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“THE SHARPEST LIVES”: HOW PHILOSOPHICAL IDEAS AND ALTERNATIVE MUSIC CAN CHANGE THE WORLD

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Abstract: In this article I argue that alternative music can change the world when it migrates from the realm of music to that of ideas. I take the example of My Chemical Romance, and I break down the claim that it changed the world of their fans firstly through a “change of language”, by using the structuralist tool of intertextuality, and secondly through a “change of hearts”, by building on the cathartic usage of emotions, both for themselves and their fanbase. I also explore the dangers intricate in the process, and I discuss a sample of accusations they were subjected to from the media.

Keywords: philosophy, pop culture, alternative music, My Chemical Romance, intertextuality, catharsis, media.

“THE SHARPEST LIVES”: CUM POT IDEILE FILOSOFICE ȘI MUZICA ALTERNATIVĂ SĂ SCHIMBE LUMEA

Rezumat: În acest articol îmi propun să arăt că muzica alternativă poate schimba lumea, atunci când trece din domeniul muzical în cel al ideilor. Folosesc exemplul formației My Chemical Romance. În ce privește asumția că aceștia au schimbat lumea propriilor fani, descriu două aspecte: “o schimbare de limbaj”, folosind procedeul structuralist al intertextualității; respectiv “o schimbare a inimilor”, bazată pe folosirea catartică a emoțiilor, atât a celor proprii cât și ale fanilor lor. De asemenea,

explorez pericolele din acest proces și o parte din acuzele formulate la adresa lor în media.

Cuvinte-cheie: filosofie, cultura pop, muzica alternativă, My Chemical Romance, intertextualitate, catharsis, media

The sharpest lives are the deadliest to lead¹

1. A Change of World. "Burn Bright"

*So give me all you've got, I can take it
We walked around in your city lights
'Cause it makes me who I am
We lit the fire and it's burning bright²*

On March 25, 2013, a long message posted by Gerard Way announced the world the sad news of the breakup of one of the most loved alternative bands from the 21st century, My Chemical Romance (hereinafter: MCR). His farewell message ended with the following prophetic words:

"My Chemical Romance is done. But it can never die.
It is alive in me, in the guys, and it is alive inside all of you.
I always knew that, and I think you did too.
Because it is not a band – *it is an idea.*"³

By doing this, the band voluntarily ended a fulminant and most celebrated career in rock and roll, to the dismal of hundreds of thousands of fans. What I want to argue in this article is that, by this very act, it also strategically entered into a very different realm, one that is mostly familiar to people who reside in libraries and spend their lives in-between conversations, lectures and academic conferences: that of pop culture philosophy. After all, ideas are the privileged domain of philosophers, ever since one of them imagined a separate and superior world for them (most notably Plato, in his dialogues). And ideas have a built-in quality that transforms them into formidable weapons (an image that graciously fits the imagery of MCR, which abounds in bullets, blood, revenge and includes an album titled *Conventional weapons*): they can literally change the world.

Saying that an alternative music band can merge into an idea that changed the world is not a mere metaphor or a manner of speaking: long before their split, their messages – either through songs and live

performances, or through interviews and media appearances – were rich and elaborated, and included a distinct worldview, a plethora of serious and difficult topics (for a band whose primary and most arduous fanbase consisted of children and teenagers), and a highly reflective and self-reflective attitude towards their audience.

What the band did, arguably, is to offer themselves as a model for their audience, and experiment all the consequences of attempting to change the world: in their own words, to “burn bright” (assuming both the positive consequences of being rockstars and the negative ones of suffering from the misunderstanding and hatred almost any superstar gets), to shine for the others but also to become consumed by these flames, and to finally be simultaneously diminished and expanded into the realm of ideas.

2. A Change of Language. “I’m Not Okay (I Promise)”

*I work in the garage all day long
Painting pictures, inventing songs
I’ll visit life but I can’t stay long
Find a better way⁴*

Firstly, how does a band change the world? Secondly, whose world can it change? If we take a closer look at their legacy and at the enthusiasm with which they were followed by their audience long after their breakup, the answer will be pretty obvious: they forever changed the world of their fans, which is not a small change, if we count their fans around. How did they do it? By changing the language and by imprinting their special vision and themes into the wider realm of their faithful audience.

