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# Icky Thump

By **ROBERT CHRISTGAU** 

So what is it about Jack White? Right, he's very talented. Major guitarist, albeit overrated by those seeking a young titan to prove the guitar retains its glamour. Voice avid and emotional enough, words catchy sometimes and — crucially — tunes catchy often. Plus the color-coded packaging and knack for self-mythification. Still, what do the **White Stripes** have to say? What do they stand for? Why do simple pop fans care about minimal Jack and his mythical sister, Meg?

Part of the answer is that not so many simple pop fans do. The White Stripes are justly

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to go Top Forty on *Billboard*'s Hot 100 — Top Twenty-Six, to be precise. Lyrically, the song is a change. *Elephant*'s “Seven Nation Army” and *Get Behind Me Satan*'s “Blue Orchid” defy fame and a temptress with typical pop imprecision. “Icky Thump” has a topic: immigration! The song isn't easy to parse, but for once that's a plus — it's genuinely complex, condensing hard moral conundrums into a narrative whose comic side is captured by the south-of-the-border video and whose intrusive guitar leaves conflict hanging rather than providing comfortable resolution.

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The other part of the answer, sad to say, is that this cultural breakthrough is almost certainly an accident. That's because Jack White is less a songwriter than a sonic architect. Compared even with Lil Jon or Avril Lavigne, what his hits have in common isn't anything he stands for. It's instantly enticing musical constructions. On these the new album comes up slightly short. One telltale sign is a standout cover: “Conquest,” an anti-sexist jump blues popularized by Patti Page in the Fifties and reconceived here as flamenco mariachi, with Jack laying on the vibrato and melisma and then flashing his



Two other top tracks show off Jack's songwriting per se: a broadly applicable philosophical closer called "Effect and Cause," and a cute Jack-and-Meg dialogue that recalls the band's earliest blues, "Rag and Bone," where the pair wander "Rich house/Doghouse/Outhouse/Old folks' house/House for unwed mothers. . . . Looking for Technics turntables to gramophones." Proudly, they build their music — and "make some money," yeah! — from the "Christmas trees" and "toilet seats" others discard. That's always been Jack's MO, and album to album — one every two years since *White Blood Cells* in 2001 — he's hauled new detritus into his theoretical garage. This time it's bagpipes, their wild-man-of-the-north mysticism balancing off the hit's south-of-the-border macho. But you can be sure we'll never find out how "Prickly Thorn, but Sweetly Worn"/ "St. Andrew (This Battle Is in the Air)" will fare on the Hot 100. The innocence lost of "Little Cream Soda," an old plaint for Jack by now, stands a better chance — as does "Bone Broke," about Jack's supposed money woes, and, right after "Icky Thump," the riff monster "You Don't Know What Love Is (You Just Do As You're Told)."

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The ostensible content of "You Don't Know What Love Is" is also anti-sexist — get-up-stand-up counsel to a woman not his wife. But in essence it's a monster riff — bigger and slower than, for instance, "Blue Orchid." And that's the scoop on the architecture



amp forgotten by history. Although the new constructions don't entice as consistently as they should, their noise stays with you. And what that noise stands for is itself. Once the White Stripes and their fashion-plate brethren the Strokes were hailed for reviving punk & roll basics. But they were cold bastards, emotional vocals and all — formalists through and through. Like his sometime heroes Led Zeppelin, Jack White builds monuments. They're suitable for awestruck visits. But they're no place to settle down.

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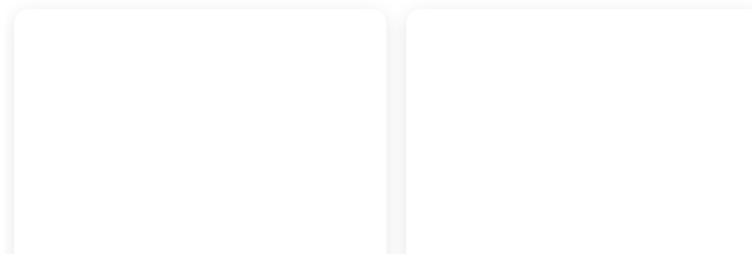
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