

After a half-decade of silence, Sleep Study wake up on 'Miss America'

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Sleep Study

The ruling class are predators. They do not sleep without the taste of blood.



But Ryan Plewacki is no lamb. You might mistake the wispy Beatles aficionado for a shorn Jeff Tweedy if not for the Lightning Skull stitched onto the back of his denim jacket. But make no mistake: The Sleep Study frontman is indeed a revolutionary. His revolution is mercy.



“As a society, it’s our job to speak up, in whatever way possible,” Plewacki says with gentle determination. “I don’t have much of a bullhorn, but the biggest one I have is Sleep Study.”



In 2012, Plewacki was one of the Twin Cities’ most recognizable musicians. The former Ryan Paul and the Ardent singer had reinvented himself as the harmonic shaman afront Sleep Study, a throwback rock band that Paste Magazine quickly recognized as one of the “12 Minnesota Bands You Should Listen to Now” that year. But Plewacki ended up squandering that momentum and grinding the band into the asphalt.

In 2014, Sleep Study ran loops around the country in support of their freshman record, *Nothing Can Destroy*. They repeated weekends of Des Moines, Chicago, and Milwaukee until Plewacki's bandmates were sick of each other. By the end, they'd proven their LP title painfully incorrect. Plewacki dropped his bandmates off on a cold midnight and decided to give everyone a break. That break lasted five years.

"Everybody was burning out except for me," Plewacki says. "It got to a point where it was like, 'This isn't fun anymore.' And then I stopped taking gigs from our booking agent. I figured I was probably doing the right thing for us."

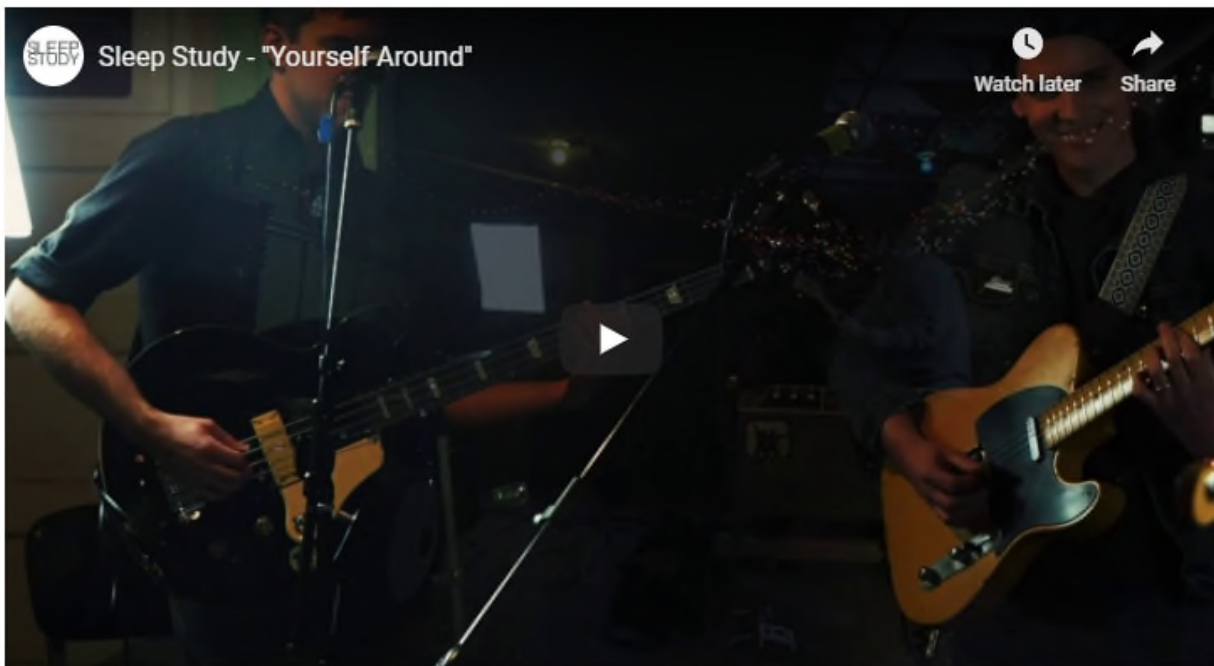
In February, the band re-emerged with a new lineup. Plewacki was joined by fellow songwriter and bassist Justin Hartke, who did some touring on *Nothing Can Destroy*, along with drummer Michael Gunvalson, for the unanticipated follow-up record *Miss America*. Spurred by Plewacki's outrage at the 2016 presidential election, the LP captures a new mood for Sleep Study: pissed-off and bleary, in search of an escape. It's part catharsis and part diversion—a protest record for the politically exhausted.

