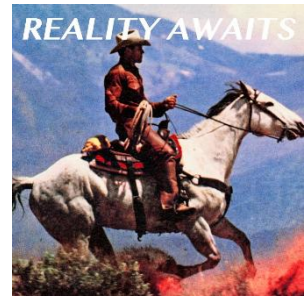


Review of *Reality Awaits* by The Strokes

3.5/10

An album where its originality drowns itself in a wall of Auto-Tune.

The Strokes, *Reality Awaits* (Cult Records / RCA Records, 2026)



Few current bands have as little left to prove, and thus as much room to disappoint, as The Strokes. The Strokes are most notably famous for their impressive six-album streak, beginning with their 2001 debut *Is This It*, an album which pushed boundaries and became so widely imitated that it remains arguably their most impressive to date.¹ Their sixth and most recent album before this one, *The New Abnormal*, is a powerful return to form with some of the greatest songs in their discography. An album which notably earned its rightful Grammy for Best Rock Album, an award that the band had somehow gone twenty years without winning beforehand.²

There were high expectations of The Strokes, which meant they had a lot to deliver. Unfortunately, the quality promised from their previous six albums is notably not there. Six years after the release of *The New Abnormal*, their 2026 album *Reality Awaits* becomes perhaps their weakest studio album to date.

Reality Awaits is the first album to be helmed entirely by Rick Rubin, who began sessions with the band in Costa Rica as far back as 2022 and who also helped produce *The New Abnormal*.³ The collaboration appeared promising, but the rollout seemed to raise concerns. The promotion of the album in general was strange, including a cryptic teaser for the album broadcast through a Nissan

¹ Reuben Cross, 'The Strokes – "Reality Awaits" Album Review: Backlash Won't Write Them Off Just Yet', *Far Out Magazine*, 23 July 2026 <<https://faroutmagazine.co.uk/the-strokes-reality-awaits-album-review/>> [accessed 11 August 2026].

² 'The New Abnormal by The Strokes Wins Grammy for Best Rock Album', *GRAMMY.com*, 15 March 2021 <<https://www.grammy.com/news/strokes-win-best-rock-album-new-abnormal-2021-grammy-awards-show>> [accessed 11 August 2026].

³ Ellie Robinson, 'The Strokes Have Started Recording Seventh Album with Rick Rubin', *NME*, 13 October 2022 <<https://www.nme.com/news/music/the-strokes-have-begun-recording-seventh-album-with-rick-rubin-3327770>> [accessed 11 August 2026].

300ZX of all things, as well as the lead single being mailed on cassette to a hundred fans before it reached streaming.⁴

Addressing the elephant in the room first, the vocal delivery is by far the greatest weakness of this album by quite a considerable margin. Using Auto-Tune is a perfectly legitimate vocal effect, and it has been pushed to a similarly extreme degree elsewhere with success – including by Kanye West in ‘808s and Heartbreak’, some of Daft Punk’s work, and, in more sombre and experimental territory closer to what this record seems to be reaching for, by Bon Iver. Justin Vernon’s interest in the technique began in ‘Woods’, his 2009 track on which his voice is processed into a stacked, hymnal wall of pitch-corrected harmony. The effect has recurred and deepened across his work ever since, most famously on 22, *A Million*.⁵

Reality Awaits seems to try replicate this iconic and hypnotising effect. Except, on *Reality Awaits*, the vocal performance lacks any clear personality or reason for the digitised effect on the vocals. The robotic, mundanity of the singing strips away anything potentially valuable to be gained from the lyrics. It attempts to sound ominous and perhaps even “evil” but instead it lacks any flavour at all. This turns the vocal performance from one of the band’s most distinctive attributes to an *unflavoured cold chicken* of a delivery. It is apparent that the vocals were sung intentionally “badly” for the robotic Auto-Tune to do its work. But the fact that one can tell this was the intention makes the effect sound shoddy and poorly executed rather than stylised.

