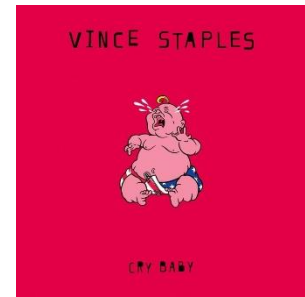


Review of *Cry Baby* by Vince Staples

9.5/10

An incredible piece of political storytelling that will be remembered as one of the most politically assertive albums of the 2020s.

Vincent Jamal Staples, *Cry Baby* (Loma Vista, 2026)



Vince Staples' seventh studio album works as his most fully realised artistic statement, the most complete and self-possessed record of his career to date, delivered now where one may have expected him to consolidate rather than to detonate. *Cry Baby* is an album Vince Staples has seemingly been building toward for a decade.

Staples is no stranger to this type of political messaging; he has been writing this form of commentary with varying degrees of blatancy since the beginning of his career. His debut EP, *Hell Can Wait* (2014), and the impressive double album *Summertime '06* (2015) established him as one of hip-hop's most clear-eyed modern narrators on poverty and violence.¹ The political register sharpened into something far rawer on *Big Fish Theory* (2017). 'BagBak', his most explicitly confrontational moment before *Cry Baby*, directs its frustration at American colourism, police brutality, and the prison system. Staples uses an anti-establishment energy that does everything to avoid being palatable.² It works as the sound of someone who had earned the right to ignore whether he requires permission to speak his mind.

Similarly, his song 'Black and Blue' from *Dark Times* (2024), he describes 'juggling thuggin', depression and pride'.³ Pride represents Blackness, and blue represents the weight of the life he was living. Staples masterfully characterises the harsh nature of growing up as a black man in the United States. *Dark Times*, his most introspective work, turned inward and found vulnerability in lines like 'it don't matter where you from, where you at, little homie?', a rhetorical

¹ 'Hell Can Wait – Vince Staples', 7 October 2014 <<https://www.allmusic.com/album/hell-can-wait-mw0002764243>> [Accessed 16 June 2026].

² Vince Staples, 'BagBak', in *Big Fish Theory* (Def Jam / ARTium / Blacksmith, 2017).

³ Vince Staples, 'Black and Blue', in *Dark Times* (Blacksmith / Def Jam, 2024).

question aimed as much at himself as anyone else, a man who had made it out of the ghetto and was still deciding what that meant.⁴

Cry Baby strives to be the most overt criticism of the American system Staples has made. This is his first release on his own imprint Section Eight Arthouse, distributed through Loma Vista, following his departure from Def Jam after *Dark Times*. The label relationship has potentially shaped, to some degree, the accessible style of his work for over a decade. Hence, its notable absence is audible in *Cry Baby*. Staples marked the occasion with his characteristic dryness: ‘as the world burns, I have decided to release this album.’⁵

Released from Def Jam, Staples made an album that he needed to make, with no proper concession to commercial palatability. The independence is almost audible in every production choice, especially with how every lyric refuses to soften their point. The record does not try to be accessible or pleasant to listen to in any way. The album is uncomfortable, distorted and aggressive – yet still occasionally portrays itself as a groovy piece of music. At a relatively short run-time of only thirty-five minutes, the ten tracks do not attempt to meet the audience as they are, instead being entirely sincere in his messaging and frustrations. He has, at last, made the record he wanted to make, and the result is potentially the finest of his career.

Staples was never comfortably inside any scene or subgenre. However, his previous albums built their foundations on electronic production with trap-adjacent bass beats. Especially on the rhythmic masterpiece *Dark Times*, which perfected the memorable and catchy soundscapes of Vince Staples’ style. His first notable departure from this style was the rhythmically dissonant experimentalism of *Big Fish Theory* – an album that NME called one of the most ambitious hip-hop albums of 2017.⁶ *FM!* (2018), his self-titled (2021) and *Ramona Park Broke My Heart* (2022) refined his voice toward something more conversational. The electronic style of *Big Fish Theory* was a drastic shift away from typical easy-listening rap, which his subsequent records quietly walked back.

⁴ Vince Staples, ‘Lil Homie’, in *Dark Times* (Blacksmith / Def Jam, 2024).

⁵ Jazz Monroe, ‘Vince Staples Readies New Album Cry Baby’, Pitchfork, 28 April 2026 <<https://pitchfork.com/news/vince-staples-readies-new-album-cry-baby/>> [Accessed 16 June 2026].

⁶ Joe Madden, ‘Vince Staples – ‘Big Fish Theory’ Review’, *NME*, 21 June 2017 <<https://www.nme.com/reviews/vince-staples-big-fish-theory-review-2090986>> [Accessed 15 June 2026].