A change of language can do this, or at least that is Richard Rorty’s thesis on the function of language for minority groups. In a well-known conference on values⁵, Rorty asserted that minority groups can attempt to infuse their original message into the majority parlance, provided they found a space of comfort and seclusion from the world, where their linguistic innovations could be fostered and where they can find words for things that previously went unnamed. Only after this process is

finished can they actively impact on the wider society. That was the solution that was pursued, historically speaking, by groups that were very diverse: from the English romantic poets to the XXth century's feminist groups.

Rorty's idea that language – and more specifically linguistic innovations that previously had no name – can change forever the world of the groups and their followers alike resonates particularly well to the way My Chemical Romance has invented a linguistic code for themselves and their fanbase. Phrases such as: "I'm not OK", "darken your clothes or strike a violent pose" "Killjoys make some noise" and countless others have their special meanings that have escaped the musical universe where they were created to enter their fans' conversations and provide them with special meanings, restricted to the *connoisseurs*. Wiki pages, forums, Facebook groups, and Reddit threads proudly display these phrases, that serve as recognition points for the fans, who enjoy them, adapt and appropriate them into myriads of formats, from blog posts and memes to fan-fiction⁶, Facebook statuses and Instagram stories.

The main tool through which this linguistic operation is performed is intertextuality, that is normally understood as a way in which a word or a phrase refers to a similar occurrence of the same word/phrase, taken out of the context of a well-known text.

Intertextuality has been a thoroughly theorized procedure inside the representatives of structuralism, notably by Roland Barthes, who asserts that every text is an inter-text⁷. Barthes incorporates this vision of the text into a wider perspective that challenges the traditional roles played by the author, the text and its message: all of them are dissolved into a spider-like web that the text simultaneously generates and supports. MCR lyrics are a good example of an inter-text, as they revolve around a series of images and concepts that mutually reinforce and consolidate their linguistic power: death, blood, sin, vampires, poison, murder, memory, fire, pain, hope. Contrary to many bands that assign authorship to a particular individual, their authorship is shared⁸; and their messages are interwoven and supported by the topics they chose (and let's not forget about the spider on the front cover of the album *Danger Days*).

After MCR broke up, the power of the inter-text they created is still visible in the songs released by the former band members. A good example is provided by the song "Young and Doomed", that ironically and self-consciously uses phrases from the MCR universe, most notably the verse: "And I promise that I'm not OK/Oh wait, that was the other guy"⁹. Almost all the albums produced by Frank Iero and the other musicians he worked with were heavy with references to MCR lyrics, and he playfully admitted it in one of the songs:

"Yeah, I know, you've heard that line before
But if I had the chance to scream all the things I've underlined
Yeah, you'd find I'm a thief
But my taste is so refined"¹⁰.

However, the way MCR fans are using intertextuality is more closely connected to the way advertisers use intertextuality. Angela Goddard describes it as: "Intertextuality can be an important component of an advert's meaning, in that the original text being referred to established a message which the second text can then use and elaborate on. In this way, the second text doesn't have to work so hard - it can take for granted that the original text has left a trace which it can use to its advantage."¹¹

When a faithful fan uses the phrase (with variations) "I'm not OK, I promise" what she/he does is to say something that sounds perfectly inconspicuous to anybody else than another soulmate; but to another fan, it will invoke the song and will infuse the saying with the original trace left by the song; and it will use it to the advantage of the speaker. It is as if the people using these words have a secret code, unavailable to strangers, and manage to infuse their messages with all the connotations and special meanings that are condensed in the original songs. Thus, they feel safe to confront the larger world, the same way minority groups do, according to Rorty.

3. A Change of Hearts. "Welcome to the Black Parade"

*Everybody wants to change the world
Everybody wants to change the world*

*But no one, no one wants to die
Wanna try, wanna try, wanna try*¹²

A band can also change the world of their fans by providing them with tools for overpassing life's hard moments. As any visit in the comment section of MCR's videos will show, there are literally hundreds of comments that are variations of the topic "MCR saved my life". At first, this seems hard to understand, especially since the audience is formed by children and teenagers. Secondly, the topics covered by MCR songs are not the likely to be addressed by a cheerful rock-and-roll band: in the majority of the songs, they sing about death¹³, diseases (most notably cancer), bullying, despair, alcohol and drugs, weapons, and world destruction. Moreover, these topics are not accidental, but programmatic. As the lead vocalist declared in an interview from 2007: "we're going to be different to everybody else because we're simply going to be ourselves. We're going to sing about things that other people wouldn't sing about...that is to say, we're going to sometimes *put extremely difficult subjects in pop music*"¹⁴ (my emphasis).

