

[Transcript] The Daily / The Sunday Read: 'Is Måneskin the Last Rock Band?'

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Cantano e maniskin.

I'm Dan Brooks and I'm a contributor to the New York Times magazine.

This week's Sunday Reads is a story I wrote for the magazine about maniskin.

They're a band of four very good-looking Italians in their early 20s who play throwback hard rock music.

They sound like a lot of bands from the post-emo era.

It's this super-competent execution of familiar elements and structures that evoke 2000s rock with what I call an unswung boogie rhythm.

So a boogie rhythm is eighth notes but swung.

And bands like Franz Ferdinand, The Strokes, they often use boogie rhythms but not swung, played in clean time.

Maniskin's tracks like I Wanna Be Your Slave

and the Eurovision winning Ziti e Buoni

are hugely popular in continental Europe.

They're the biggest international music stars from Italy

since Luciano Pavarotti and they got there by busking on the streets as teenagers and then going on to win a series of talent shows.

Last month, they kicked off a big multi-venue tour of the United States with a sold-out show at Madison Square Garden.

And what's interesting about this band is that their core fan base is not closely connected to the American critical establishment at all.

In fact, critics kind of hate Maniskin.

I first heard of Maniskin through a scathing review of their most recent album, Rush, on Pitchfork.

The article went viral after giving the record a score of 2.0 out of 10

and holding up the band as an example of many generally bad trends in music.

The use of multi-band compression, the predictable song structures, these sometimes actively stupid lyrics.

So when I looked them up, I was astonished to see how popular they are.

They currently claim 8 billion streams across various platforms.

As a Gen Xer who grew up in an indie rock versus mainstream rock dichotomy,

I was sort of like, well, this is mainstream rock.

But then I realized there's not really any such thing as mainstream rock anymore.

The last number one rock single was Nickelback's How You Remind Me in 2001,

which makes Gen Z the first generation in about 70 years

that has not experienced rock and roll as a form of pop music.

Instead, Maniskin is making pop music that takes the form of rock.

And that's why I was so interested in writing about them.

So I flew out to Rome during a heat wave,

and I spent many hours with Maniskin and their impressively large management team.

I saw their sold out shows at the Stadio Olimpico in Rome

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and the Stadio Giuseppe Meazza in Milan.

On stage, they put on these wildly theatrical, carefully engineered performances filled with pyro and erratic spotlights,

all of it emphasizing the return of the big stadium rock show.

One of the values of that performance is to call attention to the artificial or perform nature of it all.

Maniskin wants you to remember that you're watching a show.

And it's very much a zero irony presentation.

So here's my article.

Is Maniskin the Last Rock Band?

Read by James Patrick Cronin.

The American visitor to Rome arrives with certain preconceptions that feel like stereotypes but turn out to be basically accurate.

There really are mopeds flying around everywhere, and traffic seems governed by the principle that anyone can be replaced.

Breakfast is coffee and cigarettes.

Despite these orthopedic and nutritional hazards,

everyone is better looking, not literally everyone of course,

but statistically, as if whatever selective forces that emerge from urban density have had an extra hundred generations or so to work.

And they really do talk like that,

an emphatic mix of vowels, gestures, and car horns known as Italian.

To be scolded in this language by a driver who wants to park in the crosswalk is to realize that some popular ideas are actually true.

Also, it is hot.

The triumphant return to Rome of Maniskin,

arguably the only rock stars of their generation,

and almost certainly the biggest Italian rock band of all time, coincided with a heat wave across Southern Europe.

On that Tuesday in July, the temperature hit 107 degrees.

The Tiber looked thick, rippled in places and still in others, as if it were reducing.

By Thursday morning, the band's vast management team was officially concerned that the night's sold-out performance at the Stadio Olimpico would be delayed.

When Monoskin finally took the stage around 9.30 pm, it was still well into the 90s,

which was too bad because there would be pyro.

There was no opening act,

possibly because no rock band operating at this level is within 10 years of Monoskin's age.

The guitarist, Thomas Raji, played the riff to Don't Want to Sleep.

The lights came up and 60,000 Italians screamed.

