

## **Tragedy or Joy? This new wave of music promises both.**

by Addison Schmidt

I saw Phoebe Bridgers live in concert at the Governors Ball Music Festival in Randall's Island, New York at the very end of the summer of 2021. Bridgers, while popular, had not quite reached the level of fame that she has today. Her stage was timed around the same slot as Megan Thee Stallion and Aminé, and I figured, naively, that the crowd would be relatively thin. I was wrong — bodies filled the crowd, packing my friends and I hundreds deep, thronging towards the front of the stage. Teenage girls and confused parents and reluctant boyfriends pressed into each other as the countdown to Bridgers' appearance began.

I glanced to my right: a girl my age, crouched down on her heels, a pair of wired headphones in her ears as she pressed play on "Motion Sickness," one of Bridgers' most popular songs. She was doing the kind of crying that most people would reserve for a private moment: full, heaving sobs as she pressed her hands over the earbuds. The second Bridgers appeared on stage, she sprang to her feet, ripped her earbuds out and began to sob-scream along to the song.

I glanced to my left: three bewildered twenty-something men looking around at the crowd, clutching their beer cans like lifelines to the practical world. One of them looked at the girl, then at the stage, then at me, before finally turning to his friend and yelling over the crowd: "Dude, why the fuck is everyone crying?" It was only then that I realized I had tears in my eyes too.

Bridgers concluded her first song and stepped up to the mic exclaiming, "This one is for anyone who's ever had to call Child Protective Services on their parents!" We all — the girl, the three boys, my friends, myself — shared a collective glance and screamed back.

This is not to rag on my parents who I, quite fortunately, never did have to call CPS on nor to simply relive the memory of the concert, but to call upon a new phenomenon that has enveloped a new generation of musicians: the use of terror within music as a means of connection. Donning skeletal costumes and her trademark haunting voice, Bridgers brought the crowd through a frightening range of emotional introspection, employing fear and grief to both lower and

heighten the crowd. The lyrics of her songs, as well as their toned-down melodies, offered a paradoxical existence to the experience that was her show. We were reveling in her tragedy all at her request.

Bridgers is one of many in this newly popular wave of musicians, all of whom seem to call upon a specific subset of their lives for divine inspiration: personal tragedy. So many artists lay down their souls for the sake of a heart-wrenching track including boygenius in her collaboration with fellow alternative artists Julien Baker and Lucy Dacus. They bare their souls to the listener but also invite the listener to do the same, offering lyrics rich with metaphors and devastating introspection. Artists such as Mitski and Elliot Smith — Bridgers' [inspiration](#) behind the title track of *Punisher* — employ similar tactics within their music. No emotion is off limits. No amount of vulnerability is too much. No fear is left untouched.

“I’m like the black hole where people can dump all their shit, whether it’s a need for love, or it’s hatred and anger,” [Mitski](#) said in an interview with *the Guardian* in Feb. 2022. This metaphor can be explored further — the “black holes” of these artists have become more than dumping grounds for surface-level emotions, tears over an ex-fling or other petty rejections. Their complexities delve deeper as artists like Mitski and Bridgers have become otherworldly beings, unintentional deities guiding a growing number of fans through one of life’s most difficult processes: the tragedy of simply existing.

This tactic is what sets these artists apart from other musicians within the pop-alternative genre. There is a twisted kind of comfort in listening to Dacus’ wail in “Night Shift,” or Bridgers’ scream in the final minute of “I Know the End,” the apocalyptic finale of *Punisher*. One can interpret her song in a physical way, as an evaluation of both the fantasy of *the Wizard of Oz*, and the grueling challenge of getting older. But it’s almost more enjoyable to allow these songs to envelop you in another way — to hear their unbridled cries and their grief and interpret them as uninhibited catharsis. To use them as a shield to see you through whatever emotional ill is plaguing you.

It is easy to write these artists off for what they present at the surface level — to market Bridgers’ “I Know the End” as discomfoting, Mitski’s “I Bet on Losing Dogs” as bleak. The first time I played my mother “Miss Misery,” by Elliot Smith, she turned it off with an unpleasant frown. There was already enough misery in the world and she didn’t need to listen to someone singing about it. And maybe there is a point to that perspective. There’s no problem with equating music to a facilitation of comfort, a means of escape from the very subjects musicians such as Bridgers explore.

But what if these artists have stumbled upon a method of dealing with the grief of their lives in a way that actually *contradicts* many popular opinions held about their music? Consider this instead: through the songs of artists like boygenius and Smith, fans can cope with sadness by following a route that goes through its processes, not over or around. This conformation of terror is a challenge, to ourselves and to the outside forces that threaten to terrify us into submission.

It’s far from relaxing, I can’t say that listening to “Funeral” feels like a warm blanket, but these songs discomfort the reader in a way that renders the terrifying uniquely beautiful. In this way, the listener is able to accept their heartache in the way that the artist has.

Grief takes on a melody and suddenly, the unavoidable feels far more acceptable. If you listen hard enough, their tragedy might just allow yours to feel harmonic too.