Compared to Bon Iver again – whose vocal delivery is intentionally mastered in *partnership* with the processing to create a hypnotising, otherworldly effect – the vocals on this record too often sound like someone who has just discovered Auto-Tune in their music software and is using it to paper over an untrained take, rather than to build something new or interesting out of the imperfection. The album’s most successful use of vocal processing, on the closing passage of ‘Falling Out of Love’, is somewhat similar to the treatment of John Lennon’s voice on the back half of the Beatles’ ‘Tomorrow Never Knows’, where one can see a difference in how the disorientating, purposeful effect briefly suggests what a more disciplined version of this record could have sounded like. Yet even the rest of ‘Falling Out of Love’ buries a more tender vocal performance under processing for no clear reason at all – simply detracting from the performance.

⁴ Andrew Trendell, ‘The Strokes Officially Release “Going Shopping” and Announce Release Date of New Album “Reality Awaits”’, *NME*, 7 April 2026 <<https://www.nme.com/news/music/the-strokes-officially-release-going-shopping-and-announce-release-date-of-new-album-reality-awaits-3938959>> [accessed 11 August 2026].

⁵ ‘Woods: The Song That Started Bon Iver’s Obsession with Auto-Tune’, *Far Out Magazine* <<https://faroutmagazine.co.uk/woods-the-song-that-started-bon-ivers-obsession-with-auto-tune/>> [accessed 11 August 2026].

This, notably, is where the greatest pitfalls of the album come from: the vocal performance is so grating and so disorientating that it envelops the otherwise mediocre – rather than bad – instrumental performances from other band members. Which is a shame, because the playing underneath is frequently the more interesting thing happening on the record; the vocals distract from what is otherwise a serviceable and occasionally acceptable album, albeit still their weakest.

One of the biggest issues with the instrumental work, in fact, is that it does not even try to be as experimental as the vocals give the impression the album as a whole is reaching for. Where Casablancas' voice is warping and glitching upon almost every syllable, the band behind him is often playing something closer to a moodier extension of *The New Abnormal*, making it a derivative, often boring set of riffs and beats that contrast heavily with the more exciting and thrilling work of their past, particularly compared to *Is This It* and *Room on Fire*. It produces an oddly lopsided record. The songwriting and playing seem to be dressed up in the most conspicuous, attention-seeking clothing, rather than the other way around, which is usually how a band signals reinvention.

A lot of the instrumental passages sound as though they have been done countless times before, which strips them of any personality or intrigue. The argument against this point is that anyone who listens to a lot of music can pick up on similarities within the instrumentals or find echoes of other artists – no band writes in a vacuum. It would be easy enough to defend *Reality Awaits* on those grounds, since every riff is bound to recall something already done and every song is in conversation with fifty years of guitar music.

However, this album has so many moments where it sounds almost identical to a beat, a melody, or a passage from an existing song. It starts to feel less like an album in dialogue with its influences and more like an album ripping them off, diluting the best aspects of a handful of other records and gluing the pieces back together with whichever instrumental was lying around. Jonah Krueger calls the melody of 'Dine N'Dash' a warped, minor-key cousin of 'The Adults Are Talking', from *The New Abnormal* – which is, in fairness, a cleverer and more self-aware kind of borrowing than most of what else the record manages, but still a re-hash of everything the band has done before.⁶

Even the album cover for this project seems to exemplify the biggest problem of the album; in which they seem to re-use a cliché image without much creativity added to it for any interesting effect or commentary.

⁶ Jonah Krueger, 'The Strokes Push Past Abnormal on Wildly Engaging, AutoTuned *Reality Awaits*: Review', *Consequence*, 23 July 2026 <<https://consequence.net/2026/07/the-strokes-reality-awaits-album-review/>> [accessed 11 August 2026].