"My wife is Korean, and I got to experience the whole election cycle with her," Plewacki says. "I saw firsthand how terrified she was. And how terrified she stayed for the first year. It was unlike anything I could've experienced just myself. It was a big deal for my family. It still is."

Miss America borrows its theme from the Guess Who's oft-misinterpreted antiwar anthem "American Woman"; Plewacki's goal was to create something equally ambiguous. Something that Lenny Kravitz could turn into a radio hit without realizing the rebellious banner he was raising.

Other than the Guess Who's antiheroine, Plewacki drew inspiration from the Statue of Liberty and Anne Coulter to flesh out this idea of the multi-faceted, often deceitful modern American identity. "Ms. America" came to him soon after the final counts were in. The rest cascaded from there.

"Come to my place and baby tell me lies," Plewacki sings on that song. "Wave your guns in the air and show me you're right."



Miss America does not obscure its political leanings, but it doesn't bare its teeth in the same way as its opposition. Opener "Yourself Around" captures the fearful disorientation that comes after your NPR liberal bubble is popped. On "Red Light Prayer," Plewacki grasps for a reason to keep singing in the face of what could only be the apocalypse. On "Counting Our Favors," he begs his wife to not follow through on her promise and flee the country in fear.

"Part of the record is me reckoning with a side of the country I didn't believe existed," he says. "My wife immediately wanted to leave the country. A lot of people said, 'I'm gonna go to Canada,' whatever. She was really working on it. The thing that I kept telling her over and over again was, 'We can go, or we can fight.'"

Miss America finds its greatest weapon in absurdity. Plopped in the middle of the record like a sunflower in the barrel of a riot gun, "Party in Here" acts as the record's mercifully despondent heart. Obtuse and playful, it's something Ronald Reagan might have mistaken for a good campaign song. Listen after three Budweisers, and you'll be wondering how such a good-timing patriotic anthem got snuck into a record skewering Republicans for their inhumanity.

Because we need to be distracted—because we cannot process the earthly terror of what happens every day in D.C.—Plewacki gives us the reverb-soaked escape we need. Beneath the surface, a horrible barb of reality waits to sink into your neck, but enjoy these druggy guitars and Dead-like arrangements before the venom seizes your vital functions and you're left lying, another husk of what used to be a voter.

"It's all dysfunctional," Plewacki says, nearly allowing a laugh. "I'm currently in a state right now where I don't even understand what's going on."

Miss America is already four months old, and Plewacki plans on keeping Sleep Study going as long as the unrest roils inside him. There will even be a brief tour, though Plewacki has learned to treat himself more mercifully on the road. No more sleeping on floors; no more endless loops. When you're being stalked by hungry predators, you don't need another excuse to be exhausted.

"I don't think there is a call to action anywhere on the record, it's just an acknowledgement," Plewacki says. "An acknowledgement that it's hard and disgusting and that we're angry and sad, beat up and depressed."

Sleep Study

With: Van Stee

Where: Bryant-Lake Bowl

When: 10 p.m. Fri. May 24

Tickets: \$8; more info [here](#)