So how exactly is a song that depicts the daily horrors of a cancer patient¹⁵ empowering and life-saving for its audience? More than 2000 years ago, Aristotle spoke about the cathartic function of the Greek tragedies. He claimed that by displaying all the misfortunes and accidents that happen to the tragic heroes, the audience could project their deepest fears and sorrows and exorcise them throughout the play, feeling relieved at the end of the performance¹⁶.

What MCR songs do is, I argue, a double-way cathartic process. In the first move, the artists pour into their songs their deepest troubles, that are either very personal and/or very relatable - such as the struggle with alcohol addiction ("The Sharpest Lives"), or the fear and desperation following a catastrophic event such as the 9/11 terrorist strikes ("Skylines and Turnstiles"), or their suicidal thoughts ("Desert Song"), or their way of understanding death ("Welcome to the Black Parade"). By doing this, they exorcise their own "tragic affairs" and infuse the songs with strong emotions that are easily recognizable by their audience.

In the second move, the audience relates to the songs by recognizing their own deepest fears and insecurities; and feel healed by the fact that they acknowledge their belonging to a community who gives voice (and a very powerful one, combined with two electric guitars, one bass guitar and a drum set, at minimum) to their troubles, is willing to share them and is thus able to comfort them.

If one were to choose only one song out of the 94 that were recorded by the band during the interval 2002-2013, the most emblematic song would probably be "Welcome to the Black Parade"¹⁷, to which Craig Schuftan has dedicated a book-long analysis. The song tells the story of a dying patient that recalls his youth and a special day spent with his father at a particular parade¹⁸. The song has been understood as an allegory of the soul's journey during the dying process, where the dying person recognizes the power one's dreams can have over the destabilizing forces of the society:

"Do or die, you'll never make me
Because the world will never take my heart
Go and try, you'll never break me
We want it all, we wanna play this part"¹⁹.

The song speaks about life's traps and dangers, the fears and disappointments one faces during one's journey, the despair and fatality and lack of meaning all Existentialist philosophers have lectured us about, though with far more words and (sometimes) less charisma. However, as Schuftan thoughtfully observes, the message of the song is neither pessimist nor fatalist, but strong and defiant. Although very much aware of his limits: "I'm just a man, I'm not a hero/ Just a boy, who had to sing this song", the singer launches into a rebellion call: "So paint it black and take it back, let's shout it loud and clear/ Defiant to the end we hear the call", and finally adopts the ultimate Romantic solution of departing from the world towards his inner dreams: "I don't care".

Commenting upon the message of the song, Schuftan remarks: "So he's moved the search for happiness from outside to inside, and has found it, deep within himself, in his own dreams, his own imagination. This is what puts the romance in My Chemical Romance — the rejection of society in favour of the individual."²⁰

Ultimately, what MCR did for their fans was to enable (for them and in their place) a change of hearts: by courageously displaying their emotions packed in their lyrics and music, as well as during on-stage and on-camera performances, by helping them to find kindred spirits in the format of fan communities, and by offering them the last answer when nothing else seemed to function: that one cannot be held responsible for the world's bad decisions, that one can abandon the world and retire to the comfort of one's own imagination. For all these lessons, they gained many faithful fans.

4. A dangerous change? "DESTROYA"

*You don't believe in God
I don't believe in luck
They don't believe in us
But I believe we're the enemy!*²¹

However, there are dangers in mobilizing an army of fans' inner feelings, and Craig Schuftan builds up a theory that connects feelings, mass control, and violence, by associating them with totalitarian impulses. He claims that the driving force of a masterpiece such as "Welcome to the Black Parade" is precisely the intuition of Gerard Way, that such a song can literally serve as a mobilizing tool for "the broken, the beaten and the damned": and that they become a powerful army that abandons itself under the authority of its leader. What happened afterwards (during the Black Parade world tour) was the realization that they created an unstoppable force, a monster, a Frankenstein, that was ready to take its toll and destroy them.

