlier in Jesus's story. Jesus/Jimmy just wants all of his problems, all of his pain, to go away at this point. Since running off to the city, he's collected more knowledge, knowledge that's only served to cause him pain and anger, and turns towards drugs. He feels terrible, and he just wants it to go away, so he starts using novocaine - not an intoxicant, but a painkiller. The song has topics that unfortunately a lot of people can relate to, being primarily about losing yourself and using substances to numb the pain you feel. The drug referenced in the song is called procaine - used as painkillers and anesthetics in surgeries - known also by the name of novocaine.



If Jesus of Suburbia isn't my favourite song on this album, I think it would have to be this one. The theme itself isn't relevant to me or my life - but the heavy energy it gives to the song is so incredible and powerful. It's another example of a slow song still having something, a real strength. You can feel the emotions in the lyrics, feeling similar to being stabbed in the heart.

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#8 - She's A Rebel

She's A Rebel introduces a new character into our world. She's referred to throughout the album as 'Whatsername', and Jesus/Jimmy is incredibly infatuated with her. She gives him a beacon of hope that he was missing, being the physical embodiment of everything he'd hoped for when he came to the city. She's rebellious, nonconforming, independent, defiant, strong - all that St. Jimmy was, but real. Whether for good or for bad, she had Jesus/Jimmy wrapped around her finger. There's a line in the song where he says "She's holding onto my heart like a hand grenade" which while explaining the relationship between the two, also created the cover of the album. The song, like the last few pairs, heavily contrasts "Give Me Novacaine" as our character has finally found some sliver of hope.

Personally, I feel that the song has themes of hope, but also about excessive reliance, as Jesus/Jimmy regards Whatsername as basically all he has, and his own state relies heavily on her presence. Regardless, this song is probably the most catchy of them all. It doesn't feel too complicated, whether it is or not, and gives the closest thing to a genuine happy vibe we've gotten in the entirety of the album. It makes it feel almost like a breath of fresh air, making it a great interlude if you're listening to the album in its entirety.

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#9 - Extraordinary Girl

If he hadn't already, Jesus/Jimmy has now completely fallen for Whatsername. However, in Extraordinary Girl, it doesn't really work out. They're in a relationship, but they clash. Not only that, but everything they have is built on lies - she fell for St. Jimmy, but St. Jimmy isn't real. He's just a persona that Jesus created to feel stronger - but in reality, he's weak, and she's too strong. He's faking it, but she's the real thing. While she does have a darker, sadder side showcased in this song, it isn't so much of her identity as it is for Jesus. Extraordinary Girl represents the later stages of the two's relationship, where everything comes out a little more and you really see the contrast between the two characters.

This song really helps you understand Whatsername further. It deepens the story between the characters, while at the same time, setting it up to end. Musically, I love the beginning of the song as it uses instruments that we haven't yet heard anywhere in the album, giving it a different feeling. One of my favourite things about this song is that despite being just as upbeat as She's A Rebel, the really happy atmosphere has diminished.



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#10 - Letterbomb

Letterbomb - A letter left for someone which is either physically or mentally/emotionally damaging. This song is partially Whatsername's letterbomb to Jesus/Jimmy, originally written to be from a woman's point of view. She's left Jesus/Jimmy, for the reason that he was too self-destructive, leaving him angry, but more than anything, sad. It's inspired by Armstrong's own experiences with the pain and heartbreak of relationships, but speaks also to resilience, not

letting the person who hurt you see you down - yet again another easily relatable song from the band.

Letterbomb is by no means my favourite song on the album, but that doesn't mean it isn't good. However, rather than the musical content, my favourite part about this song is the lyrics, especially the little bit at the beginning in the woman's voice - "Nobody likes you/Everyone left you/They're all out without you/Having fun". It sets the tone for the song in a really cool way.

