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LYRICIST**

**THE SECRETS BEHIND
THEIR COMEBACK**

THE

STROKES

FINALLY!

BY SLOANE CROSLY

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAN MARTENSEN

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The Strokes are together again! All it took was some soul-searching, fence-mending, and a liber

BACK NEW YORK

IN THE

Fabrizio Moretti, Julian Casablancas, Nick Valensi, Albert Hammond Jr., and Nikolai Fraiture, shot for SPIN at Milk Studios in New York City, February 4, 2011



definition of the word "together." **SLOANE CROSLLEY** gets the skinny on their cathartic new album.

ARK GROOVE

Photographs by
DAN MARTENSEN



On Moretti: **Burberry**
sweater, burberry.com. On
Hammond Jr. **John Varvatos**
jacket, johnvarvatos.com.
On Fraiture: **Burberry**
jacket, burberry.com.

ALBERT

SOMEWHERE BETWEEN OTISVILLE CORRECTIONAL Facility and Albert Hammond Jr.'s house in Port Jervis, New York, I see a deer explode on the side of the highway. She makes a go of crossing, a car slams into her, and that's that. I gasp and look around, but there is no one on this train but me.



Because Hammond, one-fifth of the band credited with nothing less than rescuing rock and defining postmillennial downtown cool a decade ago, has gone country. Port Jervis is the last stop.

"I just saw a dead deer on the train," are my first words to Hammond when he picks me up in his snow-beaten late-model BMW. Gus Oberg, the silent and Swedish producer who worked on the Strokes' fourth album, *Angles*, rides shotgun.

"It was on the train?" mocks Hammond, 31, making a citizen's arrest on behalf of the grammar police. "Was it wearing a trench coat and reading the paper? Just giving you that deer-caught-in-the-headlights-look, like: 'What do you want?'"

Oberg laughs Swedishly.

A lot has happened in the five years since *First Impressions of Earth*. In addition to the Strokes' spawn (one for singer Julian Casablanca, two for bassist Nikolai Fraiture, and twins for guitarist Nick Valensi), Hammond, Casablanca, Fraiture, and drummer Fabrizio Moretti released albums of their own. They were kids when they broke through, which makes them elder statesmen now, at just the other side of 30. Still, if half the guys I know could bottle the band up and spray themselves with eau de *Is This It*, they would.

"The most violent part, in the beginning, was going to bars and people saying, 'I fucking hate you,'" Hammond recalls with his mouth full of baguette, sitting at his oversized French tiled kitchen table. "What do you stand for, man? What do I stand for? Two hours later, they'd be like, 'You know, you're a pretty nice guy.' All right. Well, you're still a douchebag."

The cool kids and douchebags alike want their Strokes back. Too bad: After years of stops and starts, what they'll get is a different Strokes (sorry) born from a new, effective if not necessarily convenient, way of working together. For many bands re-forming after a tumultuous lay-off, the question is often whether audiences will still care passionately. Not the case here—the Strokes headlined Lollapalooza last year, will do Coachella and Bonnaroo this year, as well as an intimate hometown gig at Madison Square Garden for good measure. The question is, do they still care passionately? How do they reconcile becoming a professional concern when the world awaits the aspirationally hip band of brothers they were a decade ago?

Yeah, they don't know either.

Hammond is comfortable up here, away from the fray in the East Village, where he still has an apartment. His friend, comedian David Cross (see page 62!) lives in the area, and in 2008 showed the land to Hammond, who then had the house built, right around the time of his split with then-fiancée British model Agyness Deyn. The house is simple but beautiful—classic-country exterior, contemporary interior, wraparound porch, gleaming cherry wood floors, giant fireplace, white bearskin rug. It's the sanctuary Hammond needed after the past few years, which included what he calls a

“hardcore” drug rehab that proved to be not the smallest, but definitely not the only, obstacle impeding the Strokes’ return.

“People can’t believe I did that,” he says of getting back to work on the album just a month after finishing treatment in December 2009. “I wasn’t on any chemicals. It was hard—you have two good years of post-acute withdrawal. I was nervous and couldn’t remember things. It’s like having a stroke, no pun intended. You always do the crazy-rock-star thing, of course, but I’d rather be left with music from someone I admire than their funny stories of all the fucked-up shit they did.”