Damiano Davide, the band's singer and, at age 24, its oldest member,

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charged out in black flared trousers and a mesh top
that bisected his torso diagonally.
His heavy brow and hyper-symmetrical features
making him look like some futuristic nomad
who hunted the fishnet mammoth.
Victoria De Angelis, the bassist,
wore a mini dress made from strips of leather
or possibly bungee cords.
Raji wore non-porous pants and a black button down
he quickly discarded,
while Etten Torchio drummed in a vest
with no shirt underneath his hair flying.
For the next several minutes of alternately disciplined
and frenzied noise,
they sounded as if Motley Crue had been cryogenically frozen
then revived in 2010 with Rob Thomas on vocals.
That hypothetical will appeal to some while repelling others
and which category you fall into is,
with all due respect, not my business here.
Rolling Stone, for its part,
said that Monoskin only managed to confirm
how hard rock and roll has to work these days to be noticed
and a viral pitchfork review called their most recent album
absolutely terrible at every conceivable level.
But this kind of thumbs up, thumbs down criticism
is pretty much vestigial now that music is free.
If you want to know whether you like Monoskin,
the name is Danish,
you can fire up the internet
and add to the more than 9 billion streams
Sony Music claims the band has accumulated
across Spotify, YouTube, etc.
As for whether Monoskin is good,
the Gustivus known as Disputatum,
as previous Italians once said,
in matters of taste, there can be no arguments.
You should know, though,
that even though their music has been heard
most often through phone and laptop speakers,
Monoskin sounds better on a soccer field.
That is what tens of thousands of fans
came to the Stadio Olimpico
on an eyelid-scorching Thursday to experience,
the culturally, if not personally,

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familiar commodity of a stadium rock show
delivered by the unprecedented phenomenon
of a stadium-level Italian rock band.
The pyro, 20-foot jets of swivel articulated flame
that you could feel all the way up in the mezzanine,
kicked in on gasoline,
a song Monoskin wrote to protest
Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine.
From a thrust platform in the center of the field,
Davide poured his full emotive powers into the pre-chorus.
Standing alone on that hill,
using your fuel to kill,
we won't take it standing still,
watch us dance.
The effect these words will have
on President Putin is unknown.
They capture something, though,
about rock and roll,
which has established certain conventions
over the last seven decades.
One of those conventions is an atmosphere of rebellion.
It doesn't have to be real,
you probably don't even want it to be,
but neither can it seem too contrived,
because the defining constraint of rock as a genre
is that you have to feel it.
The successful rock song creates in listeners
the sensation of defying consensus,
even if they are right in step with it.
The need to feel the rock
may explain the documented problems of fans' taste
becoming frozen in whatever era was happening
when they were between the ages of 15 and 25.
Anyone who at last, after Spotify, however,
did not grow up with rock as an organically developing form
and is likely to have experienced
the whole catalog simultaneously,
listening to Led Zeppelin at the same time
they listened to Pixies and Franz Ferdinand.
I.e., as a genre rather than as particular artists,
the way my generation, I'm 46,
experienced jazz.
The members of Monoskin belong to this post-Spotify cohort.
As the youngest and most prominent custodians

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of the rock tradition,
their job is to sell new, guitar-driven songs
of 100 to 150 beats per minute
to a larger and larger audience,
many of whom are young people
who primarily think of such music as a historical artifact.
Starting this month,
Måneskin will take this business
on a multi-venue tour of the United States,
a market where they are considerably less known,
whose first stop is Madison Square Garden.
I think the genre thing is like,
Torquillo said to me backstage in Rome,
making a gesture that conveyed translingual complexity.
We can do a metaphor.
If you eat fish, meat, and peanuts every day,
like for years,
and then you discover potatoes one day,
you'll be like, wow, potatoes, I like potatoes.
Potatoes are great.
But potatoes have been there the whole time.
Rock was the potato in this metaphor.
And he seemed to be saying that even though many people
were just now discovering that they liked it,
it had actually been around for a long time.
It was a revealing analogy.
The implication was that rock,
like the potato, is here to stay.
But what if rock is,
like the potato in our age of abundance,
comparatively bland and no longer anyone's favorite?
This episode is brought to you by the House of Chanel.
The Chanel Connect podcast is back for a brand new season.
Margaret Qualley and Savannah Leif
are two audacious talents shaking up the film industry.
The multi-hyphenate duo sit down in New York
for a conversation about their journeys so far.
I'd so much rather try and fail than not and feel like I could have.
I was going to ask you a really tough question.
Do it.
That's the one I felt like I failed.
Yeah.
There's so many dimes.
There's so many different types of dimes.