In reply, what they did, argues Schuftan, was very similar to David Bowie's treatment of Ziggy Stardust: to destroy the monster, to put an end to the Black Parade, that happened during the concert at the Palacio de los Deportes, in Mexico from October 7, 2007. As Schuftan comments: "To imagine Gerard Way in this moment is to imagine two great romantic heroes in one person. Gerard was both Napoleon Bonaparte

declaring himself emperor, and Ludwig van Beethoven, tearing up his manuscript in disgust at his own violation of 'the rights of man'."²²

When speaking about dangerous ideas, one must not mix them up with the plethora of accusations the band has attracted over the years. Like any band that enjoys that level of worldwide success, MCR have attracted an enormous amount of attention from traditional and social media. Their peculiar lyric universe and their assigned (yet violently dismissed) derogatory label of "emo" (that serves as hidden code for "suicide cult" inside the world of British tabloids²³) made them a likely target for sensationalist media, that portrayed them in bleak colors, establishing parallels between their lyrics, their outfits and a great deal of the evils of modern societies – and accusing them of making kids feel depressed and suicidal, accentuating their insecurities and their prong to self-harm, and even of encouraging mass-shootings in schools.

In the UK, a suicide committed by a teen, Hannah Bond, in 2008, mobilized a media frenzy against MCR. With headlines such as "Popular schoolgirl dies in 'emo suicide cult'"²⁴, the articles interviewed distressed parents and professors who claimed a causal connection between the troubled state of mind of the teenager and her obsession with the band. No attempt to find out the opinions of the band members was sketched in these articles; they were found guilty by default.

While academic articles are more nuanced on these accusations²⁵, they do not hesitate to comment negatively on the band's choice of words in some particular songs, and indirectly accuse them of condoning violence. In an analysis of "Teenagers"²⁶, Tim Corcoran concludes: "I am not about to draw a causal link between this or any pop song and the tragedy of gun violence in educational settings. Whilst perhaps not a flagrant call to arms for disenfranchised youth everywhere, at the least the song provides a distressed social commentary on the potential tensions existing in relationships between youth and adults in contemporary societies".²⁷ The author also adds in notes that the causal link he does not wish to establish has been shown by others.

While a careful analysis of the topics will pay attention to the risks of singing extensively about death, emotions, and world destruction, that the singers themselves recognized and attempted to deal with, the anecdotal evidence provided by the articles written by journalists and

specialists will pinpoint to an additional danger: that of being misunderstood by the mainstream audience: in their own words, "we're the enemy". All these, combined with the personal problems of the band members, accumulated during the years and triggered the 2013 breakup, that is recollected in Gerard Way's farewell message: "A perfect machine, beautiful, yet self aware of its system. Under directive to terminate before it becomes compromised. To protect the idea – at all costs... No compromise. No surrender. No fucking shit... When it's time, we stop."²⁸

5. Instead of conclusions: "Fake Your Death"

*So fake your death
Erase your blame
And leave the lights on when you stay
Take off your clothes
And dream that fame
Come on and feel that shame²⁹*

On October 31st, 2019, after a series of teasers posted on all social networks (Instagram, Facebook and Twitter), My Chemical Romance officially announced their reunion, and in subsequent days they posted tour dates for the end of 2019 and the beginning of 2020, to the surprise and excitement of their fans.

While reverting from the status of an idea to the reality of a rock band, one can only wonder what the future might hold; but one can be optimistic about the hope and interest their new musical projects will bring about for the world, the language and the hearts they will continue to touch, and shape, and change for the better.

Notes

¹ My Chemical Romance, "The Sharpest Lives", written by Bob Bryar, Frank Iero, Ray Toro, Mikey Way and Gerard Way, album *The Black Parade*, release date October 23, 2006.

² My Chemical Romance, "Burn Bright", written by Frank Iero, Ray Toro, Mikey Way, Gerard Way and Bob Bryar, album *Conventional weapons*, release date February 5, 2013.

³ Gerard Way, "A Vigil, on Birds and Glass", March 25, 2013. http://www.twitlonger.com/show/n_1rjdh4f, my emphasis.

