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How does Joywave feel now?



Joywave stopped into the D&C Digital Studio to share what's up and coming with the band as well as some of its favorite moments during the tour. Virginia Butler, Olivia Lopez, Jeff Spevak, Tina MacIntyre-Yee



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(Photo: TINA MACINTYRE-YEE/
@tyee23/staff photographer)

At first glance, Joywave appears to be unchanged on the eve of the release of the band's follow-up to its 2015 breakthrough album, *How Do You Feel Now?*

It seems to be the same five fellows who subsist on understated dry humor, the roasted-bean atmosphere of Rochester coffee shops, the bottles of Scotch in their downtown studio and songs spelling out the uncertainty of their lives, set to indie-rock dystopia and throbbing, electronic beats.

Unchanged, it appears, despite “Tongue” becoming a viral video hit and the soundtrack to a television commercial for Nexus. Unchanged, despite Joywave’s music creeping into the public consciousness through “Madden NFL” and the soccer-oriented “FIFA” — the biggest-selling video game in the world — and between innings at a Dodgers-Mets playoff game and during the X Games. Unchanged, despite career-altering moments that included the band playing live on NBC’s *Late Night With Seth Meyers* and ABC’s *Jimmy Kimmel Live*, on extended tours of the U.S., Canada and Europe, and at the hottest of festivals, including Coachilla in April 2016.

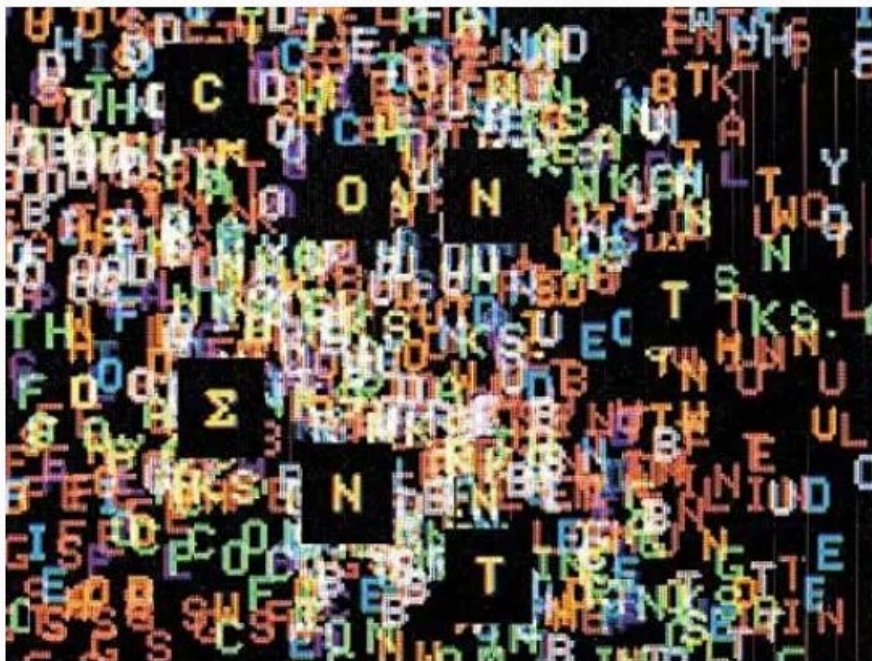
It would seem that all Joywave had to do for the new album, *Content*, was to hit “replay,” sit back and let it all happen again.

But, no.

The one thing Joywave knew was, it couldn’t write those same songs again. The past two years, and the international success of this band that insists on staying grounded in Rochester, has changed everything.

“I’d spent my whole life doing things I thought were meaningless. I was working at Staples for \$8 an hour,” says Daniel Armbruster, Joywave’s lead singer and lyricist. “I thought, OK, I’m so beyond a point I thought was possible. What does that feel like?”

Content, officially released on July 28, attempts to answer that question.



Joywave's "Content" is officially released on July 28. (Photo: Provided)

Inescapably, some of the activity surrounding the new album is business as usual. The band churned through a round of pre-release interviews last week in New York City. Standard, record-industry procedure. An extensive tour begins Aug. 2 that will likely be a huge draw for the indie-rock crowd, with Joywave opening for Cold War Kids and Young the Giant. That includes Joywave returning to Rochester for a Nov. 11 show at Anthology, but you're not supposed to know about that yet, on a tour that will consume half of the year, and likely more. Again, standard, record-industry procedure.