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Hello, everybody.

I'm Margaret Quali.

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More Leb circulation.

More Leb unpacked.

More Leb say[].

More Leb show.

More Leb talk.

My podcast's name is

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for getting busy in a Buffalo Wild Wings bathroom, enroute to a score of 2.0 out of 10.

While the members of Monoskin seemed to take this review philosophically,

their press liaisons were concerned that I was coming to Italy to have a similar type of fun.

Here I should disclose that Larson edited an essay I wrote for Pitchfork about the

Talking Heads album *Remain in Light*, score 10.0, and that I think of myself as his friend.

Possibly because of these biases, I read his review as reflecting his deeply held and among

rock fans widely shared need to feel the music, something that the many pop commercial elements

of Rush, e.g. familiar song structures, lyrics that seem to have emerged from a collaboration

between Google Translate and Nikki Six, compulsive use of multiband compression,

left him unable to do. This perspective reflects the post-90s rock consensus, PNRK,

that anything that sounds too much like a mass market product is no good.

The PNRK is premised on the idea that rock is not just a structure of song,

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but also a structure of relationship between the band and society. From rock's earliest days as black music, the real or perceived opposition between rocker and society has been central to its appeal. This adversarial relationship animated the youth and counterculture eras of the 60s, and then, when the economic dominance of mass market rock made it impossible to believe in, provoked the revitalizing backlash of punk. Even major labels felt obliged to play into this paradoxical world view, e.g. that period after Nirvana when the most popular genre of music was called alternative. Monoskin, however, are defined by their isolation from the PNRC. They play rock music, but operate according to the logic of pop.

In Milan, where Monoskin would finish their Italian mini tour, I had lunch with the band, as well as two of their managers, Marica Casalinovo and Fabrizio Ferraguzzo.

Casalinovo had been an executive producer working on the X-Factor, and Ferraguzzo was its musical director. Around the time that Monoskin broke through, Casalinovo and Ferraguzzo left the show and began working with the stars it had made. We were at the in-house restaurant of Moisa, the combination recording studio, soundstage, rehearsal space, offices, party venue, and creative playground that Ferraguzzo opened two months earlier. After clarifying that he was in no way criticizing major record labels and the many vendors they engaged to record, promote, and distribute albums, he laid out his vision for Moisa, a place where all those functions were performed by a single corporate entity, basically describing the concept of vertical integration.

Ferraguzzo oversaw the recording of Rush, along with a group of producers that included Max Martin,

the Swedish hitmaker best known for his work with Backstreet Boys and Britney Spears.

At Moisa, Ferraguzzo played for me, Monoskin's then unreleased new single, Honey Are You Coming, which features many of the band's signature moves, guitar and bass playing the same melodic phrases at the same time, unswung boogie type rhythm of the post-strokes style,

but also has Davide singing in a higher register than usual.

I listened to it first on studio monitors and then through the speaker of Ferraguzzo's phone, and it sounded clean and well produced both times, as if a team of industry veterans with unlimited access to espresso had come together to perfect it. The sheer number of older and more experienced professionals involved in Monoskin introduces a tension between the rock conventions that characterize their songwriting and the fundamentally pop circumstances under which those songs are produced. They are four friends in a band, but that band is inside an enormous machine. From their perspective though, the machine is good. There's hundreds of people working and talking about you and giving opinions, the Angelus said at lunch, so if you start to get in this loop of wanting to know and control and being anxious about it, it really ruins everything. Here lies the conflict between what the PNRC wants from a band, resistance to outside influences, contempt for commerce, authenticity as measured in doing everything themselves, and what any sane 23 year old would want, which is to have someone with an MBA make all the decisions so she can concentrate on playing bass. The other way Monoskin is isolated from the PNRC

is geographic. Over the course of lunch, it became clear that they had encyclopedic knowledge of certain eras in American rock history, but were only dimly aware of others. Raji, for instance, loves Motley Crue and has an album by album command of the Los Angeles hair metal band Skid

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Row,

which he and his bandmates seemed to understand were supposed to be guilty pleasures. But none of them had ever heard of Fugazi, the post hardcore band whose hatred of major labels, refusal to sell merchandise and commitment to keeping ticket prices as low as possible, set the standard for a generation of American rock snobs. In general, Monoskin's timeline of influences seems to break off around 1990, when the rock most respected by anglophone critics was produced by independent labels that did not have strong overseas distribution. It picks up again with Franz Ferdinand and the emo era of mainstream pop rock. This retrospect leaves them unaware of

the indie punk DIY period that was probably most important in forming the PNRC.