Hammond and I, with Oberg in tow, walk out to the converted barn where the Strokes recorded the new album. Most of the Strokes, anyway.

“Everyone was here except Julian,” Hammond says with a shrug. “I can describe one day where you’d wonder how the record got made and a day where you would think it’s the greatest thing that ever happened. You have five huge personalities and five egos, but we’re different...you’ll see.”

(Interviewing a Stroke a day has a real *Christmas Carol* feel to it. Except it’s five ghosts, not three. And they are not dead.)

He excuses himself to the bathroom and I wander around the barn, looking at mixing boards I’m scared to touch. What you will be

hearing is, in a way, *Angles 2.0*: A version produced by Joe Chiccarelli was largely scrapped and re-recorded by the band members themselves, with much of Casablanca’s vocals done at Electric Lady studios in New York. Earlier attempts were marred by Hammond’s drug problem, which came to a head in September 2009. (“I guess you could say I wasn’t really there when we started it.”) I think about something he’d said earlier, remembering when his band was less of an enterprise and more of an entourage.

“We started as a gang, with that mentality. The greatest thing when we discovered each other was that conquer-the-world feeling—whatever fear and chaos might exist, I’ll be okay.”

“And now?” I ask when Hammond returns. “Would you say there’s an elephant in the room when you guys are all together?”

Oberg brushes a cymbal.

“I’m proud of everything we’ve done,” Hammond says, “but you have to confront things right away or else they get worse. Then, because you didn’t let out, your feelings will explode one day over nothing. Suddenly, everyone thinks a fight is about the most menial thing, but it’s a much richer issue no one’s bringing up. I don’t like the elephant in the room, I like the deer on the train, just hanging out.”

FABRIZIO

FABRIZIO MORETTI LASTS about 60 seconds with me before he bolts for the door. I rip open a packet of sugar and turn around to see him running full speed past the window of this East Village café, leather jacket flapping in the wind. I ask the barista if she knows where he went.

“Your friend cut me on line by accident,” answers a girl behind me, “so he insisted on buying my scone.”

This doesn’t explain why I’m now interviewing an NYU student instead of Drew Barrymore’s hipster-heartthrob ex-boyfriend.

“They couldn’t break a hundred,” he explains upon his return, putting change on the counter.

After hovering for a few minutes, we decide the coffee shop is (a) too crowded and (b) too this-is-Fab-doing-an-interview-in-a-coffee-shop. So we take a walk through the slushy streets and head into Wiz Kid, the Strokes’ management office.

“I have no discretion when it comes to airing things,” says Moretti, 30, as a large black lab mix named Xavi licks my recorder. “I just went to a psychiatrist and was like, ‘I’m going to keep this to myself,’ and then I told everybody, including you. I’m very grateful for being in this band, but there are only five people who know what it’s



“I’d say the album is like a prostitute. I hope everyone has a night with it.”

FABRIZIO MORETTI

like to be in the Strokes. I'm part of 'them,' but I can see people trying to separate me out from the band's reputation."

That's not to say he isn't frank about wanting something for himself outside of the band. Little Joy, featuring his girlfriend Binki Shapiro and singer Rodrigo Amarante, released an album in 2008.

"I loved [the Strokes] so much, and because I believed in what we were doing so much, I would have been the fucking banjo player," he says. "I think we're capable of working out our problems. That or we're all so stubborn, it's a backhanded way of continuing: 'I'm not going to break up the band so let's go fucking make another record, you son of a bitch!'" He reaches for his pocket. "Mentos?"

I accept. Moretti taps his feet. "I think this record will determine a lot about our future."

"How would you describe the album?" I ask.

"Some type of gigolo or a prostitute or something that's easy."

I raise one eyebrow.

"I'd hope everyone has a night with this record," he grins.

Then, almost as if to prove that he is in no way joking ("False modesty is bullshit"), he suggests we go through the album, track by track, so he

can hear what I think. This sounds like a bad idea.

"You're one of the few people who's not a wife or a girlfriend or tied to the band that's heard it. You seem like an honest person and I want to know what you think."

Arm sufficiently twisted, I say I like everything. He doesn't believe me. Fine: Most of the tracks, like "Machu Picchu," "Taken for a Fool," and lead single "Under Cover of Darkness," are so instantly catchy that the couple songs that don't measure up are like iodine in your throat.