By contrast, *Cry Baby* uses incredible live rock instrumentation. Staples utilises some heavy guitars, bass, and drums that do not evoke hip-hop's standard relationship with the genre so much as consume it whole. Yet, the record works as a work which is one of Staples' most authentically hip-hop. When Staples released the first singles for the record, the internet was keen to label it as 'punk' or at least 'punk-inspired', Staples dismissed this by saying 'the dummies hear a guitar and immediately start calling [it] punk rock',⁷ subsequently pointing out that rock, punk, post-punk, grunge, and everything adjacent all derive from white artists attempting to replicate James Brown.⁸ What makes this album different from other famous political rap albums isn't just its anger, but also its sound. Staples uses rock to reclaim a genre that Black artists helped create, essentially sending a message saying that black people build the sound which white culture populated, so black culture is allowed to reclaim it.⁹ Staples is intentionally reclaiming a style whose own identity was constructed through the appropriation and erasure of Black creativity to speak about the theft of Black culture. Thus, making the style of the record a statement on its own.

The actual sounds of the record are more specific than any genre label could accommodate. It is grungy, punky, but truly hip-hop in its very nature. The production throughout the record works in four primary elements – sharp, percussive drumming; thick, aggressive bass; lightly distorted guitars (including solos); and sparse synths that emerge and recede throughout. The record is intentionally minimalist, allowing the songs to be primarily carried by the lyricism. This space creates an avenue for the lyrics to hit much harder, where previous work has not been as willing to sit with discomfort. The kinetic groove of 'Blackberry Marmalade' works with a restless energy akin to Outkast's 'B.O.B',¹⁰ where the instrumentation is crisp but compressed and slowed. 'Cotton', on the other hand, carries a self-aware minimalism and charge similar to artists like Sault, with a deep piano and synth pads arriving as punctuation rather than decoration.

Compared to *Big Fish Theory*, where SOPHIE's maximalism was the proposition, *Cry Baby* achieves a comparable boldness via the opposite means.¹¹ Where *Big Fish Theory* buried

⁷ Vince Staples, 'The dummies hear a guitar...', X, 27 April 2026 <<https://x.com/vincestaples/status/2048793367442817188>> [Accessed 16 June 2026].

⁸ Vince Staples, 'True, because James Brown...', X, 27 April 2026 <<https://x.com/vincestaples/status/2048829052467957832>> [Accessed 16 June 2026].

⁹ Mankaprr Conteh, 'Vince Staples: Cry Baby Review', *Pitchfork*, 8 June 2026 <<https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/vince-staples-cry-baby/>> [Accessed 16 June 2026].

¹⁰ Outkast, 'B.O.B', in *Stankonia* (LaFace Records / Arista Records, 2000).

¹¹ SOPHIE is the credited producer of *Big Fish Theory* – Vince Staples, *Big Fish Theory* (Def Jam / ARTium / Blacksmith, 2017).

Staples' voice in texture, *Cry Baby* strips away everything that might compete with it to place the message front and centre.

*Drop the needle, turn up that volume / Record spinnin', it's so hypnotic*¹²

This line in 'Cotton' is practically instructing you in how to receive the album. When the production is this bare, the ambiguity in 'Do You Know the Devil' – saying 'Hell, Hell, Hell / Help me, please'¹³ – lands with a weight it could not carry if surrounded by other noise. Having a maximalist arrangement would resolve that ambiguity before it could breathe. Here, it is unresolvable, and that makes the meaning of the songs punch more forcefully.

The album's messaging is his least subtle to date, and it is intentional. The album's primary backbone is its harsh, unapologetically political messaging. Where Staples' previous trilogy of introspective records turned the focus inward – documenting his personal psychology, upbringing, and survival of these factors – *Cry Baby* sends a shockwave outward at the State. The record is angry, hurt, and brutal. The shift is deliberate and the scale of it becomes jarring. The album works almost as Staples' equivalent of *To Pimp a Butterfly* (2015)¹⁴ – album which holds as much if not more relevance today. Staples uses *Cry Baby* as a public address.

One of the main criticisms of *Cry Baby* from its listeners is regarding its simplicity, that Staples is almost 'dummy-explaining' himself. However, he is not dumbing down, he is speaking plainly to people who have exhausted every sophisticated framework and found that none of it changed anything. Staples essentially claims implicitly that there is no need for subtlety anymore. Because when the problem is this obvious, ornate lyricism starts to feel like avoidance. His delivery underlines this. Subdued aggression and dry wit throughout feel like exhausted clarity. The tonal register of a man who is exhausted and has arrived at peace on the other side of fury. It does not quite have the volcanic, baroque outrage of Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp a Butterfly*¹⁵ or the menace of his own *Vince Staples* (2021).¹⁶ The album is instead a lot quieter and, ultimately, harder to shake.

