

Pharrell Williams' *Girl* troubles

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Last year Pharrell Williams made waves with his role in the recording of two smash hits, the Grammy-winning "Get Lucky" by Daft Punk and "Blurred Lines" by Robin Thicke. Each was tremendously popular with audiences.

On his new album, *Girl*, Williams continues to explore the danceable, pop-soul hybrid that gained him such prominence with those collaborations. Much of the music on this new collection recalls Quincy Jones-produced Michael Jackson, or the work of some of the more likeable, if not exactly profound, disco performers of the mid-to-late 1970s including Chic, Patrice Rushen or Maze & Frankie Beverly.

Williams is talented. As one half of the renowned production duo The Neptunes, he has left his mark on popular culture. The group has been responsible for some of the more interesting sounds in mainstream hip hop and pop music over the last decade or more. His music has some life to it. It is well produced, but not overproduced. That Williams' beats, however, are so often sold to top-dollar rappers who do little more than rap about their top dollars is unfortunate. The Neptunes are best heard in their instrumental B-sides.

As a singer, Williams often employs a somewhat dubious falsetto that strains to reach the necessary notes—a poor man's Curtis Mayfield. One tends to root for him in spite of it. Perhaps it is the sense of cool he conveys, or the absence of any great claims on his part to begin with.

His *Girl* is an enjoyable album...up to a point. One should not make more of it than is actually there.

Among the more successful songs is "Brand New," a duet with Justin Timberlake. An up-tempo love song, it captures some of the sweetness and starry-eyed infatuation of a budding romance. The pulsating four-on-the-floor beat and the repeating keyboard figure that works its way into a brass fanfare carries with it some of the momentum of falling in love.

"Happy," the album's hit single, which was also nominated for an Academy Award for its inclusion in the animated film *Despicable Me 2*, has its pleasures too. A dance record, in the classic sense, the beat is excellent. Along with Williams' falsetto, it reminds one of nothing so much as the early dance records of The Miracles, especially "Going to a Go-Go" (1965).

"Lost Queen" makes an impression as well. With samples of South African harmony vocal groups, hand percussion and laid-back lead vocals (and one of the few songs on which Williams does not sing falsetto), it is an appealing track and stands out as something unusual in today's pop music landscape.

There is one lyric, however, that gives one pause. "Though my planet's full of warfare, you make it feel like a dream," sings Williams. While there is something to be said for finding a certain strength in camaraderie, this comes very close to complacency. It's almost as though Williams is saying the world is going to hell and there's nothing we can do about it, but at least we have each other. "Happy," in its way, suffers from this as well. It would seem to suggest that cultivating some inner peace or personal happiness in the face of "all that stuff on the news" is all one truly needs.

It is this withdrawal in the face of the more difficult and disturbing aspects of the present situation and of the effort to work through them—this attempt to exist alongside the world, but never deeply in it—that prevents the album from really becoming something more significant, something genuinely important.

Artists like Williams, Timberlake, Bruno Mars and others are likeable and talented performers, and they seem free from the cynicism and posturing of someone like Lady Gaga. They're on the level, but their level is not really high enough.

Williams and the others happen to be quite well off at the moment, and somewhat isolated from the daily struggles of ordinary people. Their preoccupations

remain close to home, particularly in the bedroom. They are a little too complacent and too comfortable. While “Happy,” again, has its pleasant qualities, one is also tempted to ask Williams: “Just what are you so happy about?”

Influenced by the soul music of an earlier period, these artists have learned to produce their own versions of Marvin Gaye’s *Let’s Get It On* or *I Want You*. They have gravitated towards love and especially towards eroticism. But do they have a *What’s Going On* in them?

How much of this feels really indispensable in the end? Williams, for his part, has at least been able to connect with and entertain large audiences. Let the performer take up weightier themes and it might even surprise him just how deeply the connection would then become.



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