"I feel the same fucking way," he says, adding perfunctorily, "That's off the record."

"That's not how 'off the record' works," I explain, but he's already plopped on a faded brown sofa, petting Xavi and commenting on the creepiness of the dog's "penis that looks like it has a vagina at the end."

Moretti goes for the fridge and asks me if I want a beer, taking one for himself as well. While his bandmates currently have varying relationships with sobriety (Casablancas got sober five years ago), he enjoys being the only Stroke without a curfew.

"When did you wake up this morning?" I ask.

"This morning? This afternoon. I go out every night. It's something I'm trying to work through. Why do you think I'm going to see a psychiatrist?"

NIKOLAI

I AM GOING to stab Nikolai Fraiture in the heart.

Halfway through our interview, I decide Fraiture is the single most soft-spoken human I have ever met and that Kettle of Fish, a loud, bustling bar in his West Village neighborhood, was a bad venue in which to deconstruct the past five years of his life. So I ask him if he would like to get beaten at darts instead.

"I'd like to see that happen," he says as he stands up—he is so tall it takes him a while to straighten. "No one ever wants to play with me."

It's always the quiet ones. Fraiture, 32, the father of a six-year-old and a three-year-old, is competitive, but his face grows serious when I hit the bull's-eye...of the next dartboard over. He takes pity on me and teaches me how to straighten my elbow when I throw.

"A guy in Japan taught me that. I bet him a guitar and I beat him. But he was some label guy so it wasn't that bad. I made him ship it to me."

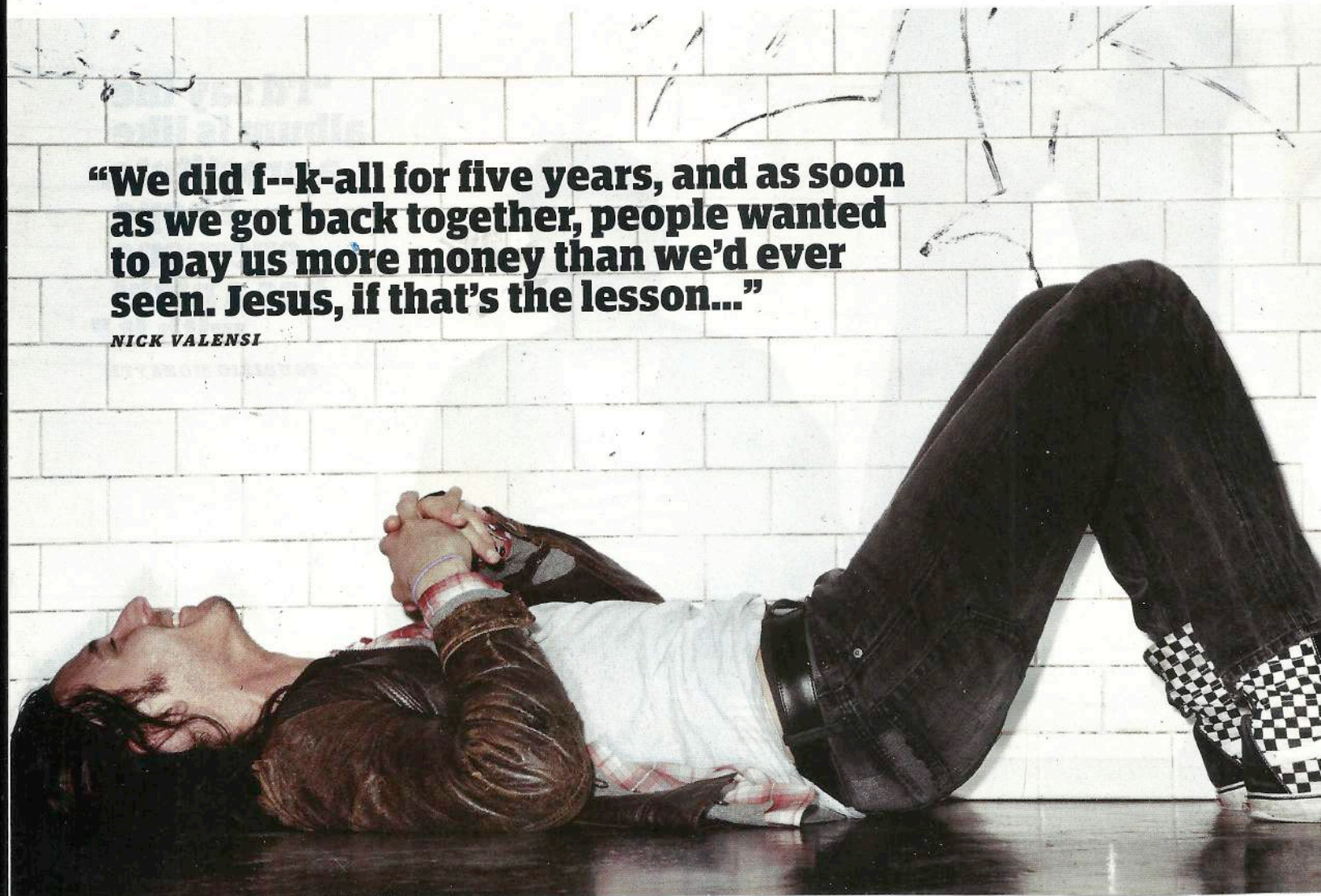
Nikolai, the Stroke of Christmas Fraiture, is really the key to the Strokes' past. He has known Casablancas the longest.