¹² Vince Staples, 'Cotton', in *Cry Baby* (Loma Vista, 2026).

¹³ Vince Staples, 'Do You Know the Devil', in *Cry Baby* (Loma Vista, 2026).

¹⁴ Kendrick Lamar, *To Pimp a Butterfly* (Interscope / Aftermath / Top Dawg, 2015).

¹⁵ Kendrick Lamar, *To Pimp a Butterfly* (Interscope / Aftermath / Top Dawg, 2015).

¹⁶ Vince Staples, *Vince Staples* (Blacksmith / Motown / EMI, 2021)

While the album is his most external, it does have a lot of references to personal struggle throughout, ‘The Running Man’ is a perfect example of this. ‘Never talked to therapists and rarely called on Jesus / don’t pick up my phone a lot, I like to be alone in thought’ reveals the personal cost of holding all this political weight.¹⁷ It’s not really a manifesto or a call to action, just a man telling you what it costs to pay attention every day.

The album begins with ‘Blackberry Marmalade’ – which also happened to be the first single – and it’s worth reflecting on properly. The music video deploys a first-person mass shooting perspective. The camera sees through the barrel before cutting to an MLK quote. The juxtaposition of the visuals in the song refuses to be separate from the violence and the moral reckoning of it. This is used to implicate the viewer in the same act the song is indicting.

The lyrics of the track are perhaps the most brutal and notable: the verse catalogues Black identity by type. He repeats a characteristic followed by the n-word each time. Such as words like ‘Ghetto’, ‘gangsta’, ‘dangerous’, but even the more positive associations – such as ‘famous’ ‘Bougie’, ‘Artist’, ‘honest’, ‘smartest’ – still includes the n-word descriptor after it.¹⁸ This is presumably to imply that whatever Staples becomes, he will still receive discrimination merely for his skin colour. The accumulation of these different types of people is the argument. Things like class, achievement, character, aspiration get swallowed by the simple characterisation of one attribute about him. Every Black man gets filed under the same heading regardless of what distinguishes him. Staples’ commentary points out that a black man is still seen as nothing more than a black man, he could be a successful black man – but that is somehow placed under a different set of criteria to the white man and is hence distinguished from him. There us another outcome of this repetition: the repetition of the word completely exhausts its weaponisation entirely. By the end of the verse, the word has been stripped of its capacity to mark any individual difference, it creates an erasure of difference that Staples is describing. The mere taxonomy of people is the racism in itself, whether it’s preceded by a positive or a negative descriptor.

The first political argument is about police brutality and racial violence featured on ‘Go! Go! Gorilla’. The lines depict mundane frustration at how the brutality is committed, not at the fact there is brutality at all. ‘Damn, why you gotta be like that? / Slammed with my hands behind

¹⁷ Vince Staples, ‘The Running Man’, in *Cry Baby* (Loma Vista, 2026).

¹⁸ Vince Staples, ‘Blackberry Marmalade’, in *Cry Baby* (Loma Vista, 2026).

my back / I know my tags are not updated, but I don't think you need that strap.' But the most devastating moment comes in the aftermath: The twelve-year-old who gets choke slammed by the policeman doesn't even mention it to his mother. The song addresses how the brutalisation and socialisation into compliance are delivered by the same institution, but his family also pushes the child towards it. 'If I get pulled over, Lord be with me / If I do the dash, then Lord forgive me' references two alternative routes, both requiring divine intervention.¹⁹ Neither of the scenarios involve safety either. This reduces the experience of being black in America to a coin flip between obedience and flight, with God as the only mediator. The American flag's colours are reframed as the colours of a police vehicle, indicating that the experience of America is that of police attacks and brutality. The American colour scheme is therefore inverted into an image of violence.

'White flag' extends this logic into how black people are alienated in society. The UFO metaphor – being treated as an alien in a literal sense – layers multiple readings and works as a triple entendre. Staples references surveillance against black people, dehumanisation, and the particular experience of being rendered suspect simply by existing in traffic. 'The Big Bad Wolf' then contextualises this in a continuous history – referencing Zimmerman back to Columbus.²⁰ The outro accelerates into a four-bar compression of the entire carceral machine: lights, rights, sentence, goodbye.

'Only In America' makes a really strong point with its main image throughout the song. The stars on the flag are likened to prison bars. The American dream is not what it appears to be. Staples notes the problem with the 13th Amendment,²¹ though not mentioned directly, is the one that lets people go to prison.

