

Before Mike Henneberger was an Emmy-winning producer with credits from Comedy Central, Rolling Stone, Billboard, Spin, and Vice under his belt, he was just another lost soul in New York City, stumbling down a path paved by mental illness, and littered with pieces of a broken heart and a broken mind. *Rock Bottom at the Renaissance: An Emo Kid's Journey Through Falling In and Out of Love In and With New York City* is Mike's mixtape memoir that follows those pieces through a mental breakdown that spanned his first years as a small-town Texas transplant in NYC, brainwashed by the New York romance that films, TV, books, and music, sold him.

Though the bulk of *Rock Bottom At The Renaissance* is set in a hotel room during a debauchorous weekend of self-imposed isolation and self-destructive introspection, and navigates the dark tunnels of Henneberger's booze and drug-addled mind over those three days, it's actually much larger in scope – taking in much of his past. Henneberger tells us of his south Texas childhood defined by divorce, sibling rivalry, and an instability that forced him to navigate the most important years of a young man's life without any sort of compass. He takes us through his minor successes – touring in bands, launching a magazine, and performing stand-up comedy – as he begins to wonder if the sense of confidence instilled by those accomplishments is actually delusion. We get a small glimpse into his time in the U.S. Army, which was supposed to increase his sense of purpose, but only increased his chemical dependencies and triggered mental illness. And at the heart of the book, whether past or present, are Henneberger's quest (and failure) to find love, and, perhaps most importantly, his relationship with music and the power that it has to get us through life's toughest moments. "I wrote a lot of the book in that very moment that exists in the book," says Henneberger. "I was in that hotel room for a weekend with a whole lot of Adderall and a lot of whiskey, beer and nicotine. I want the reader to have the feeling of what it really was like to have been there, because I want people to read it to see just how bad that weekend was."

Despite the sense of abject loneliness and the existential dread coursing through its sentences, there is also a great deal of hope within these pages. Partly that's through the life history conveyed by Henneberger, which serves to reveal exactly who he is, how and why he ended up in that situation and the clarity of purpose that comes as the past and the present weave themselves together to turn a broken, lost and hopeless person into someone with purpose and optimism – two things that are manifested in the very fact that this book exists. "You might not get that much hope from reading the book," Henneberger admits. "But you get it from me still being here and putting it out. You have to look at it like an old Dangerous Summer or a Bayside album – it's fucking dark, and it's scary and it's sad, but we were all able to make it through and make that album or book. It's okay to feel super dark and it's okay to feel suicidal – just don't commit suicide. I've been suicidal multiple times in my life, but I'm still here – and you can turn that into something to offer other people so they can deal with things they're suffering with, just like the bands in this book helped me survive through this stuff."

The Dangerous Summer and Bayside are just two of many bands – including Jimmy Eat World, The Smoking Popes, Bright Eyes, Two Door Cinema Club, Death Cab For Cutie, Alkaline Trio, Mayday Parade, and The Wonder Years – whose songs feature prominently in *Rock Bottom At The Renaissance*. The chapters aren't essays about the attached songs. Rather, the songs and

lyrics appear throughout as a soundtrack to the chapters, either because it was what Henneberger was listening to that weekend, or because, after the fact, he realized it fit thematically with what he was going through. That's because music, and those bands in particular, are crucial to Henneberger overcoming his demons – and remain so to this day.

"I really feel, as clichéd as it's become, music genuinely saved my life," he says. "And I'm okay with that, because it's important to me. My earliest memories are tied to music. I write about my dad, who wasn't around when I was growing up – my most vivid memories of him are tied to music and him playing records in the morning. I remember, in junior high, listening to radio stations' request hours, hearing how people made music important to them – dedicating songs to their boyfriends or girlfriends. There's nothing else people put value on as much as music."

That there is redemption and salvation in these songs is undeniable, but there's more nuance and depth to this memoir than that. It is, as Henneberger puts it, about "romanticizing New York City and letting your ideas guide you rather than reality" and the detrimental effects that can have. It's about being in love with the person you think will make you whole and coming to terms with the fact that they never will – nor would have done. That's something Henneberger navigated – viscerally, painfully – in that hotel, but also something he contends with in the narratives that surround that moment, flashbacks that look back, albeit some to a time after that weekend. That's because Henneberger, fueled by the substances and emotions flowing through his mind and body, wrote much of the book in those three days, but finished it a number of months later. To do so, however, meant returning to that very point in time.

"I didn't want to go back to that dark place, but I was still in it as single guy in New York," he says today after living in New York City for seven years now. "I didn't know anybody here and I was new in town, and I felt like the last missing piece was 'the girl', so that's what was driving me. Which is a horrible thing, because as long as that – or anything that you glorify as the last missing piece – is driving you, you're not going to be stable. That's just not how it works."

Though, as he said, that might not be entirely clear in the book, as it wasn't to him in his intoxicated and inebriated state, what is obvious is the lesson that *Rock Bottom At The Renaissance* offers – that happiness had to be found within himself, rather than in that missing piece of the jigsaw. It's neither a sanctimonious nor self-righteous epiphany, nor one that Henneberger leans on in his memoir. But what it does do is provide a hand for people who may be in similar situations – and give them hope for their futures. Ultimately, that's all he wants.

"It's just loneliness and the whole 'wherever you go, there you are' thing," he says. "I wasn't happy with myself and I wouldn't have been happier in Texas, but then things started changing with my life and I felt better. That's why I feel more comfortable putting this out, because I'm such a different person now, this book no longer feels like it's about me. I want people who are going through this same shit to know it's not the end of the world. All you have to do is get through it – you'll feel like a different person eventually. It's hard to be optimistic, but that fact that I'm still alive and here to talk about it should be some sort of sign that it's possible."