Joywave has always displayed a taste for quirky — in one of last week's interviews, Armbruster discussed the Buffalo Sabres on a hockey blog. And now that it's not just another local band playing the Bug Jar, Joywave has clout in this town. It celebrates *Content* on the night of its release in one of downtown Rochester's most-curious landmarks: the top floor of the Rochester First Federal Plaza. That's the flying saucer-inspired disc on the roof, once the rotating restaurant known as The Changing Scene. It's currently abandoned, but the band talked the landlord into allowing it to play there in what amounts to a private party for 150 friends and a few ticket holders.

Joywave is still guitarist Joseph Morinelli, but no longer drinking coffee. Keyboardist Benjamin Bailey, no longer drinking coffee. Drummer Paul Brenner, no longer drinking coffee. Cutting back on the caffeine, to better handle the rigors of the road. Bassist Sean Donnelly isn't sold on the idea; he's still drinking coffee. And Armbruster, still drinking coffee. But not much else.

"Coachella was the first show I played sober," he says.

A quick visual inspection today shows that the band looks pretty good. Brenner's grown more hair. But the touring in support of *How Do You Feel Now?* took a toll. Joywave is a rock band, so not every off day was a day off. In Colorado, the guys rented a limo and a driver, stopped to load up on beer and the state's legal marijuana products, and had the driver lead them to a Rocky Mountain high in one of the nearby national parks.

Changes in lifestyle, updates in technology. Unlike "Tongues," these new songs were not recorded by Armbruster with one microphone in the basement of his parents' home in Greece. Joywave rented a studio in a South Bloomfield farm and did it big, "with four or five microphones," Armbruster jokes.



Can we mock Joywave when the band beats us to it? And when the results are so convincing? *How Do You Feel Now?* hedged its messages with the sampled voices of Bambi and Thumper. *Content* scraps the clever and reaches for existential personal apocalypse.

We hear it from *Content*'s first seconds, a mournful synth opening and Armbruster's delicate vocals on the opening title track:

*I'm searching for the difference between
the content and content can bring.*

Maybe they're no different 'cause they look the same.

Maybe I'm just an algorithm with a given name.

Algorithms. Joywave knows insidious, faceless corporations have your number. There is no clear indication as to what the one-word title of the new album is supposed to mean. Is it *CONtent*, the noun, as defined by the *Merriam-Webster* dictionary, "something contained... a part, element, or complex of parts?" Or the adjective, *ConTENT*, "pleased and satisfied: not needing more..."?

It seems to be both. *Content* is a world of shifting dynamics. Armbruster's fragile words give way to howling, bewildering blasts of rock and electronic programming. Powerful, immersive, lush, emotionally distant. The production by Armbruster, Donnelly and Rich Costey, who has worked with layered, dense-sounding bands such as Arctic Monkeys and Muse, is careful to keep the vocals out front.

Other sonic details are a treat, but hardly cute: There are what critics call “Beatlesque” moments. The dreamlike segue of applause folding into a murky machine rhythm of “Thanks, Thanks For Coming.” Armbruster tipping toward Paul McCartney-like Tin-Pan Alley vocals. The final track, “Let’s Talk About Feelings,” is the most subversively daring of all 11 songs. “I am drowning in love with you,” Armbruster sings over Bailey’s lounge piano, the shimmer of Brenner’s cymbals and cocktail-crowd chatter. Armbruster dares to carry the song like a cracked Perry Como. It’s a theatrical, murky sadness.

So, after months of percolating in that South Bloomfield barn, *Content* is ready for its close-up.

Where am I?



Rochester's Joywave talks about the sound and making the big time. Video by Max Schulte Max Schulte

To understand *Content*, we need to remember where these five guys from Greece were coming from before Joywave signed with Hollywood Records, which is owned by that most-corporate of entertainment entities, Disney. Where they were before the 2015 release of *How Do You Feel Now?*

They were pursuing the elusive dream. Brenner even took time off from Greece Olympia High School to try out as Teddy Geiger's drummer when the local teen pop star's manager set up a cattle-call audition at The Club at Water Street. Nothing came of it, for anyone — including Geiger, who's now writing songs for the next generation of teen pop stars.

Undeterred, Brenner and two of his fellow Greece Olympians, Armbruster and Morinelli, put together a promising rock band, The Hoodies. There were some successes, with The Hoodies landing songs on the season premiere of *The Real World: Cancun* and the *MTV Movie Awards*, and playing at the CMJ Music Marathon & Film Festival in New York City.

