

Who's the worse musician? Avril Lavigne or Chad Kroeger?

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With the announcement of the engagement of Avril Lavigne and Nickelback frontman Chad Kroeger, an important discussion broke out at work: Which is the worse musician?

To me, the answer is obvious, and it insults the intelligence of anyone who's ever listened to music to even consider this a worthy debate. Lavigne is a genuinely good pop singer, with an impressive catalogue of catchy tunes. Kroeger is a cliched fake-angry mainstream radio rock star with depressingly bland and dark songs that give me a headache just contemplating them. While I'm no mega-fan of Avril's, a quick perusal of my collection reveals I own three of her albums -- and surprisingly, one Nickelback album, 1998's "The State," probably given to me by a friend.

But response to a Facebook query told a different story, with Kroeger overwhelmingly getting the backing among my friends as the least-bad musician. Matt, the music-geek buddy I respect most, made the argument that Kroeger writes songs and plays guitar proficiently, whereas Lavigne does neither. Fair enough, and maybe it's my fault for not phrasing the question properly. What I really want to know is: Who has better songs?

I suggest we do a rundown of each singer's six highest-charting hits (on the U.S. Billboard Hot 100 chart). But first, let's start with what I consider to be each of their best songs:

"Kroeger: Best song: "Breathe" (2000)" -- Not really my thing, but it is respectable '90s grunge rock that's effortlessly catchy in a dank-back-alley sort of way, and it seemingly comes from the heart, something that can't be said about future Nickelback songs.

"Lavigne: Best song: "Anything But Ordinary" (2002)" -- The most meaningful Avril song; she captures the ennui of one's early 20s with: "Is it enough to love? Is it enough to breathe? Somebody rip my heart out, and leave me here to bleed. Is it enough to die? Somebody save my life. I'd rather be anything but ordinary, please."

"Kroeger: "How You Remind Me" (2001)" -- This edges out Creed's "With Arms Wide Open" as the worst massively popular song of all time as Nickelback's freefall from its late-'90s potential is instant. (The drop in quality corresponds exactly with the band's rise up the sales charts.)

"Lavigne: "Complicated" (2002)" -- Kinda slow and simple, in retrospect, although it's a

cute introduction to the Canadian popster.

"Kroeger: "Someday" (2003)" -- This is why mute buttons were invented. I guess it's a story song about a bad patch in a relationship; I give it mild credit for not being as literal as some other Nickelback songs, but it's still grating and unlistenable.

"Lavigne: "Sk8er Boi" (2002)" -- The first song where Avril shows she can rock, it also has a good message about how you can't judge people based on their looks: That grungy skateboarder might be the next great guitar talent.

"Kroeger: "Photograph" (2005)" -- There are a thousand better "nostalgic for high school" songs. The songwriting is blandly literal and the way Chad's inflection is identical on every lyric makes me want to jam forks in my ears. It doesn't quite work as a parody, although it gets off to a good start when Kroeger says "Look at this photograph" and literally holds up a photograph in the music video. (It reminds me of a college newspaper front page with a track star who broke a record holding a broken vinyl record for the camera. The lead photographer of my college paper pasted that clipping to the wall with a note to his underling that said: "If you ever do this, I will kill you.")

"Lavigne: "I'm With You" (2002)" -- A strong emotional rollercoaster, although you have to be in the right mood for it. I like how "damp cold night" works as "damn cold night" if you prefer.

"Kroeger: "Far Away" (2006)" -- Oh god. After the success of "Photograph," it seems like Kroeger fancies himself as a meaningful balladeer. The problem is he can't break away from his mouthful-of-nails voice. And, in this debate, does Kroeger really get credit for songwriting when he pens stuff like: "Cuz you know I love you. I've loved you all along"?

"Lavigne: "My Happy Ending" (2004)" -- Great buildup to a staircase of a chorus, as Avril gets a bit darker and more mature on her second album.

"Kroeger: "Rockstar" (2006)" -- This is absolutely awful. Plenty of bands have written songs about wanting to be a rock star, and this has to be the worst. I want to punch every person in the video mouthing the mind-numbingly empty words, even Wayne Gretzky. Actually, many of them look miserable just being in the video, perhaps because the track played multiple times as the director sought the best take. Frankly, I'd rather dive into a pit filled with starving wolverines than listen to this s*** again.

"Lavigne: "Girlfriend" (2007)" -- This is pop bliss, and (for what it's worth in this debate) Avril also shows her acting chops in the music video, playing dual roles.

"Kroeger: "Gotta Be Somebody" (2008)" -- As far as Nickelback's catalogue goes, this one is actually decent. When he sings "There's gotta be somebody for me out there," Kroeger's voice almost achieves melody. Credit where credit is due: Unlike the band's other hits, I could imagine hearing this song in a grocery store and not smashing everything in sight. It's a bad song, sure, but it's not aggressively, obnoxiously bad.

"Lavigne: "What the Hell" (2011)" -- I love the '60s jukebox organ that kicks it off, and while the lyrics aren't deep, they are delivered in the hookiest way as Avril sings: "All my life I've been good, but now/Oh-oh-oh-oh I'm thinking what the hell?"

Like I say, I could approach my pro-Lavigne argument from two directions. One, I honestly think she's released some legitimately good singles. Two, everything Nickelback has released this century is horrible. My friend Brian summed it up best: "Nickelback set out to unleash some of the worst butt rock in the history of mankind willingly. And there's a special place in hell for them."

But I don't mean to influence the voting. Just listen to the songs above to refresh your memory, and cast your vote in the comment thread below. Who's worse among this couple?