

# Born This Way and the Lady Gaga phenomenon

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Pop singer Lady Gaga has returned with her third album *Born This Way*. Both the album, and its title track, have gained attention for the singer's outspoken support for gay rights. The title track has also been criticized, with some justification, for its obvious resemblance to Madonna's music of the 1980s.

Since her debut album *The Fame* in 2008, and subsequent hits such as "Paparazzi," "Bad Romance," and "Poker Face," Lady Gaga has been hailed as a groundbreaking and controversial artist. Her outlandish stage costumes, music videos and public appearances routinely make headlines.

Among her more famous, or infamous, stunts came with an appearance at the 2010 MTV Video Music Awards show, during which she wore a dress made entirely of meat. A series of recent television interviews saw Gaga appearing in prosthetic makeup designed to create the illusion of bones or horns protruding from beneath her skin. More recently, she appeared on the British talk show Paul O'Grady Live wearing a bald cap and singing her song "Hair" to a wig resting on a mannequin's head placed atop her piano.

A self-described performance artist, Lady Gaga seeks to shock and titillate. But how shocking is any of this really? Both the acclaim the singer has received as well as the attempt by the media to drum up controversy around her are out of proportion to her actual talents and the actual "shock," or lack thereof, in the content of her music. Behind the eccentric costumes, one sees, especially on her latest album, a great deal of conventional thinking and musical ideas that exhausted

themselves decades ago.

There is something stale and calculated about Lady Gaga. Spontaneity and surprise are generally absent in her work. The costuming, the fake blood, the constant and nostalgic reference to other artists' music can only get her so far, and the superficiality of thinking and feeling evident in her songs is more pronounced than ever with *Born This Way*.

Something of a caricature of contemporary dance music, virtually every song on Gaga's new album is built around a pounding metronome of a beat with little if any rhythmic variation or inventiveness. Such tedious productions tend to numb listeners rather than enliven or engage them. The guitar and synthesizers are set to the expected tone for the genre and play their standard role. It is, at every turn, what one would expect.

"I'm beautiful in my way," sings Lady Gaga on "Born This Way," "cause God makes no mistakes." The religious theme continues: "There's nothing wrong with loving who you are," she sings, "cause He made you perfect, babe." "Don't be a drag, just be a queen," goes the refrain. Conceived partly as a response to anti-gay bigotry, the first single from *Born This Way* is an anthem of self-empowerment. "We are all born superstars," she sings.

Some of the narrow mindedness and naïveté of identity politics is expressed in the song. While Gaga's opposition to anti-gay bigotry may be heartfelt, including her desire to comfort those who have been hurt by it, the encouragement of gay, racial or national pride is of no help. Not a reinforcement, but a destruction and crossing over of all such boundaries is

desperately needed at present, including if one wishes to combat anti-gay prejudice.

That one finds in Lady Gaga's work such limited ways of thinking and feeling about the world generally is not so surprising. The artistic and intellectual climate in which Lady Gaga, born Stefani Germanotta in New York City in 1986, developed as an artist has presented considerable difficulties. Certainly the middle class, "left" liberal milieu the young singer has gravitated toward has been dominated by identity politics, cynicism and complacency.

The contemporary art world, in which Gaga has immersed herself, contains more than its share of self-absorption and triviality. Lady Gaga has been an all too uncritical receptor to all of this. Among the singer's biggest influences is blockbuster artist Damien Hirst, whose vacuous work brings in top dollar on the art market. Quentin Tarantino, whose repugnant films Gaga paid tribute to in the 2010 music video for her song "Telephone," has been another influence. All things considered, this is not a school in which one learns to explore the truth of social life in art, a difficult undertaking even in the best of circumstances.

Gaga's weaknesses are on display throughout the new work. "Edge of Glory," the latest single from *Born This Way*, demonstrates again Lady Gaga's nostalgia for 1980s pop. Described by the singer as "Springsteen-esque," the song features the same sort of fist-pumping, high-octane chorus that was all too common in the 1980s, a sound, frankly, that the best musicians of the period tended to avoid. The song is about the importance of living one's life to the full because each day could be our last. To assist her in creating the supposedly Springsteen-esque feel of the song, Gaga brought in Bruce Springsteen's longtime saxophonist Clarence Clemons, who died on June 18, to perform on the track.

In addition to her nostalgia for the 1980s, the song also demonstrates Gaga's awkwardness as a lyricist. "I got a reason that you're who should take me home," she sings, and, later, "Right on the limits is where we know we both belong tonight." One can find similarly distracting lyrics throughout her discography.

In "Judas," a song about battling one's inner demons, Gaga sings "Jesus is my virtue and Judas is the demon I cling to." Again, there is something superficial and banal at the center of this material, which has been criticized for "going too far." The music video for "Judas," featuring a depiction of Jesus and his disciples as a biker gang, attracted considerable attention in the media, as it was meant to. There is something very strained in all of this, both in the art itself and in the media's efforts to make a scandal of it.

The titles alone of some of the other songs on the album give a sense of what the remainder is like: "Heavy Metal Lover," "Highway Unicorn (Road to Love)," "Scheiße." Anything and everything but a sense of real life.



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