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### Review: Ex Hex (*Rips*, 2014)

 [January 28, 2015](#)    [Valerie Polichar](#)

Mary Timony has travelled a long road from her early noise-pop/punk-pop days with Helium and its predecessor Autoclave. Her early-2000s solo release *Mountains* featured a speak-singing style that evoked Suzanne Vega and occasionally exchanged her trademark guitar for a grave piano accompaniment. After stints in Soft Power and Wild Flag, 2013 found her fronting Ex Hex with singer/bass player Betsy Wright and drummer Laura Harris, her guitar back in hand. Speedily signed to Merge Records, Ex Hex put out its first album, *Rips*, in October 2014.

There's no question that Timony & company can rock. *Rips* opens with the strong surf-punk-meets-Tom-Petty strides of "Don't Wanna Lose," and finds Timony's voice richer, more defined than we've heard it in the past. The song is

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catchy, danceable if you pogo. It's followed on the album by the equally bouncy "Beast." The band is competent, practiced, energetic. Played in the background, the album inspires perpetual toe-tapping.



But as licks repeat, rhythm is even, and volume remains consistent, uninspired lyrics like "You never needed no one / You never wanted to have fun" fall flat against the absence of shapely background. In the end, *Rips* leaves us wanting more – not more of the same, but the more we sense the band could give us if they would only, well, let it rip.



Guitar and bass evoke Joan Jett or the Pretenders on tracks like "Hot and Cold" and "How You Got That Girl," but the vocals are lighter, with a sound more reminiscent of Susanna Hoffs than Chrissie Hynde, and girl-group harmonies occasionally swing in ("Whoa-oh-oh") against Wright's beautifully fuzzy bass. But Timony finds the dense bottom of her voice in more aggressive rockers like "You Fell Apart," which employs a punk beat to good effect. Even here, though, the lyrics are a weak point. Neither catchy enough to form a hook nor deep enough to wander past the basic girl-meets-guy, guy-disappoints-girl message, they occasionally become a distraction.

Production (recording by Mitch Easter; mixing by Bobby Harlow, known for his garage/low-fi skills; production by the band and Jonah Takagi), while keeping an admirably light touch and a warm color, favors the bass, often to the



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detriment of Harris' drums, which are left too far back in the mix and sound too tinny for the density of vocals and guitars – an odd result in such experienced hands.

If Timony's voice explores new textures on *Rips*, her guitar in general seems more canned, less creative than her expressive past would predict. It's unclear whether she's choosing to play in a box to let the bass shine, because she needs the vocal focus, or because of some limiting misconception about the genre in which she's working. When she does cut a little bit loose – as on “New Kid,” one of the album's best tracks – she brings an added dimension to the work that's much missed on other pieces. If the vocals are a little more rough here, a little off-pace, that's a welcome disruption. As if in acknowledgement of her overall restraint elsewhere, the album's final track – amusingly, if appropriately, titled “Outro” – finds Timony spooling out a beautiful lead that channels George Harrison at his best.

But these lovely interludes are too-brief glimpses of what this album could have been, hints of what potential lies untapped amongst these three clearly skilled musicians. Ultimately, *Rips* is a disappointment – one that leaves us hoping that next time, someone leaves an open bottle of whiskey in the studio, scatters a few microphones and sneaks off to see what magic might be uncorked if this trio really rips its way out of the cage.

*Unappreciated Scholars Review Grade: C+*

*Rips* is available on [iTunes](#). Follow Ex Hex on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/exhexband>. Visit the official website at <http://www.exhexband.com/>

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