"Oh, you haven't met Julian yet?"

No, I have not. The weather has apparently waylaid Casablancas and his wife and year-old

"We did f--k-all for five years, and as soon as we got back together, people wanted to pay us more money than we'd ever seen. Jesus, if that's the lesson..."

NICK VALENSI



son in Paris, but no one can say for certain.

"He's vague and mysterious. It's hard to know what he's thinking, and I can translate the best. Maybe because we are both mumblers."

Later, Nick Valensi will tell me that when Casablancas has an idea, he is the one who can "translate that to the rest of the band because Julian doesn't speak in musical terms." I begin to wonder: Who is this human who gets away with having an army of interpreters on call? I ask Frazier why Casablancas wasn't around during the recording.

"I thought he was going to be there. He said he was." The bartender comes over and pats Frazier on the back, says he's surprised to see him here so early in the evening.

"The last time he saw me was one of those tension-filled nights," he explains to me. "I walked in here at 3:45 [A.M.] and had five beers in 15 minutes." He is laying off the booze now. "If I have one, you won't see me for the rest of the night."

Frazier offers his take on the events—and nonevents—that ultimately resulted in *Angles*. "After about two years of a break, I started to get a little scared," he says. "My album [2008's *Nickel Eye*] was a fun experiment, but it felt like something I had to do rather than something I wanted to do—I had nothing else going on. If it was me, we would have started right away, but everyone was feeling burned. And Albert had some...things...going on. A democracy is difficult, and at the end of the day, everyone listens to each other, whether they act on that advice or not."

So no one stormed out and slammed that beautiful barn door upstate?

"Okay, yes. All the time."

The Strokes are in a marriage. Who among us can pick out a movie with four other people, forget make four albums?

