

# BODEGA

Sometimes you have to move backwards to move forwards. Just ask punk cultural commentators BODEGA, whose new album sees them carve a new future from fuzz-soaked, consumerism-skewering shards of their past. “It’s something we’ve been wanting to do for years,” guitarist and vocalist Ben Hozie explains of *Our Brand Could Be Yr Life* – a collection of catchy indie-rock ruminations on the slow-creep of corporate-think into youth culture, first written eight years ago. Then known as BODEGA BAY, the Brooklyn group recorded those songs as a paradoxical double album. “It was super meticulous but aggressively lo-fi at the same time,” Hozie laughs, recalling thirty three tracks they “treated like a lush Brian Wilson epic but recorded through a scrappy MacBook mic.” Pretty much no one heard the ensuing self-released album outside of Bushwick, he insists. But for Hozie and vocalist Nikki Belfiglio – BODEGA’s other driving force – it retained a special place in their hearts, as more than just music. “It was a statement,” the guitarist beams. “Where the philosophy we loved and music we loved began to combine into one package,” Belfiglio adds.

Now, BODEGA – completed by lead guitarist Dan Ryan, bassist Adam See and drummer Adam Shumski – have reinterpreted *Our Brand Could Be Yr Life* for 2024. “We thought of it like a director remaking one of their old films, like when Hitchcock remade the *Man Who Knew Too Much*, or when Yasujirō Ozu re-did *The Story of Floating Weeds*,” says Hozie, who it’s never a surprise to hear talking about music through a cinematic lens. After all, this is a creative who, in addition to his work in BODEGA, moonlights as a celebrated indie filmmaker (*PVT Chat*, his 2020 drama about online sex work, won rave reviews). “When you’re older and better at your craft, you can revisit the same material but do different things with it.”

The guitarist isn’t kidding. On this rebooted *Our Brand*, singalongs of old are brought blazing into modern day with heavily reworked arrangements that underline how much their musicianship has grown. ‘Tarkovski’, for example, now features a face-melting solo from Ryan, as part of an extended jam section the band are calling “the closest we’ve come to working our live improvisations into a record so far.” ‘Set The Controls For The Heart of the Drum’, meanwhile – previously a ninety-second burst of electricity – is now longer, more pounding and funnier than before, with an absurd mid-song skit that speaks to the group’s subtle comic streak. Throw in new songs, like opener ‘Dedicated to the Dedicated’ and the album’s explosive finale ‘City is Taken’ – a song lit up by Shumski’s thundering drum fills – and you’re left with a thrilling time capsule of who BODEGA were and who they’re soon to be. One that, by the way, was recorded using more than one MacBook microphone this time around. “I think it’s our best-sounding record to date,” says Hozie, who produced the album, with long-time collaborator Adam Sachs on engineering and mixing duties.

Everything and nothing has changed since *Our Brand*’s oldest songs were originally written. Sure, BODEGA may now be cult-adored indie rock truthsayers, lauded for their combination of caterwauling rhythms and literary lyrics about liberals hiding out in Barnes and Noble as protests rage on the streets outside. Yes, releases like 2018’s *Endless Scroll* and 2022’s *Broken Equipment* may have found them mentioned in the same breath as the likes of Parquet Courts, Wet Leg and Courtney Barnett. And, of course, their reputation as a scintillatingly energetic live act might have seen them elevate from sweaty basement venues to substantial-sized rooms, invariably sold out.

But the brandification of the modern counterculture that Our Brand originally grappled with? That hasn't budged, not one bit. In fact, if anything it's become more entrenched, Hozie says.

"The theme is still a pressing one. The idea of the corporatisation of guitar music has only been exacerbated," he sighs. "The big philosophical question that I end up asking myself is: has it always been this way? Was rock always superficial, but I was just too young and naive to understand? If you look back to 1957 rock music, it had this incredible surge of electricity to it. Chuck Berry really was an underrated poet. I'm not denigrating the original rock'n'roll at all, which I still love and cherish. But it was superficial by design. It was meant to be like a quick product that you could market to teenagers and then toss aside."

That observation is typical of the intellectual curiosity bred in BODEGA's music. The duo don't always have an answer for the malaise – nor are they themselves exempt from the sharp knife they wield as critiquers of the world and its woes. "We made it our mission to challenge the hypocrisy of our scene and ourselves. The best critique is self-critique," says Hozie, admitting that perhaps BODEGA's backlash against the word "brand" in rock is itself a brand of sorts that they're leveraging. On songs like the pummelling 'ATM' – whose imagery is echoed in the album's provocative cover art, crafted by Belfiglio – ideas like this culminate into an important point about how transactional we've become as a music scene and a species. "There's this term called "standing reserve," which is where you treat something as a means to an end. A field is no longer just a field that we appreciate the beauty of. It becomes about the resources we can extract from it. We use the ATM as a playful metaphor for this. Think of every single person you know – your parents, your lovers, even your best friends. We've been trained to think, 'what do I get out of my relationship with them?' Social media gets you to think of your whole life as standing reserve. It's a terrible way to live our lives," he laments, with a dark chuckle.

Elsewhere on the record is the lighters-in-the-air anthem 'Major Amberson' and the driving 'G.N.D' – a song that, from its title (kink slang for "girl next door") to its eye-opening lyrics from the perspective of a fictional sex worker, further explores Belfiglio's fascination with the intersection between sex and technology. All that before a recurring character familiar to BODEGA fans steps into the view for a trio of tracks as the album nears its denouement. "The Cultural Consumer is a guy I've noticed around Brooklyn a lot," Hozie explains of the middle class bohemian figure from whose perspective he frequently writes lyrics. By 'Cultural Consumer III', he's in a car en route to the airport, about to embark on a wellness retreat in Taiwan. But none of that masks the creeping emptiness at his core – this feeling of "having envisioned this exciting, adventurous life for himself where he thought he would inflict change upon the world. Instead, he's just buying shit."

Our Brand Could Be Yr Life is a safari tour of indie-rock subgenres for a reason. "It's got dance-punk. There's some shoegaze on there. There's slacker rock on there. There's psychedelic rock on there. R.E.M, too. We wanted to be another band in a long stream of missionaries, proselytising a certain type of rock subculture," Hozie says. "We simultaneously mock and celebrate the rock cannon, hoping to redeem its fall from grace, like foolish missionaries who inherited a stained formal tradition that needs to change in order to become meaningful again."

Which is sort of where the album title comes in. In 2001, the author Michael Azzarad released *Our Band Could Be Your Life* – a seminal book that chronicled (and for a young Hozie, instantly mythologised) that same subculture, in all its punk spirit and DIY freedom. 22 years later, riffing on that tome's name, Hozie and Belfiglio are about to release an album that, for a second time, asks: "what happened? And is there a way out?" For BODEGA, heading down the garden path towards an answer meant first retracing their steps. Sometimes you have to move backwards to move forwards, after all.

*Our Band Could Be Yr Life* is the euphorically poppy proof.