

Twenty-One Pilots: An Ode to Staying Awake

The word “peace” on its own almost implicitly brings to mind a soothing hum, like that created by the soft strumming of a ukelele or a series of clever chords played gently on a grand piano. While both of these forms of music feature prominently in the *Twenty-One Pilots* songs that represent my safe space, this simplistic characterization of peace cannot accommodate the soulful screaming or intense drumming that also defines the duo’s music. A broader, more inclusive definition of peace is needed for that.

Peace is often reduced to an antonym of war or, perhaps more appropriately, external conflict at large. Although minimizing or exterminating the need for combat is certainly a step towards achieving peace, it fails to address the most common seed of strife, one that touches every one of us every day of our lives: our own psyches. While billions of us could go through life without once touching a weapon or experiencing battle firsthand, who among us hasn’t had a moment of doubt about our self-worth or questioned what It all means, if It means anything at all? Who among us has never experienced loneliness, or regret, or a wish to return to some simpler time when we had it all figured out (or at least thought we did)? And, while not everyone reaches this point, many question whether It is worth it at all and try to escape their suffering through various methods, some more detrimental and permanent than others. Pursuing peace doesn’t mean shoving these very human questions and emotions back into the Pandora’s box from whence they sprung; instead, it means going through life with your eyes and ears wide open to find moments that answer and justify them and make going on worth it. It means facing the contents of the box head-on while still keeping the flame of hope cradled within it alive.

For me, other members of the “Skeleton Clique” (the nickname for *Twenty One Pilots* fans), and even band members Tyler and Josh, the band’s symbolism-laden songs and poetic lyrics represent powerful tools to accomplish this, or “stay awake,” as they put it, independent of the intrinsic beauty of the beats, rhythms, and melodies they use. Although their albums differ so completely in the instruments, musical techniques, moods, tones, and genres they encompass that even their creators have difficulty describing what it is they create, the common thread throughout is a focus on a few fundamental themes that can be interpreted slightly differently during each listen. Doubt, insecurity, and vulnerability; love, friendship, and faith (in all senses of the words); creation and destruction; and the repeating cycles of progress and regression that mark all of our endeavors as human feature heavily both in the words and the common storyline that underlies every song the band has written since the *Blurryface* album in 2015. For the few, the proud, and the emotional who can’t help grappling with these issues, *Twenty One Pilots’* music serves as a sign to continue on their quest for meaning, for there are thousands of others searching alongside them, past and present. Perhaps one day, this pursuit of peace in an internal sense may even bring external tranquility as well, by showcasing our deeper similarities and allowing us to reevaluate our priorities in a way that brings us all together.

Of course, the sound of peace is something that shifts constantly over the course of our lives and varies wildly from person to person. I can’t claim that it will be *TOP* music forever or for everyone, or even that those statements will apply to my future self. I know that, after spending the next month binge-watching the music videos from the new *Clancy* album, *Navigating* may supersede *Forest* as my ringtone; that a year from now, *My Chemical Romance* or some band I haven’t even discovered yet may take *Twenty One Pilots’* place on the never-ending soundtrack looping in my brain; and that a decade from now, nature, or silence, or

the voice of a loved one, or some utterly new form of expression may make music fall to the wayside as my “jumpsuit” (a symbol and source of safety and comfort in *Twenty One Pilots* lore). That’s alright. In fact, it’s more than alright: evolving over time is part of being human. As long as we continue pursuing peace through sound and sight and all other means, as long as we “stay awake” and keep questioning and don’t let life pass us by, we’re human, and that’s all that matters.