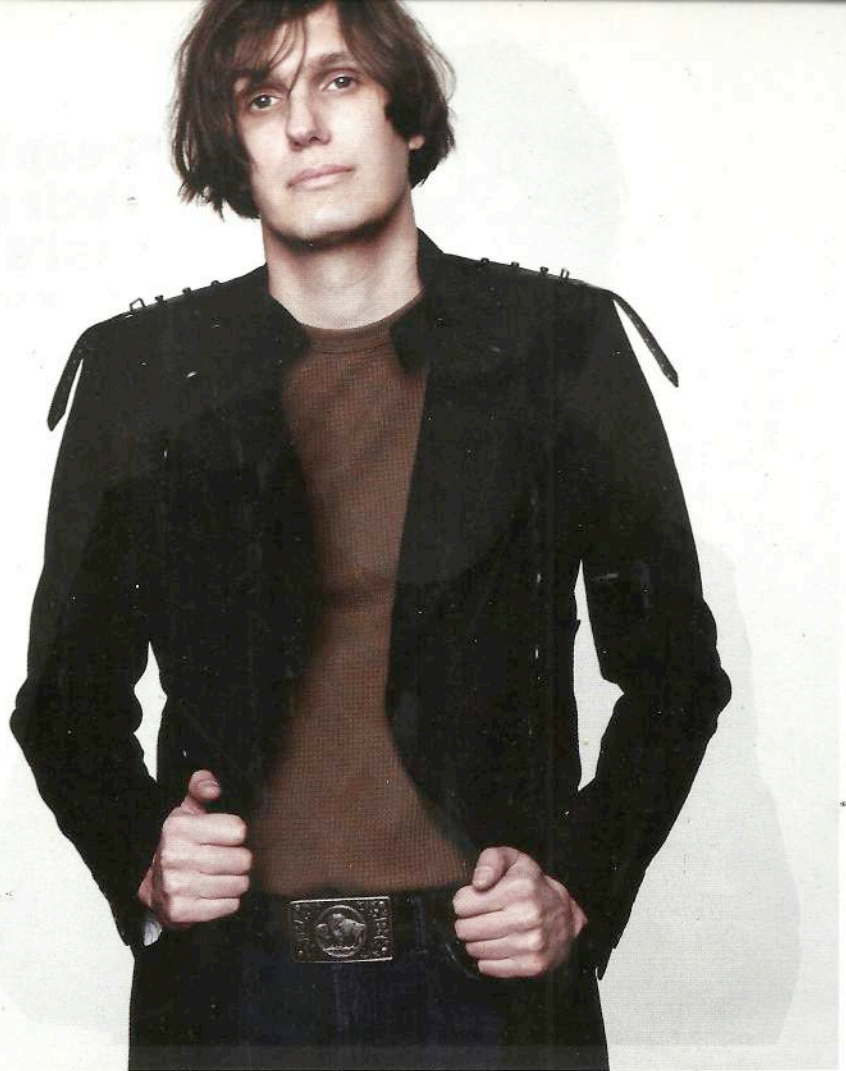
"We used to go to a lot of concerts, Julian and I," Frazier says, beaming. "Somebody actually just sent me an unbelievable video of us at a *Jane's Addiction* show in 1997. Someone with a camera randomly stopped us and was like, 'Hey, what did you think of the show?' and we said, 'We liked it.' It would be funny if we were like, 'We're gonna start a band now. This is the best night of our lives!' But it was, actually. It was one of the best nights of our lives."

And for a moment, all those resentments and fears and tensions of the past five years feel completely exaggerated.

NICK

"I FEEL LIKE I'm on a date," says Nick Valensi, handing the waitress his menu and ordering the tasting course of sushi for us both. "This is weird."

Of all the Strokes, Valensi, 30, dresses the most like a rock star. He's wearing a beaten leather jacket, vertically striped blue-and-white pants, a studded belt, and a vintage, possibly slept-in *Star Wars* T-shirt. But he's a self-



described suburban dad ("The moms on the playground look at me like, 'Who gave that homeless man two children?'").

"The other day my daughter said, 'Daddy, guess who my favorite Strokes is?' And I thought she was going to say me because, oh man, she loves me so much, and she said: 'Julian! Because he's the singer.'"

Valensi is prone to fits of confession that require breaks either verbal ("I'm saying too much, I need to compose myself") or physical (our bathroom-trip ratio is 4-to-1). The words "I think Julian was really fucking surprised his solo album didn't work" come as easily as "I'm such a food faggot." He calls himself the most neurotic and nitpicky member of the band, but he also seems the most engaging, which helps leaven his rants.

"I don't know what it is about these lazy New York bands—we're all busy getting drunk in high-end fucking lounges and eating fancy fucking food. We did absolutely fuck-all for five years, and I was afraid we'd be forgotten and all the work would be for naught—we're not the fucking Beatles. And that didn't happen. As soon as we got back together, we got offered a headlining slot at Lollapalooza and people wanted to pay us more money than we had ever seen in our lives. Jesus, if that's the lesson...well, that's the new financial model for

the Strokes: Work less, put in as little effort as you can, and you'll be rewarded. It was confusing for me to be wrong about that. I'm talking a lot now. I'm talking too much."

A bit before midnight, we take a cab to the bar at the Bowery Hotel, and he orders his first Pernod.