Where a lot of their previous work was quite complex and interesting – wielding more abstract album covers – this one shows a very plain image of something quite cliché and dull, with a couple of digital effects slapped on the top to add some saturation. The album cover, credited to photographer Johann Rashid, re-purposes Richard Prince’s ‘(Untitled) Cowboy’ (1989).⁷ Rashid’s photograph uses the most recognisable image from Prince’s Cowboys series, in which Prince simply rephotographed existing Marlboro cigarette adverts and presented the results as his own.⁸

This album’s cover is an original photograph of a restaging of a photograph of an advert, making it an overused, plain, clichéd image about the emptiness of plain, clichéd images, several steps removed from anything resembling a fresh idea. The three-level recycling of this image is almost fitting for the lacklustre re-hashing that the album seems to do. As already addressed, the instrumental and lyrical aspects of this album feel like stuff that has already been done, which takes away any intrigue or re-listen value from the project. Used knowingly, the cover could be a sharp joke about a band photographing its own myth for the fifth or sixth time. Used as the actual cover of the actual album, it mostly just reads as a bland, beige image plastered on the project last minute.

The album opens with ‘Psycho S—t’, which includes a disappointingly slow and basic instrumental that sounds like a cheap copy of every indie rock record to come out over the past few years. The guitar cycles through four unchanging chords with a few ambient layers laid on top that are clearly intended to add immersion but never seem to. Simplicity is a strong facet used correctly, but this song becomes distractingly simple in the beginning. The soft drum work underneath gets overwhelmed by the frankly poor vocals and becomes almost unnoticeable, as though the mixing on the drums was never actually finished.

Lyricaly, the song opens on an extended predator-and-prey conceit, the narrator likening himself to a hunting bird admired only from a safe distance. Opening the album with “I’m like a bird of prey” is a very small detail but highlights a major issue with the writing where it is incredibly cliché and lacks any effective substance or original metaphor. A later image of a neon sign glowing over someone’s bed confirms as much; it is an overused lyrical trope.

Buried in the middle of the song is an interesting turn the rest of the track does nothing with. There is a moment where the narrator, having spent the whole song positioning himself as predator, briefly acknowledges the wounded child underneath the performance and admits that hunter and hunted are not so different after all. This is accompanied by a relatively interesting instrumental build-up with grungy effects. It is the closest thing to a real idea on the track, and it is gone within two lines,

⁷ Trendell, ‘The Strokes Officially Release “Going Shopping”’.

⁸ Trendell, ‘The Strokes Officially Release “Going Shopping”’.

swallowed back up by a blunt, more repeatable hook about being a predator who works from behind a desk. Doing this loses any immersion by taking another overused metaphor.

Then, the build up towards the end of the song becomes a mess where each instrument is desperately competing with the vocals to make any sound at all, not in the intentionally overwhelming sense of a band like Death Grips, but in the sense that several instruments genuinely cannot be picked out for entire passages. This appears to be another issue with the mixing and distracts from the song quite massively.

The second track, 'Dine N'Dash', opens with a guitar solo that is perfectly acceptable – if not another plainly executed and mundane riff – before the song plunges into the record's most unpredictable few minutes: a slick post-punk groove, with some sudden surges in the instrumental, and Casablancas briefly delivering a passage of spoken word in a British accent.⁹ The distorted effect that comes in sounds quite good, but gets undercut by the vocals and doesn't return after that point. It feels like the song built up towards it and then stripped itself back down for the vocals. And after the first verse, the instrumental is incredibly flat without any additional instrument work from underneath the vocal passage, perhaps even removing some of it.

At least this song has the pleasure of not being hindered by the frustrating Auto-Tune: for a significant stretch Casablancas' voice is left almost unchanged. It is possibly the best and most interesting vocal performance on the album. It sounds a lot more similar to the lead singer from Prep, which works very much in the song's favour. This makes the song one of the primary standouts from the album. The lyrics fare slightly better than elsewhere, and there is a highlight early on where a familiar proverb about birds of a feather is twisted so its final word lands on mortality rather than togetherness.