⁴ Frank Iero and the Patience, „Viva Indifference", written by Frank Iero, album *Parachutes*, release date October 28, 2016.

⁵ Richard Rorty, "Feminism and pragmatism" (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan), 1991.

⁶ For an analysis of fan-fiction related to MCR, see Ross Hagen, "Bandom Ate My Face": The Collapse of the Fourth Wall in Online Fan Fiction". *Popular Music and Society*. Vol. 38, No. 1, 2015: 44–58, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2014.974326>

⁷ Roland Barthes, *Plăcerea textului* (Cluj: Editura Echinox, 1994).

⁸ Each song from all the albums are designated as being written by all the members that the band included at that particular time moment.

⁹ Frank Iero and The Future Violents, „Young and Doomed", written by Frank Iero, album *Barriers*, release date May 31, 2019.

¹⁰ Frank Iero and the cellabration, „stage 4 fear of trying", written by Frank Iero, album *Stomachaches*, release date August 25, 2014.

¹¹ Angela Goddard, *The Language of Advertising. Written texts*, (Routledge: London and New York, 1998), 69.

¹² My Chemical Romance, "Na Na Na (Na Na Na Na Na Na Na Na Na)", produced by My Chemical Romance & Rob Cavallo, Album *Danger Days: The True Lives of the Fabulous Killjoys*, authors: Bob Bryar, Ray Toro, Frank Iero, Mikey Way & Gerard Way, release date September 28, 2010.

¹³ A simple browsing through their song titles provides titles such as: "Cemetery Drive", "Bury Me in Black", "Dead!", "Demolition Lovers", "Cancer", "Desolation Row", "Drowning Lessons", "Drugs", "The End", "Famous Last Words", "The Five of Us Are Dying", "Give 'Em Hell, Kid", "Gun.", "I'm Not OK (I Promise)", "It's Not a Fashion Statement, It's a Deathwish", "This is How I Disappear", "To the End", "The World is Ugly".

¹⁴ Gerard Way in Liza Minelli, „My Chemical Romance", *Interview*, April 2007.

¹⁵ „Turn away, if you could get me a drink/ Of water, cause my lips are chapped and faded"... „Now turn away, 'cause I'm awful just to see/ 'Cause all my hair's abandoned all my body". My Chemical Romance, "Cancer", written by Bob Bryar, Frank Iero, Ray Toro, Mikey Way and Gerard Way, album *The*

Black Parade, release date October 23, 2006.

¹⁶ Aristotle, *Poetics*, translated by Anthony Kenny, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 1449b24.

¹⁷ During an interview, Gerard Way declared that this song "personifies the whole record" "The Black Parade Interview Part 1", available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vXdwo1znlQw>.

¹⁸ During the same interview, Gerard Way explained the story of the song with the following words: "I'd like to think that when you die death comes for you however you want, and I feel that it's your strongest memory—either from childhood or adulthood. [...] For this particular character [...] called 'The Patient,' his strongest memory is of being a child and his father is taking him to this parade. So when death comes to him, it comes in the form of a Black Parade." "The Black Parade Interview Part 1", available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vXdwo1znlQw>.

¹⁹ My Chemical Romance, „Welcome to the Black Parade”, written by Mikey Way, Gerard Way, Ray Toro, Frank Iero and Bob Bryar, album *The Black Parade*, release date September 12, 2006.

²⁰ Craig Schuftan, *Hey, Nietzsche! Leave them kids alone. The Romantic Movement, Rock and Roll, and the End of Civilization as We Know It*, chapter "Disenchanted", Harper Collins, Australia, 2012, iBooks.

²¹ My Chemical Romance, „DESTROYA”, written by Frank Iero, Mikey Way, Gerard Way & Ray Toro, album *Danger Days*, release date November 22, 2010.

²² Craig Schuftan. *Hey, Nietzsche! Leave them kids alone*, chapter "The Black Parade is Dead", iBooks.

²³ Craig Schuftan, *Hey, Nietzsche! Leave them kids alone*, chapter "This Tragic Affair", iBooks.