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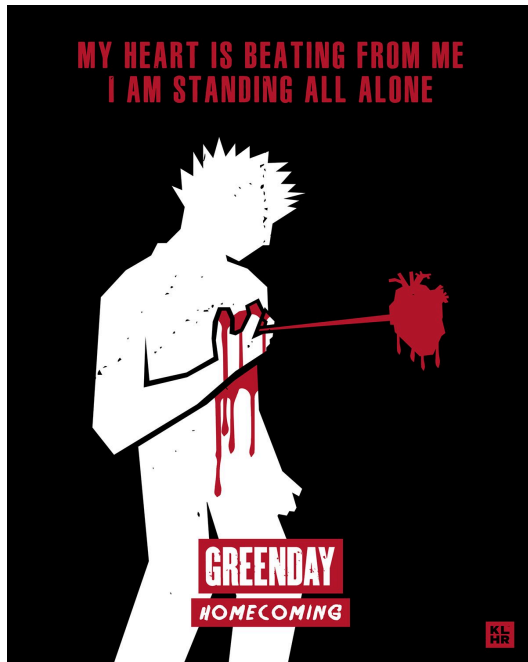


#11 - Wake Me up When September Ends

Wake Me up When September Ends is the outcast of the album. It has no actual relevance to the story the album is telling, because the song was originally meant to be put on a different album. It's about Armstrong's dad, who passed away due to cancer on September 1st when he was 10 years old. However, he wasn't emotionally ready to record the song, so they delayed it, ending up putting the song on American Idiot as even without having any of the plot tied to it, the theme and sound of the song did mesh well with the album. Armstrong addresses it as the most autobiographical song he'd ever written, and it was very difficult for him to perform. The name even came from something Armstrong had said right after his father's funeral. He had locked himself in his room, and when his mother tried to get him to come out, he told her "Wake me up when September ends".

Once again, this song made it huge. It's a slower song, but both the lyrical content and music feels heavy. The grief Armstrong feels is very apparent, making the song have a very real atmosphere of loss and pain - and atmosphere in songs is everything.

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#12 - Homecoming

In homecoming, the climax of American Idiot, Jesus decides to return home. The song has a length of 9 minutes and 19 seconds, consisting of 5 movements. It was also written in small 30 second sections, much like Jesus of Suburbia. The movements are; The Death of St. Jimmy, East 12th Street, Nobody Likes You, Rock'N'Roll Girlfriend, and We're Coming Home Again. In the beginning of the song, Jesus 'kills off' his St. Jimmy persona, essentially representing him coming back to reality. As the song progresses, he starts to live a more 'plain' life. He gets a regular old job, conforms to societal standards. He's fully come to accept that running off to the city was a bad idea, his dreams have crumbled, and nothing turned out the way he wanted it to. He lost Whatsername, he's still depressed, and he's not really living - just existing. He receives

a postcard from another character, 'Tunny', boasting about how great his life is, how he's living the rock'n'roll dream essentially. Knowing that nothing worked out for him here, Jesus moves back home, where he'd fled from so long ago. However, the band doesn't ever tell you what happens with him after he returns home, intentionally leaving the song open-ended.

In my opinion, this song would've been an amazing way to end the album. It has power, and concludes the story of the 'Jesus of Suburbia' in a clean way - although, it isn't really a happy ending. It feels sort of like a less youthful, hopeful version of 'Jesus of Suburbia', as if that was his rise and this is his fall.

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#13 - Whatsername

The last song of the album. Inspired by a woman named Amanda, like other Green Day songs 'She' and 'Sassafras Roots' - the last song is about Whatsername. It ends the album with Jesus reminiscing about her. He regrets losing her heavily, and still misses her, but just can't remember her name. He wonders what's become of her, still living his plain, normal life. Despite losing her and everything that happened, he doesn't regret his time in the city, taking it as a learning experience - including what happened with Whatsername. As much as it was something he didn't want to hear, she was the real start to him snapping out of his self-destructive behaviors, breaking the truth to him about it and even leaving him because of it. All he has is her memories, and in the end, all he wants to do is forget about her and the pain they caused each other - but not forget the time.

As I said before, I think Homecoming could've ended the album really nicely - but I have no real problem with the ending of Whatsername. It gives us closure on Jesus's feelings about her now, and him never wanting to look back despite missing her. I also really like the tone in which the vocals are sung in this song. I can't quite explain it, but it's slightly different from the rest of the album in some spots, giving it the feeling of really being the end of the story, with what feels like Jesus finally beginning to let go of the past.

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Conclusion

Whilst being one of Green Day's most popular albums, American Idiot is also in my opinion, one of their best albums. The band did an amazing job of composing a concept album with a good, relatable story, different types of songs with very different atmospheres, well written lyrics, and well as having almost every song have a 2nd meaning or theme that pertained to the real world at the time - along with so much more. Like any other album, it has some songs that stand out more than others, but I don't think this album has a single song that is actually 'worse' than the others. I may be biased on my opinions, but I mean it when I say this album deserves every ounce of recognition it gets and more.