Mistook the words of a wise man who once said / "The birds of a feather, die together"

The lyrics otherwise describe quite an interesting self-admission of prejudice which works in the song's favour. As these lyrics are being sung, the distorted effects return. As it does so, the track hits a potential high point that unfortunately drags too long without much change to land with any real punch. In the final passage of the song, it builds again only to drop quickly before any kind of proper resolution or climax. The ending of the song winds up lying completely flat on the ground without any kind of release or drop, just pure flatness with a disappointingly sudden ending. It feels like a disappointingly sudden stop rather than any release.

⁹ Krueger, 'The Strokes Push Past Abnormal'.

‘Lonely In the Future’ is where the autotune effect works more in the song’s favour. The half-spoken hook, built around a recurring idea of having already lived through the present moment once before, has an earworm-y quality, and the processing sounds slightly less bearable elsewhere on the record by comparison. It particularly sounds very good in the chorus. As he says, “*when I was a kid*”, it has a weirdly effective sound. The instrumental in the middle is also fairly creative, built around abstract, almost improvisatory keyboard playing. However, the instrumental seems to otherwise fade into the background and stops abruptly without much build or release at the end, similar to the previous track.

The lyrics are where the undoubtedly biggest gripes with this song come from, which the song has caught some notable controversy for. Conceptually, there is something admittedly clever here: a song about the anxiety of being boring that name-drops real musicians and critics. However, the lyrics as a whole are incredibly poor and the meaning of them lacks any form of ingenuity. Despite its difference from typical tropes of just calling people “haters”, the song includes some poorly constructed jabs at Anthony Fantano from *The Needle Drop*.¹⁰ Claiming that he “*would not recognize art in any age*”, adding that he could recite what Fantano would say “*when I was a kid*”.¹¹

The problem with this lyric, aside from being a strange callout, is that it is also closer to a reference than an argument. The lyric never really answers the anxiety it raises, just repeats the observation that the band has done all this before, without saying much about why that repetition might be worth defending beyond a half-joking claim that history will eventually side with them. This, admittedly, makes the recycled concepts and instrumentals throughout the album feel more insulting and purposeful rather than accidental. It almost seems to claim that they do not care that the album is unoriginal, and that their previous albums simply hold too much weight for this one to matter.

A meandering, seemingly unrelated bridge about a first date and a soaking-wet costume does not help things, dropping the self-aware framing for a few lines that feel added on from another song that the band liked enough to try and shove in somewhere else on the record.

‘Falling Out of Love’ is potentially the most underwhelmingly boring track on the album. For a concept that can hold a lot of melancholy, conflict, and subtlety, the song instead sounds like a Phoebe Bridgers homage without the heart or compositional daring that makes her records work. It instead turns into a dull-sounding song about a non-specific event from the lead singer’s life. The song works as Casablancas telling a story of the time he fell out of love, like he’s telling the story of what he got up to on an average day.

¹⁰ Krueger, ‘The Strokes Push Past Abnormal’.

¹¹ Krueger, ‘The Strokes Push Past Abnormal’.

It doesn't help that the lyrics fail to detail any specifics and instead opt for clichés like “overnight”, “putting on a show” and feeling bad about letting them go. The song eventually falls into a repeated, tired vehicle metaphor about grinding gears, which sums up a track with more interesting ideas than it knows what to do with. There is so much more nuance that can come from a topic like this, one that has been touched on before countless times. Sure, there is a bit more emotion in his voice – particularly compared to the first track – but the autotune and lack of commitment to the delivery subtract so much rawness that could've been heard in the performance.

That said, there is a moment worth defending. The plainly stated acknowledgment in the middle of the song that two contradictory things can be true of the same relationship at once is about as mature and specific as the writing gets anywhere on the record. However, it too is abandoned almost immediately after the interesting point is raised. It seems to reach close to something interesting but effectively gives up on it.