Staples also speaks to the extraction of Black labour from Black art; he refuses to treat it as separate from police violence. 'Blackberry Marmalade' repeats the use of the word 'crackers' to address different crimes – such as watching, taxing, jacking, shelving – which details a specific complicity in the abusing of black people during and after the slave trade. 'The Running Man' refers to the music industry as Grand Minstrel Station, like it's a departures board for Black performance.

¹⁹ Vince Staples, 'Go! Go! Gorilla', in *Cry Baby* (Loma Vista, 2026).

²⁰ Adeel Hassan, 'Stand Your Ground' Case in Florida Ends With Manslaughter Verdict', *The New York Times*, 29 July 2018 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/24/us/michael-drejka-stand-your-ground.html>> [Accessed 10 June 2026].

²¹ 13th Amendment: permitting slavery as punishment for crime - Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (The New Press, 2010).

Almost alluding to how black artists come with their own baggage and the elite audience is already there. It is one of the album's most powerful lines.

'White Flag' also critiques the music industry. Specifically, it turns the knife toward the listener: 'hip-hop taught me all y'all love Black folks, but it's not enough.'²² The line is aimed directly at the well-meaning attendee, including his very audience. Every track on this album yields a standout line like this, he seems to harshly point out that the problem is not specific to the country but to the individual. This works as a harsh down-to-earth criticism of personal biases.

Another notable theme throughout the album is how Staples, a non-believer, uses Christian imagery as a shared cultural picture to describe his circumstances. 'Do You Know the Devil' places him in direct address with God, with his recording booth essentially serving as the only confessional space he has. The outro's 'Amen' lands differently because he does not only mean it religiously but means it completely. As a kind of 'so be it' to end the address. 'The Big Bad Wolf' uses similar religious themes and opens by questioning the iconography of Christianity itself, he criticises the image of White Jesus as a piece of American propaganda.

Similarly, 'Cotton' repositions the use of religion in the slave trade as abandonment rather than salvation. Potentially referencing the 'Slave Bible' indirectly.²³ Staples borrows the infrastructure of faith to make arguments about American failure to uphold the values of Christianity. This imagery is cleverly utilised; Staples meets believers on their own rhetorical ground and extends it to enter a territory which criticises the disobedience of the very values Christians portray themselves to follow. This technique respects its audience enough to use the language they already trust but subverts it expertly.

The album's most explicit statement is delivered as a roll call on 'Tulsa, OK'. Staples lists the people who have died in violence against black people. He names Assata, Stokely, Huey, Fred Hampton, Bunchy Carter; before pivoting to how the struggle didn't end, it just got quieter.²⁴ Staples tackles his own audience when he addresses how after all this, the audience was upset over a choice of beats. He claims 'All that barking, who gon' bite? All that marching, who gon' fight?'

²² Vince Staples, 'White Flag', in *Cry Baby* (Loma Vista, 2026).

²³ Anthony Pinn, *Varieties of African American Religious Experience: Toward a Comparative Black Theology*, 20th Anniversary Edition (Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2017).

²⁴ Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin Jr., *Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (University of California Press, 2013)

to ask whether the performance of political consciousness has become a substitute for the thing itself.²⁵

‘Go! Go! Gorilla’ essentially summarises American history into a kind of sick, short poem: ‘Went from bread lines to picket lines to mainline prison time / For the crimes that we commit, but genocide / Don’t mean nan’ to Uncle Sam, guess it’s dignified.’²⁶ He references American historical events like the Great Depression, the Civil Rights movement, and mass incarceration – before speaking about issues in Gaza. Staples uses the immediacy of this to not let any particular injustice get treated as unique or over. The prayer before a traffic stop in the same song then becomes a depiction of daily survival.

‘White Flag’ is a personal favourite song of the album, it’s a very simple song, but it works in various ways. The chorus lands with a simplicity of something genuinely felt by Staples, and it hits harder every time it is repeated. The music video – in which Staples literally paints an American flag white – is perhaps one of the least subtle metaphors on the album. The visual and lyrical imagery is the most economical images of surrender and refusal the album offers. Simply stating ‘White flag I don’t wanna fight no more’ shows how he is tired of living in a country that discriminates and ‘fights’ against him.²⁷ Painting the American flag white works as a way of either giving up or saying that – through the white representing purity and innocence – Staples is painting a purer future in the song. Both interpretations work excellently to portray the hardship that Staples describes.

