

Opinion: Is art mimicking life in California?

By Joe Mathews

How is California doing these days? The answer depends on whether you believe Gov. Jerry Brown or Blink-182.

This summer has exposed a divide in perception of California between the political triumphalism of our elected officials and the more anxious state of affairs depicted in the broader culture.



Joe Mathews

Our state's political and media elites are selling the idea of a "California comeback." They say, in speeches, op-eds and books, that the Golden State, not so long ago dismissed as dysfunctional, is now a global and national model of balanced budgets and progressive policies on climate change and gun control.

But this summer, the portrayal of California by non-political storytellers is far less triumphant—in music and film, we're in a state of frustrations, forgotten places, and struggles.

No document speaks to this alternate view more powerfully than "California", the new album from Blink-182, the Southern California pop punk band. Blink-182's "California" this month rose to No. 1 on the Billboard 200 Chart, which ranks the top

albums across all genres.

"California" the album has no talk of comebacks. Its first song is called "Cynical" and it gets rougher from there, with tracks in which the narrator just tries to prevent decline. In "Home is Such a Lonely Place," Blink-182 sings, "we're falling faster than we can fly/Forgotten seconds out on Sunset Drive And I hold on tight/But not enough to hold you back."

The hit "Bored to Death" is even bleaker in its sense of disconnection in a California in which "life is too short to last long" and people are "broken, lost and cold and fading fast." The album's title track begins: "Beige little boxes in a row/Neighbors and friends that you don't know/Here's a form go wait in line." My favorite song on the album is "No Future," with its infectious and taunting chorus: "You don't know a thing about it/Hours lost to dawn from dusk/Yeah, they don't care about you."

Of course, Blink-182 is punk, of a sort, and punk isn't supposed to be happy. But the same sense of anxiety and foreboding about California has been a strong recent theme even from more upbeat singers. Last year's California-heavy album "Wildheart" from Miguel, the Grammy winner from San Pedro, was popular for its frankly sexual songs and mood, but couldn't disguise an underlying fear of decline. "Heart caught in a rip tide, cold Pacific waters keep on pulling me under," he sang on the album hit "Leaves," with its chorus juxtaposing "sweet California, sour California, bitter California."

Blink-182 writes about not being able to go home again, the same idea at the center of the plot of the year's top grossing movie, "Finding Dory", from Emeryville-based Pixar. Dory, a Pacific blue tang fish with Ellen DeGeneres' voice, rides a current to California, a scary journey. A giant squid tries to eat her fish friends, and she ends up confined to an aquarium.

Dory, it turns out, is from Morro Bay. And like so many Californians who grew up along the coast, she dreams of figuring out a way to return home and live near her parents. While this is very difficult for human Californians, given the daunting combination of stagnant incomes and sky-high housing prices, Dory is a fish in a movie fantasy so—spoiler alert!—she escapes the aquarium and finds her family in the waters of San Luis Obispo County.

Of course, these days, no California triumph can be celebrated whole-heartedly. The San Francisco start-up Niantic (a Google spin-off) had little time to celebrate the global triumph of its Pokémon Go, before a massive public backlash against the free smartphone game began. And then hackers shut it down, temporarily ruining everyone's fun.

California's mix of political triumphalism and cultural anxiety has left the public somewhere in the middle. In a new Field Poll, a narrow majority of voters says the state is "on the right track" even as other surveys show stubborn and broad concerns about the economy, drought and the country as a whole.

The best cultural approximation of this middle ground comes from a new song "The Other California," written by Erin Friedman who along with her husband, Craig, make up the duo Still Married. Their song is a celebration of the far north part of the state—the musicians also run a shipping business in Redding—that's "rugged, raw and real."

During a phone interview, I asked Erin Friedman to name her favorite California song and she mentioned the Eagles' "Hollywood Waltz," which argues for finding a middle ground between California's hype and disappointment.

"So give her this dance," went the chorus of that 1975 hit, "She can't be forsaken. Learn how to love her with all of her faults."

Joe Mathews writes the Connecting California column for Zocalo Public Square.