The question is whether that consensus still matters. While snobs like Larson and me are overrepresented in journalism, we never constituted a majority of rock fans. That's the whole point of being a snob. And snobbery is obsolete anyway. Digital distribution ended the correlation between how obscure your favorite band was and how much effort you put into listening to them.

The longevity of rock and roll as a genre, meanwhile, has solidified a core audience that is now between the ages of 40 and 80, rendering the fan versus society dimension of the PNRC impossible to believe. And the economics of the industry, in which streaming has reduced the profit margin on recorded music and the closure of small venues has made stadiums and big auditoriums the

only reliable way to make money on tour have decimated the indie model. All these forces have converged to make rock for the first time in its history, merely a way of writing songs instead of a way of life. Yet rock as a cluster of signifiers retains its power around the world. In the same way everyone knows what a castle is and what it signifies, even though actual castles are no longer a meaningful force in our lives, rock remains a shared language of cultural expression, even though it is no longer determining our friendships, turning children against their parents, yelling truth at power, etc. Also like a castle, a lot of people will pay good money to see a preserved historical example of rock or even a convincing replica of it, especially in Europe.

In Milan, the temperature had dropped 20 degrees and Mona skins show at Stadio Giuseppe Meazza,

commonly known as San Siro, the largest stadium in Italy, sold out that night at 60,000, was threatened by thunderstorms instead of record breaking heat. Fans remained undaunted, many camped in the parking lot the night before in order to be among the first to enter the stadium. One of them was Tamara, an American who reported her age as 60 and a half and said she had skipped a reservation to see Da Vinci's Last Supper in order to stay in line.

When you get to knocking on the door, you kind of want to do what you want, she said.

The threat of rain was made good at pretty much the exact moment the show began. The sea of black

t-shirts on the pitch became a field of multicolored ponchos and raindrops were bouncing visibly off the surface of the stage. Davide lost his footing near the end of I Want to Be Your Slave, briefly rolling to his back, while De Angelis, who is very good at making lips parted in ecstasy type rock faces, played with her eyes turned upward to the flashing sky, like a martyr.

The rain stopped in time for Cool Kids, a punk-inspired song in which Davide affects a cockney accent to sing about the vexed cultural position of rock and roll. Cool Kids, they do not like rock, they only listen to trap and pop. These are probably the monoskin lyrics most quoted

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by music journalists, although they should probably be taken with a grain of salt, considering that the song also contains lyrics like, I like doing things I love, yeah, and Cool Kids, they do not vomit. Cool Kids was the last song before the encore, and each night a few dozen good-looking 20-somethings were released onto the stage to dance, and then, as the band walked off, to make we're not worthy bows around Raji's abandoned guitar. The whole thing looked at least semi-choreographed, but management assured me that the Cool Kids were not professional dancers, just enthusiastic fans who had been asked if they wanted to be part of the show.

I kept trying to meet the person in charge of wrangling these Cool Kids, and there kept being new reasons that was not possible. The regular Kids, on the other hand, were available and friendly throughout. In Rome, Dorca and Sarah, two young members of a monoskin fan club, saw my notebook and shot right over to tell me they loved the band because, as Sarah put it, they allow you to be yourself. When asked whether they felt their culture was conservative in ways that prevented them from being themselves, Dorca, who was 21 and wearing eyeglasses that looked like part of her daily wardrobe and a mesh top that didn't, said, maybe it turns out that you can be yourself, but you don't know that at first. You feel like you can. Here lies the element of rock that functions independently from the economics of the industry, or the shifting preferences of critics, the part that is maybe independent from time itself.

The continually renewed experience of adolescence, of hearing, and therefore feeling it all for the first time. But how disorienting must those feelings be when they have been fully monetized, fully sanctioned, when the response to your demand to rock and roll all night and party every day is great, exactly. Thank you.

In a culture where defying consensus is the dominant value, anything is possible except rebellion. It must be strange in this post-everything century to finally become yourself and discover that no one has any problem with that.