The New Pornographers – Brill Bruisers Review

**Score**: 8.3

**Album:** *Brill Bruisers*

**Artist:** The New Pornographers

**Year:** 2014

**Genre:** Alternative

**Home page teaser (one sentence):** Indie supergroup slide forward for sixth full-length.

**Banner quote (from album):** “*See my former glory still burning. It had every intent of returning”*

**SEO Tags:** Alternative,Indie,Supergroup,New Pornographers,Destoyer,Zumpano,Neko Case, Dan Bejar,A.C. Newman,Synth Pop,80’s,Kathryn Calder,John Collins,Kurt Dahle,Todd Fancey,Blaine Thurier,Matador Records,

**Conclusive Review:**

The New Pornographers have been partying consistently for the past fourteen years, with the occasional hiatus and solo album in-between drinks. On *Brill Bruisers*, their sixth proper full-length, A.C. Newman and company regain some shred of their early 2000’s nostalgia with just the right dash of space-aged synth feedback to keep the rioters happy. “*We are champions of red wine/poured all over/It's what we're known for,*” Neko Case sings on the album’s second track, perpetuating a familiar irreverence, despite the inevitable passing of time. It’s been four years since this ragtag bunch of tattered angels harmonized and made light of life’s often jumbled circumstances, and while 2010’s *Together* had its moments, the general aesthetic of that record left a lot to be desired. Ironically, the members sounded disjointed, collaborating with a barrage of indie rock misfits to include St. Vincent’s Annie Clark and Beirut’s Zach Condon.

There’s no shame occasionally exiting your safety zone to achieve something new, although *Together* lacked the polished frenzy of past efforts, *Twin Cinema* and *Challengers*; two of the band’s strongest albums. *Brill Bruisers* is a much appreciated second wind, The New Pornographers re-establishing a previously solemn mood before tapping the kegs, pulling the anchor and setting sail. Newman initiates the festivities right off the bat. “*Looking for searchlights leading the charge/The mass appeal/To brilliant bruisers taking the wheel,*” he sings on the album’s self-titled first track. It’s clearer than ever that these friends are happy to cruise the same waves again; their dynamic fluctuations highly balanced and picking up steam, with the occasional stray barnacle along the way.

Part of *Brill Bruisers* joyous allure can be attributed to the band members’ time spent on the outskirts. Newman, Case and Dan Bejar, better known as Destroyer, have all released solo albums since *Together*, all three of which were extremely well-received. Notoriety aside, these subtle baby steps and inevitable musical shifts are important when dealing with the latest from what can only be summed up as a supergroup. It’s a bit of a cliché at this point, a concept better defined by the likes of The Traveling Wilbury’s and Crosby, Still, Nash and Young before metal giants and 90’s grunge gurus stepped in and made the idea considerably icky with their high-pitched disregard.

That’s not to say that every once in a while the right gaggle of tortured souls can bring the goods to the table. In the case of Newman and Bejar, *Brill Bruisers* contains some of their best gems to date. Newman with the upbeat grooves of “Fantasy Fools” and “Backstairs” blends an uncanny mix of synth pop love with full rock band swagger. Meanwhile, Bejar revisits remnants of Destroyer’s latest *Kaputt* but adds enough 80’s electronica and French revolutionary-isms to stir the melting pot. “War on the East Coast” is Bejar at his most comfortable, backed by old friends, calling out, “*It's war on the east coast/It's war out west/Oh, I don't care/I don't care*.” This lack of concern is a real selling point, especially when considering how even musicians are often subjected to the outrageous unevenness of this world.

Thematically *Brill Bruisers* takes aim at the irreverent squares and jumbled authority figures of old, but never does so in an overly-dramatic fashion. These are all pop songs, some subtle, others ridden with noises and harmonies worthy of any pre-battle finale. However, the sum of these parts is often quite daunting. At forty-three minutes, this album’s thirteen tracks share an unconceivable amount of similarities that often bog it down from keyboard intro to background vocal arrangement. Whereas the first five cuts highlight the band at their absolute collaborative peak, one can’t help but feel forced into a smoke-filled room of waning positivity by the end. That’s not to say that any one member is at fault, but rather everyone’s perhaps a little tired of shot-gunning beers and imposing comic relief what with the sun coming up and all. It’s a testament to the group’s durability that they can still meet up and make an album of this heightened quality, though, especially when considering where they all were at the end of last century. Scattered members of an alternative underground, somewhere between lost and low-key, unscathed, but ripe for the first of many adventures to come. Let’s just hope there are enough libations to last until the next port.

