

Frank Ocean's *Channel Orange*

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Channel Orange, the debut from Frank Ocean, was one of the more intriguing albums released in 2012. Though not entirely consistent, the album, at its best, combines layered storytelling, confident musical direction and an emotional depth missing in most popular American music last year.

Frank Ocean is the name used by New Orleans native Christopher Breaux, a 25-year-old R&B singer-artist who came to Los Angeles in 2005 after his university and the local recording studio he frequented were severely damaged by Hurricane Katrina. While working part-time jobs, he made his way into the music industry by writing songs for up-and-coming R&B and hip hop artists. He began recording and distributing his own musical contributions when he joined the gothic, dark hip hop collective Odd Future.

Prior to *Channel Orange*, Ocean's only output as a solo artist was a free online "mix-tape" of largely sample-backed recordings in an EP called *Nostalgia, Ultra*. He continues to write songs for other popular artists—notably Jay Z, Kanye West and Beyoncé—and still collaborates with Odd Future. His current album contains liner notes implying that he is gay, something of a taboo in the world of hip-hop and R&B. *Channel Orange* is comprised of a series of vignettes about social life, complicated relationships and emotional struggle. The musical production, largely carried out by Ocean and creative partner Malay, employs a variety of approaches grounded in R&B and soul, but extending into other genres, including hip hop, rock and electronic music.

With an often soulful and compelling sound, Ocean tells stories that reveal a sensitive eye for detail and structure. Many of the songs build to a climax, change direction halfway through or take an unexpected turn.

At times, Ocean's efforts provide a sense—or at least a hint—of underlying difficulties in social and psychological life today. The song "Sweet Life," for

instance, is a lushly orchestrated, seemingly carefree song told from the perspective of an African American family that moved to a middle class neighborhood in south-central Los Angeles, likely during the 1970s, before manufacturing bottomed out in the area ("Living in Ladera Heights/ The black Beverly Hills/ Domesticated paradise/ Palm trees and pools, swallow the pill").

The bright, self-satisfied refrain—"So why see the world, when you've got the beach"—suggests people preoccupied with a comfortable lifestyle and prepared to tune out the rest of the world. And yet, without much warning, the last lines imply that the world has now come crashing back into the picture, "It's everything I thought it'd be/ But this neighborhood is getting trippier everyday/ This neighborhood, is going apeshit crazy"—followed by a giant howl from Ocean.

Other songs end with a similar, disturbing coda: an underemployed, young father's last thoughts express anxiety about his daughter's future in "Sierra Leone"; a spoiled kid's day comes to some kind of "crash" at the end of "Super Rich Kids." To his credit, Ocean rarely simplifies things in his songs; most situations are left unresolved, foreboding often lurks beneath the surface.

The strongest song on the album, "Crack Rock," sincerely portrays the life of a man addicted to crack cocaine. The music is buffeted by a taut, propelling drum rhythm that alternates with spare organ and keyboard accompaniments. As is the case with many of Ocean's songs, certain details in the lyrics grab your attention: "You're shucking and jiving, stealing and robbing, to get that fix you're itching for. Your family stopped inviting you to things, won't let you hold their infant."

The narrator's refrain is initially sung in a plaintive manner—almost deliberately unemotional—but gradually builds. Near the end, after comparing the shooting

deaths of a crooked, drug-dealing cop (“300 men will search for me”) to that of his crack-addicted brother (“Don’t no one hear the sound”), Ocean’s refrain is sung at an incredibly intense emotional pitch, and oscillates between a scream and a whisper, which adds an unexpected depth. *Channel Orange* is a musically restrained work, but rarely dull. Certain songs—particularly “Thinking ‘Bout You” and “Bad Religion”—are sparse but lovely. This is due, first and foremost, to Ocean’s strength as a vocalist. He possesses a baritone voice, but is capable of singing tenor. His fluctuations of tone and volume almost always serve the arc of the song, rather than the song being a showcase for the voice.

The small, revealing lyrical details that infuse several songs (“Pilot Jones,” “Bad Religion” and “Super Rich Kids” for instance) become more significant in the quieter songs, and add subtle layers to seemingly straightforward tales. Ultimately, Ocean emerges as an artist capable of portraying social life in a complicated and thoughtful manner.

The album is not a complete success. It meanders at times, particularly its later songs. With the exception of “Bad Religion”—a confessional song about unrequited love set to moving string orchestration—none of the songs from “Pyramids” through to the end of the album are as engaging or creative as those in the first half.

Frequently in the second half of the album Ocean returns to murky scenes of life amidst prostitution, stripping and drug-dealing. While there are certainly revelations and meaningful stories to be found here, the listener is most often forced to see the world through the eyes of the pimp, would-be pimp or drug dealer (“Lost,” “Pink Matter,” “Pyramids,” “Monks”). With perhaps the exception of the second half of “Pyramids” (a ten minute song), neither the music nor the storytelling makes these subjects particularly interesting or compelling.

“Monks” and “Pink Matter,” for instance, are scattered and bland, and the latter suffers particularly from a barely there, incredibly slow bass-line as well as the rapper Andre 3000’s unfocused musings.

The last two songs, “Forrest Gump” and “Golden Girl,” are upbeat love songs, but they are largely out of place after the battery of songs about the seedy side of life. Taken as an album, *Channel Orange* moves from fairly personal, focused stories towards more general,

distant storytelling about features of reality that, frankly, have been all too well covered in R&B and hip hop, with just as little fresh insight.

The weaknesses in the second half of the album may be bound up with the inevitable pressures of the music business and Ocean’s aforementioned collaborations prior to *Channel Orange*. The honest emotions and willingness to look directly at life on much of this album far surpass anything in the output of the artists for whom he has written songs in the past. In fact, it was a bit of a surprise to find such warmth and sincerity on Ocean’s debut album, as there was very little evidence of those qualities in his work with the dreary, immature Odd Future or the self-involved bombast of Kanye West, Jay-Z or Beyoncé.

The album’s strengths surpass its weaknesses, and there is persuasive evidence that Frank Ocean is a serious and moving musical artist.



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