“Dookie”—Green Day (1994)

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Essay by Ian Winwood (guest post)*

Green Day, c. 1994

Despite every appearance to the contrary, the success of Green Day’s “Dookie” was not pre-ordained. Released on the first day of February in 1994, in its first week of release, the major label debut of the Northern Californian punk rock group Green Day limped onto the Billboard Hot 200 at a pallid 141. In the north-eastern states, more than half of the copies designated for stores remained in warehouses due to an impediment frigid winter storm. Subsequent delays in pressing and distribution led to further scarcity in the racks. At this point, to put it at its mildest, the signs that a record named after a child’s slang word for a lump of excrement was going to be a hit was hard to find.

Notwithstanding these initial setbacks, though, in a wider sense, Green Day’s timing was perfect. Emerging into the vacuum of an alt-rock movement that had become unduly dark and dangerous--scene leaders Nirvana would lose their frontman to suicide in April of that year--the Oakland-based group brought a splash of color to an audience that was by then hungry for a change of emphasis. That many opinion-formers in the music press, exhausted from lavishing encomiums on their immediate predecessors, regarded the achievements of singer and guitarist Billie Joe Armstrong, bassist Mike Dirnt and drummer Tre Cool with little more than an affectionate ruffle of the hair need not detain us. Green Day’s brand of anarchy may have been disobedient rather than destructive, or *self*-destructive, but beneath the Day-Glo exterior and major-key melodies, “Dookie’s” exquisite vignettes of loneliness and dislocation were as substantial as anything that came before it.

“I remember… we didn’t really get the respect you would normally associate with a band that [went on to sell more than] fifteen million albums,” Rob Cavallo, Green Day’s producer and A&R man at Warner Bros., recalled. “I was, like, ‘Doesn’t “Rolling Stone” [magazine] realize that this guy [Armstrong] is a fucking genius and that every lyric on “Dookie” is the truth?’ They’re the truth of every young man and every young woman coming out of high school and embarking on life. A lot of them came out of school and were going to work at Walmart or to work in another retail job. I used to quote lyrics all the time and say, ‘These are the experiences that kids all around the country are going through.’”

That “Dookie” did at last gain traction, in the spring of 1994, can in part be attributed to the tenacity of Warner Bros. Head of Alternative Promotion, Steve Tipp. Having, at first, met with resistance from media gatekeepers, it was Tipp’s refusal to accept that “Dookie’s” leadoff single, “Longview,” was anything other than a hit that saw the song creep onto the

playlist of the taste-making Southern Californian radio station KROQ. From there, it was but a short hop out into the rest of the country and onto the airwaves of MTV. Released to radio on February 1st, the track's remarkable durability was such that it would be a further *six months* until its successor, "Basket Case," was unveiled as a single.

The decision by Green Day to sign to a major label was first mooted in 1992, after fans attending a concert at City Gardens, in Trenton in New Jersey, complained of being unable to find copies of the group's second LP, "Kerplunk," in stores. Inevitably, in the acutely political Bay Area scene, the reception to this news fell some way short of rapture. Aggrieved by the trio's decision to leave their original independent label, Lookout--to whom they had "signed" with a handshake--for the corporate music scene, a letter printed in the punk rock magazine, Maximumrocknroll, told of a fan who had started picketing the group's shows. Over in Berkeley, the decision by the staunchly independent music club, 924 Gilman Street, to ban the trio from its stage caused hurt and upset on both sides of the divide.

"It was definitely one of those things that I understood and where I respected people's sense of ownership of their bands and of their scene," Mike Dirnt would later say. "I understood that. But for us, we didn't have anything else. There were a lot of kids that had a lot of shit to fall back on who were really self-righteous, and I said, 'Well, you can be indignant when you've got a fucking trust fund.' I was sleeping in the back of my truck half the time, you know?"

But for all the brickbats from the scene's moral arbiters, the conditions posed by Green Day to their major label suitor spoke to an independent mind-set not easily extinguished. In preference to a tour bus--the standard request of new signatories--instead, the group asked for funds with which to buy a new (to them) van. Impressed by the 122 concerts the trio had undertaken on their own dime, in North America and Europe in 1992--the latter a three-month campaign of such squalor that Armstrong contracted body lice--label president Lenny Waronker said, "Let's give 'em the fucking van." (Using $20,000 of a relatively modest $225,000 advance, the band purchased "the Bookmobile," a second-hand mobile library.)

