



“All Things Considered”

CAKE: FLYING HIGH AFTER A RECORD LOW

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In January, the California rock band [Cake](#) unveiled its sixth album, *Showroom of Compassion*. Released on the band's own independent label, Upbeat Records, the album debuted at No. 1 on the *Billboard* 200. However, it did so after selling just 44,000 copies — the lowest No. 1 in the 20-year history of calculating record sales.

That revelation reflects a music industry deeply changed since Cake's last new release about seven years ago. As lead singer John McCrea tells *All Things*

Considered host Melissa Block, he knew the band needed to proceed with caution.

"We had to sort of re-evaluate our whole business model," says McCrea. "We knew that it probably wasn't a good idea to be on a big label right now — but we also thought that we could be crushed like a bug releasing an album on our own label. Thankfully we were wrong, but we didn't have high hopes."

Though he's happy the new album is doing well by today's standards, McCrea says he's skeptical about the future of music as a vocation. "I see music as a really great hobby for most people in five or 10 years," he says. "I see everybody I know, some of them really important artists, studying how to do other jobs."

The anxiety of the working musician is on full view in a track from *Showroom Of Compassion*, the lilting "Bound Away." The song sounds a bit like a sea chantey, but it takes place mostly on an airplane and describes the interminable waiting a musician does when traveling on tour. "I'm circling, I'm swiveling, I'm waiting just to land / I'm trying to come home, but I'm here with the band," goes one couplet.

The new album also features a familiar sound from Cake's catalog: the buzzy percussion instrument called the vibraslap. Descended from an African instrument made out of the jawbone of a large mammal, the vibraslap isn't a natural fit for a rock band — but McCrae has always found ways to incorporate it. "It really can't be heard very well over the usual bombast of rock," he says. "I have to find places where the rock sort of recedes."

After two decades with Cake, McCrea has started to think about his life after the band — which might mean taking his interest in farming and gardening more seriously. "I think I want to live a little closer to the ground," he says. "There's something pretty healthy about working every day outdoors, and not being on an airplane all the time."

But for the moment, McCrea says he's content to keep playing. As for the dubious honor of making the lowest-selling No. 1 album ever, McCrea says that kind of contradiction is "perfect" for a band like Cake. "Optimism and pessimism are actually buddies sitting together on the same sofa," he says. "I mean, that's sort of what we're about."