Successes, but not the kind that support a lifestyle. Brenner was a line cook. He kept telling himself, "I'm smarter than Olive Garden."

"We all felt that way, for sure," Morinelli says. He was working at Wegmans, rounding up escaped shopping carts.

And Armbruster's dreams were the fear-of-failure variety, "where you skip a class you didn't know you were signed up for and fail," he says. Or the dream within a dream, "where we're playing on *Saturday Night Live*, and I woke up and in the dream I was still sleeping in my twin bed in my parents' house thinking, 'My life sucks.'"

How Do You Feel Now? His life sucked, and Armbruster's lyrics reflected that. But everyone can relate to that on some level, and the album started to take off, along with the gigs.

"We didn't really know what to expect with the tour life," Bailey says.

They figured it out pretty quick. "We had the time of our lives going on the road," Brenner says. It was a road test for the band. Now, "anything that bothers me about Paul," Armbruster says, "I already know."



Joywave's Sean Donnelly, left, and Daniel Armbruster at the Main Street Armory in 2015. (Photo: Tina MacIntyre-Yee)

Even then, playing for big festival crowds in Europe, Joywave appears to have been throwing around the ideas that would become the songs of *Content*. Such as "Little Lies You Were Told," and the illusion of success:

*You deserve the finer things
you're supposed to be famous.*

*Those are lies that they told you
they don't pay the rent.*

How big is a rock band supposed to be? Joywave has a surprising answer. Numbers are less important than engagement, the guys say. Maybe a thousand people following the band through social media, discussing the new album, anticipating the upcoming shows, tweeting about them afterward. That keeps it manageable.

And Armbruster felt personally confined by the regimentation, and the facades, that goes with big. "You have your whole day laid out for you," he says. Interviews at this time, sound check at that time...

"Going to a Place," from *Content*:

*I'm going to a place where everybody's pretty
but they're all dead and vacant inside.*

After last year's final leg of the *How Do You Feel Now?* tour, the band came home to emotional distance. Armbruster compares it to "various levels of PTSD." Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. No bombs, but apparently plenty of shots. He'd had a series of attacks, crippling internal seizures.

"The first four, the doctors didn't know what it was," he says. Self-diagnosing on the internet, he decided he was suffering from pancreatitis, an inflammation of the pancreas, often due to heavy drinking. Doctors disagreed. "They said, 'You're way too young for that.'" He's 32. "Are you having 15 drinks a day?" No.

But Armbruster did down a few drinks before shows, to get over his stage nerves. And by the fifth attack, the doctors agreed. OK, it is pancreatitis. Armbruster quit drinking and changed his diet to healthier foods. “That was the saddest part, I thought,” he says. “Watching people eating fries.”

Less treatable is the emotional distance so evident in *Content*. From “Shutdown:”:

Feel those feelings that you used to have

feel those feelings again or at least pretend...

Shut it down!

All of Joywave appears to have felt it. With the end of the last tour, Brenner recalls “sitting in the car for an hour, staring at the steering wheel, wondering: Where am I?”

Bailey laughs loudly when he hears Brenner say this. Bailey had said the very same thing to the *Democrat and Chronicle* in 2015, almost word for word, after the band returned from a seven-month leg of that tour.

“There was this whole range of emotions I could not relate to,” Brenner says. He describes the relief of sleeping in a real bed after returning to Rochester, and not feeling the highway moving beneath him.

Again, Morinelli had said the very same thing to the *Democrat and Chronicle* in that 2015 story, almost word for word. Joywave is in sync when it comes to how touring bred this sense of alienation. Morinelli talks of coming home, standing on the street outside his house after putting his kid on the bus for school.



Joywave says there's a stigma about Rochester, but the area has actually produced plenty of great things. Video by Max Schulte.

“At 7:30 in the morning, every single car on my street pulled out of their driveway,” he says. “And I’m just standing there, with my coffee cup in my hand.”

Everyone on the street was getting on with their work, their lives.

From “Shutdown” again:

*Think think for a moment, just don't analyze
the smartest folks are the saddest I know.*

Armbruster concedes it is ridiculous to complain. This is what they wanted. *How Do You Feel Now?* Joywave first posed the question in 2015, and with *Content* arrives at less of an answer than a path. As Brenner says, “The record easily could have been called, ‘Now What?’”



Rochester's Joywave, Wegmans shopping and local entertainment icons Doug & Gary. Max Schulte/Jeff Spevak