That Green Day found their way onto the record company's radar at all can be attributed to Rob Cavallo's decision to listen to a demo tape of the band's latest songs when driving home, in the tiny hours of night, from a recording session with the LA punk trio The Muffs. During the subsequent courtship ritual, at a meeting at the group's communal home, Cavallo proved his chops by playing a selection of Beatles songs on an acoustic guitar while seated on an upturned bucket, high on marijuana. At this embryonic stage, of course, no one had an eye for diamond certifications or, indeed, canonisation in the Library of Congress. At Warner Bros. headquarters, the producer explained to colleagues confused by his determination to sign the group that "we're going to generate a little bit of profit--I think we're going to sell a 100,000 albums."

In 1993, this kind of number seemed sensible. Notwithstanding shared characteristics with the alternative groups of the early nineties, as a punk rock group, Green Day, distinguished themselves in identifying with a movement that had been driven underground on both sides of the Atlantic. After a moral panic propelled the Sex Pistols to number one, in the United Kingdom, punk as a mainstream concern withered and died. In the US, meanwhile, its practitioners persevered without harvesting anything like their just rewards. Of all the domestic groups that had signed to major labels in the seventies and eighties--Ramones, X, Husker Du, The Replacements, and more--not one attained ever a single gold record.

In 1993, the album that would help smash the glass ceiling that had separated punk rock from the American mainstream for almost two decades took shape in a practice space. Seeking to replicate the energy of the group's live concerts, each day, Rob Cavallo would watch as Green Day built up their new batch of songs to the point at which the material was tight like Rogers and Astaire. Only then was money spent. Transferring their operation to Fantasy Studios, in Berkeley, the band duly transposed their efforts onto tape with the kind of fluent economy that sounded effortless.

Inevitably, it didn't take long for the potential of the little-album-that-could, and indeed would, to be noticed by those who patrolled the corridors of power at Warner Bros. After being granted a sneak preview of what was still a work-in-progress, product manager Geoffrey Weiss exclaimed, "You did it! You fucking did it!" With this, almost at once, the decision by Cavallo to take percentage points on the record's back end, in preference to an upfront producer's fee, looked like an astute strategy. By the end of the following year, in 1994, "Dookie" had become the fifth highest selling album in the United States. Allowing even for the apparently ubiquitous international dominance of the "American Idiot" LP, from 2004, it remains its authors' most commercially successful release.

Such is its durability, in fact, that three decades after a teenage army of would-be punk rockers fell for its charms, in 2024, Green Day played "Dookie" in its entirety on a headline tour of stadiums in Europe and North America. In these vast spaces, deep cuts that had lain dusty for an age proved themselves suited to the appetites of a vast modern audience. Songs such as "Having A Blast," about America's ghastly predilection for random violence; "Pulling Teeth," with its gallows-at-dawn humor concerning domestic abuse; and the wistful inertia of the love-struck "Sassafras Roots." It might even be that in rolling back the years, Green Day themselves were reminded of the collective strength of an album recorded more than half a lifetime ago, at a point when only the deeply committed knew their name.

Reflecting on the "Dookie's" impact and success almost a quarter of a century after the fact, in 2018, Billie Joe Armstrong said, "It was the first time a punk band in America really became huge so we were kind of like the ultimate guinea pigs…. But I really didn't know what would happen. I think I was expecting something in-between two extremes. I was expecting the best and expecting the worst. The last thing I wanted was to be anywhere in the middle. I didn't want to be in the middle of the road, and I didn't want to be mediocre. I thought, 'Well, if we're going to do this, let's make it as big as possible, or else let's go down in flames.' And there was fear when it came to both of those things. But this is what we signed up for. We wanted to do this for the rest of our lives, and that's what we've done."

Ian Winwood is the author of "Smash! Green Day, The Offspring, Bad Religion, NOFX & the Nineties Punk Explosion." His latest book is "Bodies: Life & Death in Music."

*The views expressed in the essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.