²⁴ Richard Alleyne, „Popular schoolgirl dies in 'emo suicide cult'", *The Telegraph*, May 7, 2008, online available at <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1935735/Popular-schoolgirl-dies-in-emo-sucide-cult.html>; Richard Levy, "Girl, 13, hangs herself after becoming obsessed with 'Emo suicide cult' rock band", *Daily Mail*, May 7, 2008.

²⁵ For instance, see the analysis of Emily Ryalls, "Emo Angst, Masochism, and Masculinity in Crisis, Text and Performance Quarterly. 33:2, 2013: 83-97, DOI: 10.1080/10462937.2013.764570, where the author merely accuses them of using performative acts such as "gay stage" to perpetuate stereotypical attitudes of masculinity and misogyny under the disguise of an

enlightened, emotional masculinity.

²⁶ The verses deemed problematic that are subject to Corcoran allegedly „Foucauldian” analysis are: „But if you're troubled and hurt/ What you got under your shirt/ Will make them pay for the things that they did”. My Chemical Romance, „Teenagers”, written by Gerard Way, Mikey Way, Frank Iero, Ray Toro and Bob Bryar, album *The Black Parade*, release date July 9, 2007.

For my own analysis of the song „Teenagers”, see Mihaela Frunză, „Adolescenții, libertatea și filosofia”, Mihaela Frunză's blog, November 27, 2019, online available at

<https://frunzamihaelablog.wordpress.com/2019/11/27/adolescentii-libertatea-si-filosofia/>

²⁷ Tim Corcoran “Are the kids alright? Relating to representations of youth.” *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, 27 March 2014: 11.

²⁸ Gerard Way, “A Vigil, on Birds and Glass”. March 25, 2013. http://www.twitlonger.com/show/n_1rjd4f

²⁹ My Chemical Romance, „Fake Your Death”, written by James Dewees, Ray Toro, Frank Iero, Mikey Way & Gerard Way, produced by My Chemical Romance, Doug McKean & Rob Cavallo, album *May Death Never Stop You*, release date: February 17, 2014.

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*** "The Black Parade Interview Part 1", available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vXdwo1znlQw>.

Songs of My Chemical Romance

My Chemical Romance, "The Sharpest Lives", written by Bob Bryar, Frank Iero, Ray Toro, Mikey Way and Gerard Way, album *The Black Parade*, release date October 23, 2006.

My Chemical Romance, "Cancer", written by Bob Bryar, Frank Iero, Ray Toro, Mikey Way and Gerard Way, album *The Black Parade*, release date October 23, 2006.

My Chemical Romance, „Teenagers", written by Gerard Way, Mikey Way, Frank Iero, Ray Toro and Bob Bryar, album *The Black Parade*, release date July 9, 2007

My Chemical Romance, „Welcome to the Black Parade”, written by Mikey Way, Gerard Way, Ray Toro, Frank Iero and Bob Bryar, album *The Black Parade*, release date September 12, 2006.

My Chemical Romance, „Na Na Na (Na Na Na Na Na Na Na Na Na)”, produced by My Chemical Romance & Rob Cavallo, Album *Danger Days: The True Lives of the Fabulous Killjoys*, authors: Bob Bryar, Ray Toro, Frank Iero, Mikey Way & Gerard Way, release date September 28, 2010.

My Chemical Romance, „DESTROYA”, written by Frank Iero, Mikey Way, Gerard Way & Ray Toro, album *Danger Days*, release date November 22, 2010.

My Chemical Romance, „Burn Bright”, written by Frank Iero, Ray Toro, Mikey Way, Gerard Way and Bob Bryar, album *Conventional weapons*, release date February 5, 2013.

My Chemical Romance, „Fake Your Death”, written by James Dewees, Ray Toro, Frank Iero, Mikey Way & Gerard Way, produced by My Chemical Romance, Doug McKean & Rob Cavallo, album *May Death Never Stop You*, release date: February 17, 2014.

Songs of Frank Iero

Frank Iero and the cellabration, „stage 4 fear of trying”, written by Frank Iero, album *Stomachaches*, release date August 25, 2014.

Frank Iero and the Patience, „Viva Indifference”, written by Frank Iero, album *Parachutes*, release date October 28, 2016.

Frank Iero and The Future Violents, „Young and Doomed”, written by Frank Iero, album *Barriers*, release date May 31, 2019.