The underlying composition is rather tender, built on the bassline from Nikolai Fraiture and warmly interlocking guitar work, and yet the processing on Casablancas' voice ruins the track's authenticity, for no clear compositional reason. There is real emotion audible underneath, certainly more than on the opening track, but the Auto-Tune and a general lack of commitment to the delivery subtract so much of the rawness that a performance like this requires. It would almost have been better to have a poorly sung but clean vocal performance because it would have felt more vulnerable or perhaps could have been processed for a more distinct reason – such as in how Quadea uses processed vocals on ‘YOU DON'T KNOW ME LIKE THAT’ to match the song's chaotic production and to make the vocals feel fractured, urgent, and submerged within the aggressive soundscape.

‘Going to Babble On’ is another unfortunate example of an incredibly simple and classic set of lyrics that follow something of a songwriting formula. There is nothing original to them. The title is the best idea in the song: a decent pun on the Tower of Babel, gesturing at communication breakdown and directionless speech, which the lyric then does almost nothing to develop, settling instead for a repeated refrain about starting over and some flat imagery of desks, deadlines, and going back online.

The instrumental fares a little better on this one: recalling a combination of ‘Accidentally in Love’ and James Marriott-esque instrumentation, which instead of feeling sweet or having the same punch as those songs, feels a bit disappointing by association. That said, the guitar solo underneath the vocal performance towards the end is genuinely strong, arguably the best instrumental passage on the record and possibly the strongest ending to any song here. Especially set against Casablancas humming over the top of it, it becomes one of the few moments on the album where the vocal and instrumental performances feel like they are working toward the same goal rather than past each other.

‘Going Shopping’, released as the album’s lead single and mailed to a hundred fans on cassette tape before it ever reached streaming, experiences the same vocal issues mentioned multiple times previously. It is probably the blandest song here and is thus ironically a good lead single for the album. It feels like it’s the *abstract* of the academic article that is this album.

The melody is disappointing and simple, and the vocal delivery is also slightly off beat in a way that doesn’t feel charming but accidental. The instrumental suffers similarly, echoing something that has been done before. It seems to fade from the mind quickly as a result, becoming incredibly forgettable. The lyrics are more interesting than the mundane delivery suggests, though the song does little to draw attention to their best moment: tucked into an otherwise inconsequential verse about *malls and consumerism* is a dark, specific image of stockbrokers thrown from windows, treated with a kind of nostalgic fondness rather than horror. This is one of the most creative single images on the album, evoking financial collapse with an unsettling casualness. It is thrown away in the space of one line, sandwiched between lyrics about wanting to be a giant zombie and, later, a giant starfish. Where the album has otherwise been hindered by not expanding on its interesting ideas, this lyric’s brevity works in the song’s favour and adds an existential feeling to it. Overall though, the song attempts to be a psychedelic, surreal daydream about escaping pressures of modern life, and there are flashes of that in the writing, but the hook keeps dragging it back to the title’s most literal meaning.

‘Liar’s Remorse’ is a weirdly AI-generated sounding title, which is a nice, presumably unintentional irony given that the song itself takes a direct jab at people outsourcing their decisions to artificial intelligence. With that aside, lyrically the most interesting device on the whole record turns up here: a short, closed loop of cause and effect working backward from love to pain to trust and back again. Each line’s consequence becomes the next line’s premise. It is a clever idea, recounting a liar’s logic that eats its own tail. While the song wears out the effect slightly, it works very well for the most part.

The track sounds like a fairly unremarkable AJR parody, right down to the vocal quality at the beginning, combined with the odd riff reminiscent of System of a Down’s ‘Radio/Video’ scattered in. The song otherwise feels too similar in shape to the opening track and so carries less intrigue on its own. Additionally, the use of the piano towards the end just felt like it could have been a simple accordion piece, which would’ve been much more interesting and would have made it stand out from the rest of the album, and would’ve added more textural layers, which it badly needs.