"Okay, I started the break," he exhales. "I was having a kid and asked for six months off, and everyone was miffed. Then we had a meeting and Albert was like, 'I want to put out a [solo] album.' I felt a little betrayed. Then I think Julian felt like everyone resented him. He's controlling but he was also coming in with the most unique ideas. But we all saw something was broken—certain people getting into drugs. There was a lot of nodding off and passing out in the studio, like, 'Jesus, you're not awake to record your part, we have to wait four hours so you can nap.' But this is Act II, Scene I now, not Act IV. It feels like a new beginning."

Valensi's phone vibrates and plays "Billie Jean."

"It's my wife," he says gleefully and talks to her briefly. When he hangs up, I ask if he has ringtones for everyone.

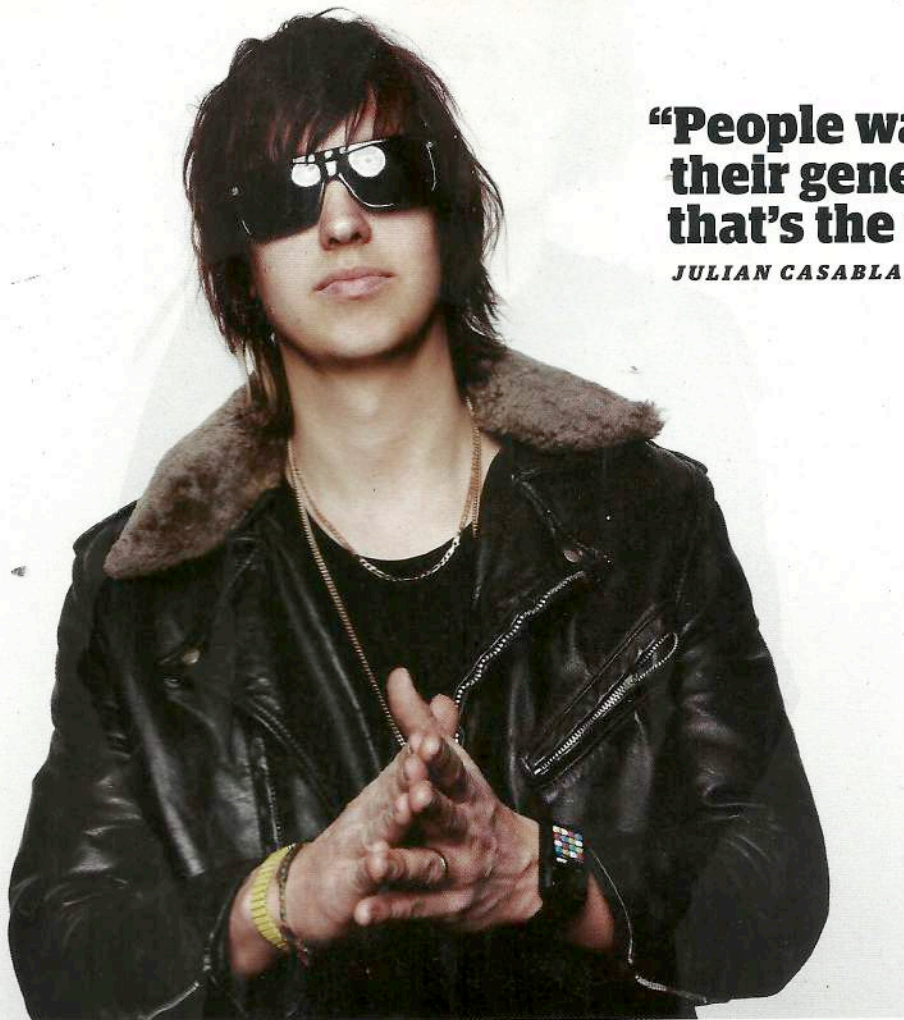
"Oh yeah. I have rings for all my friends. Fab's got his own ring. Albert's got his own ring."

And the others?

"No, but they don't call me."

“People want a rock band of their generation they can trust—that’s the vibe I’m getting.”

JULIAN CASABLANCAS



JULIAN

THE WEEKLONG GAME of “Where in the World is Julian Casablancas?” is over, and I finally have my answer: right in front of me outside a building south of Union Square, late on a Friday night, not 24 hours since he arrived, belatedly, from Paris. Casablancas, 32, smiles broadly and shakes my hand, fighting exhaustion from jet lag and a day of photo shoots. He’s oddly cagey about where we’re going as I step into an elevator with him.