**Track-by-track reviews, with scores:**

1. Brill Bruisers: Full of life from the first chord, this single is a bright mess of lush harmonies and Newman’s signature wail. “*And the sea was alright/And it was alright/It's all we know now to never go back.*” Much like their past work, *Brill Bruisers* is about some grand journey, poetic, elaborate and surprisingly upbeat when considering the surrounding brawls. The New Pornographers are gang of misanthropes on this track, holding their own, past flying bottles and ticking grenades. They hit their stride right in the middle, keeping us afloat for yet another storm. 9.5/10
2. Champions of Red Wine: A sprawling keyboard and electronic vocal hums lead this march forward. Case sings of further explorations, the alcoholic nature of glad tidings and the inevitable twists of a relationship. “*I’m not your love song/your love song gone wrong/I’m coming over.*” It’s in this light, yet forceful declaration that certain standards regain their momentum. Newman’s always had a knack for writing the right kind of songs for his leading ladies. *Champions of Red Wine* is no exception, a groovy transition that keeps the listener in check. 8.9/10
3. Fantasy Fools: Another plush mix of vocal waves begin this track with standard rock band arrangement on the verse. The chorus is one of *Brill Bruisers* best, Newman and Case really feeding well off of one another. It’s a love song, interspersed with skepticism and doubt, but whimsical enough to lead the listener astray. It’s often difficult when the fantasy is overwhelmingly better than the real thing. While this song is quick to admit this fact, there’s still something highly contagious about the way we all dive in head first, no matter how shallow it seems. 9.3/10
4. War on the East Coast: The first of three Bejar contributions on the record packs a kindred 80’s wallop. “*The ride of a lifetime/the rites of spring of a lifetime*,*”* he repeats before crawling deeper into cryptic imagery of women and all the surrounding chaos. Bejar is unflinching on this tracks, the near Springsteen distorted harmonica and jumbled structure perfectly accentuating his lyrical prowess. Wars come and go, on all fronts, and yet he simply wants somebody to watch the fallout with. It’s personal and strangely inconsiderate. A real A-bomb. 9.8/10
5. Backstairs: Seamlessly transitioning from the previous track with light keys and vocodered vocals, one could easily mistake this song for Daft Punk. Then Newman enters the scene, setting everyone straight. *Backstairs* is a gradual rise, built around quite a catchy hook at end of each verse. The moody electronics and bridge set this song apart from its predecessors, before a sweet blend of Case, Newman and Kathryn Calder break fresh ground on the outro; one of many highlights on the horizon. 9.4/10
6. Marching Orders: Another stellar keyboard intro, Case returning on lead, tip-toeing on each lyrical pop. “*They say we can’t make this stuff up/but what else could we make*?” This unsettled statement centers the track, which rocks steady, giving the listener a sunny break from the futuristic insatiability of the past. Newman adds his voice, but remains reserved, as if Case is the real drill sergeant here, telling us all to sing out. The funny part is, very few of her fellow soldiers join in. Are they saying more with less, or were the rest out having a smoke? - 7.7/10
7. Another Drug Deal of the Heart: The shortest of the bunch at a minute and a half, the title says it all. Reemploying old new wave tricks, *Another Drug Deal of the Heart* stands as an afterthought to the previous six tracks. It’s a light, fluffy transition, Case pulsing with Calder as her back-up. Lyrically, this song is a cheeky blend that doesn’t get too deep, but is still worthy of a sophomoric smirk at the tiniest of inclinations. Anyone waiting for the man can easily relate. 8.1/10
8. Born with a Sound: Bejar’s second cut opens with a background field recording of some crazy kook ranting about the sounds in his head. He and Calder then match each other on the verse, while the band find their footing between synth lines. Much like the previous two, this track could benefit from a little more pizzazz. It’s a sweet mix that alludes to the beauty of all music, how certain folks wake up with it in their heads and keep it with them for the day, although this particular track doesn’t have quite the staying power of its predecessors. 6.5/10
9. Wide Eyes: Newman employs several old standards on this track, almost as if it’s more than a subtle nod to his past. “*See my former glory still burning/it had every intent of returning*.” He’s beyond optimistic, cleaning off the dust from his six-string and calling up the crew for another go-around. Newman and Case are their tightest on the chorus, even if the rest could use a little boost. *Wide Eyes* has everything it needs to make that look from across the room outrageously more meaningful than it has to be, but some of the more cynical audience members require just a tad more convincing. 8.0/10
10. Dancehall Domine: Following several downbeat numbers, *Dancehall Domine* places The New Pornographers back in routine territory. What could easily pass for an outtake from *Twin Cinema*, this track relies heavily on old dynamics. Newman and Case bounce back and forth off of one another, gracefully leading everybody out under the disco ball for some standard fanfare. Whereas previous tracks painted portraits of perilous nomads heading off towards the unknown, this eager jam doesn’t complicate things too much, but in that same vain, sounds almost too familiar. 7.8/10
11. Spidyr: The last of Bejar’s songs could work just as well on the last Destroyer record, mixing a barrage of illogical lines about insects and the people that so closely resemble them. Again, he pulls the harmonica from his pocket, channeling *Nebraska* if not for the synth-filled oscillations in the background. When the right elements swell, this track does it all and then some at just over two minutes. Spiders may be a bit cliché topic from The Who to The Rolling Stones, but if nothing else, Bejar’s in good company 8.3/10
12. Hi-Rise: Newman mumbles another round of residual “Oh’s” before slowly spouting his lines. “*We are on the move/all eyes in the night*.” He sings of forward motions, collectively transitioning from one vantage point to the next. Dynamically, *Hi-Rise* lacks the quick kicks of its predecessors. The synths and guitars are arranged well-enough with sharp waves of electro sound passing by in the background, but there still isn’t enough to set this track apart. If they’re going for a lowered mood, then The New Pornographers are almost there, though *Hi-Rise* feels suspiciously out of place here. 6.1/10
13. You Tell Me Where: This band has always been finely-tuned at creating both peaks and valleys on their records. *You Tell Me Where* is that raised ground meant to remind us of these constant changes in elevation. It’s the last call, and while we’re all drunk, tired and ready for whatever pressing intoxicants follow, there’s still enough room to down those final few sips. Not as rambunctious as the first track, or spacey as those that follow, this song has the right idea. Even after the endless U-turns, there’s still no shame in waiting for somebody else to name their place and impatiently wait. However, it’s still a bummer that some got lost along the way. 8.3/10