

Wealth and status under fire: Lorde's *Pure Heroine*

Ed Hightower
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Popular culture is in a pretty bad place at present. This is perhaps especially true of hip-hop music. Seemingly every hit song and every successful artist in the genre describes a world of material wealth and privileged lifestyles, complete with mansions, luxury cars, designer clothes and premium liquor. Ninety-nine percent of human life seems to take place “in the club” or “on the dance floor.” Vanishingly little is revealed about the experiences of the vast majority of the world’s population, whose lives are miles away from the Rolls Royces, diamond jewelry and champagne bottles of the mainstream hip hop industry.

Enter 16-year-old New Zealand pop singer Ella Yelich O’Connor, stage name “Lorde.” Her hit single “Royals” debuted at number one on the New Zealand pop charts in March and soon became an international favorite, topping the US Billboard Hot 100 for the past three weeks.

O’Connor said in an interview that she had a sneaking suspicion that “Royals” would make waves in the United States.

“I’ve never seen a diamond in the flesh,” the first verse begins, with the singer describing a life without privilege “in a torn up town,” with “no post code envy.” The second verse depicts the singer and her friends counting their dollars on the train, not, in this case, to show off their riches but to make sure they have enough to make it through the night. They “didn’t come from money,” she sings. The refrain of “Royals” is the center of the song, contrasting the ordinary lives of Lorde and her friends with the wealthy lifestyles portrayed in hip hop and pop music:

“But every song’s like,
‘Gold teeth, Grey Goose, tripping in the bathroom,
Blood stains, ball gowns, trashing the hotel room,’
We don’t care

We’re driving Cadillacs in our dreams.
“But everybody’s like,
‘Cristal, Maybach, diamonds on your time piece
Jet planes, islands, tigers on a gold leash
We don’t care
We aren’t caught up in your love affair”

For those uninitiated in the world of mainstream hip-hop, Cristal is the preferred champagne to rap about, priced at over \$200 US for a bottle, and a Maybach is an ultra-luxury car, whose 2013 editions start at a boast-worthy \$376,000 US. The latter reference is a barb aimed specifically at rapper Rick Ross, whose every song features a woman saying, “Maybach music” in voiceover, as if stamping it with a brand name.

The lines which give “Royals” its name also bear quoting:

“And we’ll never be royals
It don’t run in our blood
That kind of luxe just ain’t for us
We crave a different kind of buzz.”

At first listen, “Royals” is something very different from anything else on the pop charts. With a slow but catchy beat, impressive vocals and a rapid-fire refrain that thrusts against the worst in hip-hop while employing elements of the latter’s style, the song gives expression to changing sentiments. While pop music may be the immediate target, a certain disgust with official life as a whole is finding expression here.

The success of “Royals” also blows a hole through any claim that popular music in general, and hip-hop in particular, presents wealth-worship and other light-minded banalities because this is what audiences demand. The success of “Royals” proves that large numbers of people have something quite different in mind.

“Royals” is the first of Lorde’s singles to succeed in

the United States so far, but other tracks from the *Pure Heroine* album are finding their way onto the airwaves, including most recently the single, “Team.” Here the sentiments expressed in “Royals” find elaboration:

“We live in cities you’ll never see on screens
Not very pretty but we sure know how to run things
Living in the ruins of a palace within my dreams
And you know
We’re on each other’s team.”

And later:

“I’m kind of over getting told to throw my hands up
in the air

So there.

I’m kind of older than I was when I reveled without a
care

So there.”

Several tracks address young love, including “Tennis Court” “400 Lux” and “Ribs.” In each of these the artist avoids cliché and generally succeeds in honestly bringing the subject matter to life. A heartfelt, caring quality pervades these songs.

Lorde is the daughter of award-winning New Zealand poet Sonja Yelich, and has clearly taken something from her mother’s craft. Just as important to her artistic development has been the era in which she was born, filled with increasing social inequality, innumerable military conflicts and an accompanying cultural climate of stagnation and decline. All of this has had a tremendous impact on the young artist.

It is to Lorde’s credit that she has directed her talents to criticism of this culture. She appears to be an artist willing to go her own way. Lorde recently told interviewers on a New Zealand television show that she had turned down an invitation to tour with American pop star Katy Perry, a tour that would have brought immediate financial rewards. One imagines this decision was not arrived at lightly, and possibly faced strong opposition from record label executives.

While “Royals” has attracted a large audience, the song has also come under attack in some quarters. Lorde has recently received accusations of racism from feminist blogger Veronica Bayetti Flores. Writing for the blog *Feministing*, Flores stated on October 3:

“While I love a good critique of wealth accumulation and inequity, this song is not one; in fact, it is deeply racist. Because we all know who she’s thinking when we’re talking gold teeth, Cristal and Maybachs. So why

shit on black folks? Why shit on rappers? Why aren’t we critiquing wealth by taking hits at golf or polo or Central Park East? Why not take to task the bankers and old-money folks who actually have a hand in perpetuating and increasing wealth inequality? I’m gonna take a guess: racism. I don’t have to explain why wealth operates differently among folks who’ve grown up struggling because this shit has been explained already: *If you grew up with holes in your zapatos you’d celebrate the minute you was having dough.*”

This is nothing more than a justification for the worst kind of backwardness. For Flores, the obscene glorification of wealth and the most ruthless means of attaining it are entirely acceptable so long as the right people are doing it. Her comments expose the true class basis of identity politics. It is entirely to Lorde’s credit that flunkies of Flores’ caliber attack her work. One hopes that Lorde’s development as an artist will include taking on even more challenging subject matter while retaining her integrity and deepening and expanding her sensitivities. *Pure Heroine* is a strong start.



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