“A bunch of friends work here,” he says. We sit in an office decorated with old maps and books, as Bob Marley, Uffie, and Stevie Wonder play in the background. Whose office is this again?

“Just some friends’.”

It’s pretty clear he’d rather be in bed or building his bicycle—that’s not a metaphor, that’s just what he does for fun these days. He is a man of few words but they don’t exactly come out minced. As Valensi predicted, “You won’t crack Julian.” Behold: “I was wrecked after the third album. I was hesitant about walking out of my house. I was wretchedly destroyed by all the rock clichés and pretty emotionally messed up by what I saw as a kind of destruction of the band vibe.”

Can I ask you what destroyed the band vibe?

“No.”

Okay then.

“I mean, if you’re talking about that time, that was, you know, that. I can work it so that I

can reconstruct the phrase a little better.”

I don’t think you need to reconstruct the phrase, “I’m not going to tell you.”

“We all got along this time.”

But you weren’t there.

“I did go up to Albert’s. Very briefly,” he laughs. “I had a weird experience up there. I visited. It was just one of the many minor setbacks in the whole process.”

Oh, what was the weird experience?

“It’s not worth my telling you.”

What is worth you telling me, then?

“I just want people to be happy. I’ve always wanted them to bring [songs]. Finally I guess people were comfortable with it.”

There’s a line I love on this album that goes, “We’re so lucky ‘cause we never grow up.”

“It’s just a line, not like a deep belief.”

Casablancas asks if I want any green tea. I notice for the first time that, despite its hindrances, a band with five members does provide an inherent cloaking system: Person X never went on a bender and Person Y never felt disenfranchised. Instead “people” did those things. The Strokes may be the coolest Greek chorus of all time.

“Okay,” he smiles with his face in his hand, swiveling side to side in a black office chair. “Albert, Nikolai, and Fab didn’t bring music to the band much until after their solo records—then people were less precious about having their songs mutilated. To put it bluntly. Honestly,

this is not what I envisioned. But if everyone’s happy, I’m okay to let go on a lot of things. And the stuff I don’t want to compromise on, I’ll do somewhere else. With my album [2009’s *Phrases for the Young*], I was unimpeded to do whatever I thought was cool.” I wonder if he’s pleased with *Angles* or if it’s one big compromise. He does seem to genuinely want for the happiness of his friends and bandmates. Then again, he also strikes me as the guy who slips in a “...that you’re upse” after, “I’m sorry.”

“All the success is totally bad for friendship; it’s a story as old as rock. If we all had random jobs and kept in touch, that would be tricky enough. But people want a rock band of their generation they can trust—that’s the vibe I’m getting. We’re a band that people discovered and liked the way you would a band from the ’60s. Before the Internet. But we’re still young-ish. We were friends then, but I think now—now I don’t know if we’d be friends.”

The clock says it’s 1:30 in the morning. “Do you have enough evidence to put me away?”

I ask him if he feels like he gets portrayed as an asshole.

“Yeah.”

“Do you feel like some of it is fair?”

He pauses, for even longer than usual. Saint Etienne’s cover of Neil Young’s “Only Love Can Break Your Heart” comes on.

“I think almost everything I did on the solo thing felt so positive and almost everything I’ve ever done with the Strokes feels so negative and I just don’t know why.”

A WEEK HAS passed since I was at Hammond’s house. By now, thanks to the magic of photo-shoot obligations, all five Strokes have been in the same room together for the first time in a long time.

“Amazing,” Hammond tells me. “One of my favorite days. Now we get to just enjoy being a successful band, or at least try. This stuff takes time.”

At the entrance to his studio upstate sat a large rusted A that looked like it fell off a vintage marquee. There were holes in it for light bulbs, the kind that might surround a dressing-room mirror.

“Does that thing still work?” I had asked him.

“Nah,” he said, stomping snow off his boots. “It used to.”

Now, as I scroll through the transcript, I catch myself wanting him to have said, “It used to light up but it hasn’t in so long and this makes me sad.” Or: “It used to show us the way. Now it’s just dark out here.” Alas, “It used to” is all I have. Simple but accurate. Neither hopeful nor rueful. Perfect because it’s the truth, and if you listen for it, it will be there, clear as a bell. ☺