The album reaches its highest point, however, on ‘Cotton’. The symbol of cotton works through a double meaning throughout the album: it is a motif of spiritual and therapeutic music but also it is the crop of exploitation and extracted labour of enslaved people. Both meanings are present simultaneously throughout the song. The piece never resolves one or the other. The production on the song is also the album’s most unique, its more disco-inflected and heavy-pocket. Perhaps this itself works as a criticism of the music industry.

The bridge of the song works almost as the album’s emotional centrepiece. ‘Music makes me feel just like cotton / pick me up when I feel like falling down’ – cotton is like comfort.²⁸ But

²⁵ Vince Staples, ‘Tulsa, OK’, in *Cry Baby* (Loma Vista, 2026).

²⁶ Vince Staples, ‘Go! Go! Gorilla’, in *Cry Baby* (Loma Vista, 2026).

²⁷ Vince Staples, ‘White Flag’, in *Cry Baby* (Loma Vista, 2026).

²⁸ Ibid.

then saying ‘dance for me, dance for me’ shifts to the most devastating moment on *Cry Baby*.²⁹ The phrase that initially described the listener’s comforting relationship with music instantly transforms into a coercive command from an overseer of a slave. The shift in perspective to the slave owner is chilling. By overlapping comfort with coercion, the song permanently alters how the listener hears the track. This clever overlap the two elements together, making it impossible to unhear the song’s darker meaning.

Vince Staples doesn’t only criticise America’s internal problems: ‘Only in America’, for example, repurposes ‘God Bless the USA’ as ironic anthem, a bit like Bruce Springsteen’s ‘Born in the USA’.³⁰ It portrays itself as the land of the free but is home of the enslaved. ‘7 in the Morning’ uses this framing to widen the view a bit more to look at American foreign intervention. The narrator of the song remains in a war zone and is waiting for America to save them. They are promised things like Laker parades Figueroa and a plane to LA, which sounds like something out of a Hollywood movie. Yet, Staples makes it clear that this promise is just a cruel lie. Instead, the only reason the soldier is there is because of greed, people killing each other for America. The parade and the military march are shown as the same thing so you can’t tell celebration from militarism. As a result, American salvation is seen as a form of entertainment throughout the song. Staples asks why the public enjoys war and works as a sort of *Apocalypse Now* (1979) slap in the face of what the purpose of war is.³¹

Overall, *Cry Baby* is a relatively simple but harsh critique of the American system at a time that – certainly for him – the country deserves a critical analysis. *Cry Baby* was made at a difficult and perfectly bleak moment in time. The progress made during the 2020 protests have seemingly been undone by courts and schools, quietly erasing history and Civil Rights activism. This album feels like it was made under the heavy pressure of this modern setback.

The music videos for songs like ‘White Flag’ and ‘Cotton’ use the American flag as a symbol of grief and complicated history, instead of patriotism or pride. While this trope is a reoccurring theme throughout much of the fall of America’s empire, this feels particularly personal for Staples. On the track ‘Only in America,’ Staples delivers his clearest point of the album with

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Steve Inskeep, Vince Pearson and Barry Gordemer, ‘What Does ‘Born In The U.S.A.’ Really Mean?’, *NPR*, 26 March 2019 <<https://www.npr.org/2019/03/26/706566556/bruce-springsteen-born-in-the-usa-american-anthem>> [Accessed 16 June 2026].

³¹ Francis Ford Coppola, dir., *Apocalypse Now* (United Artists, 1979).

the lyric: ‘stole me and they brought me to the USA [...] thank you, I guess’.³² Instead of debating patriotism, Staples points out how absurd it is to expect patriotism from people whose ancestors were brought to the country by force. He delivers the line bluntly, leaving the listener to sit with the weight of it.

The record uses sound, message, delivery, and concept that all earn their place. The fact that this record exists at all is inseparable from his freedom that made it possible.

The ‘Blackberry Marmalade’ video closes with a Martin Luther King Jr. question that effectively brings conclusion to all the issues of the album. The question of what kind of extremists we will be. Extremists for hatred, or extremists for love? The smile and murder duality of that track’s final lines - saying ‘know that behind every smile / they thinkin’ ’bout killing you’³³ – is the clearest possible summary of American race relations in 2025, delivered melodically in a brutal way.

Vince Staples hence releases *Cry Baby* as one of the most politically assertive and subtly experimental albums of the 2020s. *Cry Baby* manages to criticise the system, deconstruct the system, and then criticise it again. Every song works as a punch in the gut for those who are ready to receive it, and a uppercut to the jaw for those that aren’t.

³² Vince Staples, ‘Only in America’, in *Cry Baby* (Loma Vista, 2026).

³³ Vince Staples, ‘Blackberry Marmalade’, in *Cry Baby* (Loma Vista, 2026).