

## Lonesome stranger: Paul Westerberg lets down his guard on new CD

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Star Tribune

February 20, 1999 - 10:00 PM

Paul Westerberg is looking out the window of a downtown hotel room. He's rented a 16th-floor suite for a photo shoot and interview, but he seems more focused on the fat snowflakes slowly cascading outside than the events at hand.

He's here only out of necessity, to promote his new record. He's also exhausted. It's only 4 o'clock in the afternoon, but the Minneapolis singer/songwriter is suffering from a herniated disc, a condition that makes sitting and standing painful.

For once, Westerberg's physical and emotional pain are in sync. It's this pain that his new CD, "Suicaine Gratification," revels in. Personally, though, it's nothing he aspires to possess. He lights up when talk turns to his 9-month-old son, Johnny, and their walks around the neighborhood. He chuckles and shakes his head, saying that before they even make it to the corner Johnny is face-forward in his sled, fast asleep. The first time, he panicked and had to make sure that little Johnny wasn't frozen stiff.

As Westerberg continues chatting, slowly and skeptically, he begins to relax. Cracking a few jokes, letting fly with some punk-issue sarcasm and even laughing and smiling, it becomes apparent that this is a man who simply wants to be understood.

His guarded stance, he explains later, comes from a long line of people with agendas, false friends and fanatics who won't let him live in the here and now but would rather pigeonhole him in his punk-rock past with Minneapolis' fabled Replacements. "You have to be somebody's has-been to qualify as someone else's hero," he says.

"Suicaine Gratification," arriving in stores Tuesday, is the album that should make Westerberg a hero again. Easily the feather in his cap, it captures the itinerant struggle between hope and hopelessness. This interpersonal war is what has always made Westerberg's songs resonant with a hollowed emptiness that welcomes the lonely hearts, losers and leftovers -- a space reserved only for the lonely.

"It's kind of sad," he says of the record. "I guess I'm proud that I followed the muse where it took me, which was a very solitary, dark place."

It's a territory defined by the kind of insecurity that, paired with their outrageous antics, made the Replacements an unforgettable cast of misfits who were more comfortable creating chaos than living without it. Now, Westerberg fights his own internal chaos by cutting to the bone with lyrics that question a man's prime of life, fate, love, final chances and lies.

A collection of thoughtful, spare ballads and three-chord rock songs, "Suicaine Gratification" proves that Westerberg's verve and venom are as potent as ever.

"He's an incredibly creative guy," says the record's producer, Don Was, who has collaborated with Bonnie Raitt, Bob Dylan and the Rolling Stones. "If I could've worked with John Lennon at his creative peak, that's what Paul reminds me of. He doesn't want to repeat anything anyone has done before; he makes sure the mikes in the studio are not set up the same way they were the week before. Nothing with him is rote."

### Basement tapes

In keeping with his solitary nature, Westerberg recorded most of "Suicaine Gratification" in his basement.

"I didn't even know I was making a record," he says. Back home after a concert tour following the release of his last album

three years ago, Westerberg started writing and recording. "After about two months I had six or seven songs and I thought, 'Hey, I have a record here.' "

Bumped around on Capitol Records' release schedule – partly because of the departure of label head Gary Gersh, who signed Westerberg and is now acting as his manager – the album was initially slated for release last summer, and it seems a distant memory when Westerberg talks about it. But the record carries special import.

"This one, for whatever reason, is unique," he says. "From the beginning of making it, to this very moment, it doesn't ring like any of the other records. The closest it does is to the very first one I ever made. The difference is when I was done with that one I was so excited to go out and tell the world and play. That's not the case here."

He's adamant about not going on tour immediately – regardless of what his record label might want. The thrill of the spotlight has long faded, and Westerberg takes more comfort holing up at home with a book or his son, or in his studio.

"Last time out, it mentally exhausted me and I had become depressed halfway through because of expectations I had on myself or simply just chemical, clinical depression. Somehow being on stage playing rock music with guys that weren't in my band, per se, for the first time felt wrong, like 'Gee, I've done this. This might be a waste of my talent to be known as a guitar-slinging performer.' A little voice told me that this was not what I was born to do. And going home and making the record, it was, 'Now it's about time to see what I can do.' "

### **History lesson: Forget it**

Westerberg knows all too well the importance that fans place on his history with the 1980s' most applauded punks, the Replacements, but he has no desire to go back.

"Minus all the bad stuff we did and took, the [Replacements'] performances were creative," he says. "We would reinvent songs, do things differently, wear odd clothing. Over the years it had gotten to the point where there was so much pressure to go up and play the songs well – like the records, like the people want to hear. We disintegrated."

This disintegration had many pointing the finger at Westerberg. He knows many blame him for being a "tyrant" and "ending the party." He says with resignation: "I've distanced myself from the Replacements, what they represent, what they are, so much that I barely know they exist."

His first two solo records, "14 Songs" and "Eventually," got a lukewarm greeting from critics and fans. But it's the thrill of the song that keeps him from worrying about commercial viability or mainstream stardom.

"I was probably 36 when I started recording this album and it dawned on me that I don't know what [kids] want – I'm a fool to even guess. So I have to do what I want at the risk of being considered a has-been, an old man or whatever. When they rediscover me when they're 25, they'll see that I was very cool."

His need to write and perform had him working with his wife, Laurie Lindeen, on her solo debut "Pregnant Pause," and he assumed an alter ego, Grandpa Boy, for a 7-inch single and an EP on the tiny Soundproof/Monolith label. The Grandpa Boy tracks, which rail with a spittle familiar to Replacements fans, were an outlet for Westerberg, who says he's become "more fearless in my art," looking for personal satisfaction rather than mass endorsement.

Was became involved after Capitol sent him "a third-generation cassette [that] sounded like crap." Nonetheless, he says, "I knew they were great songs and if there was any plan, it was to stay out of the way of the songs."

Although he wasn't Westerberg's first choice as producer (Quincy Jones was), Westerberg admits that Was pushed him in the right direction, insisting that he include "Bookmark," a personal and delicate ballad that sounds like a last rite. Was enlisted Shawn Colvin to sing on the touching "Born for Me" and brought in pedal steel guitarist Greg Leisz, drummer Jim Keltner and keyboardist Benmont Tench. Soul Asylum's Dave Pirner sings background on "Fugitive Kind," as does the studio's secretary.

"Someone at the label kept saying we need more female voices. I walked up to the secretary and said, 'You – can you

sing?" " Westerberg says, laughing.

As the conversation winds down, it's clear that music is still what makes him tick. He mentions a Bad Company CD he wants, says that he joked with Soul Asylum bassist Karl Mueller about putting together a band and that he enjoyed co-writing with Carole King (even though they didn't release anything) and is disappointed he couldn't contribute a song to Blondie's new album.

Then Westerberg eases himself off the couch, signaling the end of his duty.

"I don't feel like I have any answers," he says. "I feel like I've reached a new level where I do understand Bob Dylan a little bit now. And Picasso. It's like 'Don't look back, don't explain, don't apologize.' You create this mystique. . . . People hate you, but it's not of your doing, it's of necessity to do what you do. And if you really believe in what you do, to dissect and talk about it, you can't. You don't know how."

He may not feel that he's well-liked or that he articulates his motives well enough. No matter. Because even if no one else understands, Westerberg knows that in the end, it's about the music.

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