‘The Fruits of Conquest’ is good background music. That is possibly the greatest compliment that can be given to a song featured on this album. There isn’t much to complain about with it or anything substantial of note that happens. It’s possibly the most digestible song for better and for worse. The

song is closer to a piece of audio graffiti than a song with anything to say. The verses barely qualify as verses, cycling through a repeated, boastful self-description built out of single-word declarations, one of which includes a boisterous, groan-worthy pun about a woman doing her best work lying down. Hooray for sexism.

A repeated refrain about running impossible distances and climbing impossible hills closes the song out, functioning as pure momentum without much meaning. None of it is particularly unpleasant, and the groove genuinely is good, but there is barely enough written material here to justify calling it a song rather than a very long hook.

The closing track, ‘Tyrants of the Mellow Moon’, adds just about as much as every other song on the album beyond one final, poor use of Auto-Tune. It suffers from most of the same problems as the rest of the album, including a bland, undercooked use of the drums, with the heavy lifting once again coming from distorted guitars, piano, and the rest of the instrumental palette.

Lyricaly, it is the most tonally erratic song here, and not always to a positive effect. It is certainly a closure though, opening with a thank you to the unnamed listener and hoping to have made them laugh one last time. This happens before dropping a startling declaration of having killed for someone’s sake. This forces a tonal whiplash that the song doesn’t really justify or explain otherwise. Although, the song’s closing image, of a black bird with red eyes flying home through a chrome sky, is rather striking, and a reminder of what this band can still do with a single well-chosen picture when it is not competing with everything else happening around it. Without the haphazard interchanging of the bridge in this song, this could have been a powerful and forceful closure to an otherwise poor album.

One thing that was touched on briefly but requires a bit more attention is the fact that the titles just sound AI-generated. Titles like ‘Fruits of Conquest’ and ‘Tyrants of the Mellow Moon’ sound exactly like the kind of thing that a language model would come up with if asked for evocative rock song titles. The titles feel vaguely poetic but largely disconnected from any specific image or idea. This is notable as AI-generated songs on streaming platforms tend to have similarly abstract titles using words like “remorse”, “conquest” or “tyrants”.

In an era where creativity is being hindered by the advancement of generative AI this would not come as a surprise. At best, it is a somewhat corny attempt at coming up with a set of edgy rock song titles that ends up sounding machine-made; at worst, it is a symptom of the instinct that the rest of the lyrics follow – being nondescript and having very little to say within them underneath an artsy

sound to it. The assumption is that the lyrics are not in fact AI-generated, but it would not be a far cry to assume that they are.

Reality Awaits is, in the end, a frustrating listen. While there are songs that hold up slightly on their own, taken as a whole – and set against a catalogue this strong – this album fails to deliver in several avenues. An album called *Reality Awaits* promises, at minimum, some kind of drama to it. It could have dealt with conflicts over age, with legacy, or whatever comes after twenty-five years of being the band other bands are measured against.

Instead, The Strokes released a record that fails to achieve any of these things. It acts as a pseudo-experimental record which is actually just a bland set of music set underneath a vocal effect it never justifies. While there are moments of respite that are interesting, they feel few and far between on an album that could have been so much more than it is.

Some of the lyrics touch on interesting themes, but they never let themselves soak them in for more than a line or two. There are some decent concepts within this album, but they are drowned out by an extremely bland tendency to return to lyrical tropes, similar to how the vocals tend to drown out the otherwise occasionally interesting instrumental concepts.

Ultimately, The Strokes' latest album seems to be several steps back from their previous successes. Where the album seemed to hint at going in a more experimental direction, the band stayed bland outside of the strange vocal choices. Instead of pushing boundaries, they resorted to a lower-quality album which rivals failures of bands several leagues below them.

The album never progresses anything further than serviceable, and even that is in between some incredibly poor passages that make up the majority of the album, making *Reality Awaits* one of the most disappointing albums of 2026.