

Beyoncé, the new album

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Beyoncé Knowles-Carter (born 1981 in Houston, Texas) is likely one of the most recognizable pop stars in the United States today, if not the world. She has sold over 30 million records as a solo artist, and another 20 million with her former R&B group, Destiny's Child. She has performed in the Super Bowl half-time show, starred in several movies, appeared in countless television commercials and is married to one of the world's biggest hip-hop stars, Jay Z (Sean Carter). The couple has an estimated \$850 million in combined wealth.

The pair also have a somewhat cozy relationship with the Obama administration. Beyoncé sang at both presidential inaugurations, and most recently at a private birthday performance for Michelle Obama.

Given her financial and political connections, and her nearly inevitable cocoon-like lifestyle, it is perhaps not surprising just how *little* the music featured on the singer's new, eponymous album manages to convey of contemporary life.

Beyoncé, the album, was accompanied by music videos for each of its 14 songs. It has already collected a large following on YouTube. The lead singles "XO," "Drunk in Love" and "Pretty Hurts" have together been viewed more than 150 million times. The album has been downloaded from iTunes over 2 million times.

Beyoncé rarely fails to attract a large audience to her music. She knows how to put on a show. She has produced countless highly choreographed dance videos and concerts. The often sleek, catchy productions that have generally accompanied her music also have their appeal, up to a point. Two of her biggest hits are "Crazy in Love" and "Single Ladies"—the former punctuated by enveloping, uplifting horns (reminiscent of Stevie Wonder's "Sir Duke") and the latter structured with an instantly grabbing, snappy rhythm.

The music industry has bent over backward to promote Beyoncé as the "next great" female R&B

singer, the heir apparent to singers like Etta James, Nina Simone and Aretha Franklin. Her earlier, slightly warmer efforts with Destiny's Child may have been promising, but her solo output has not been comparable to that of those of more talented singers, both in emotional depth and the complexity of the subject matter they took on.

Beyoncé the album was produced by a small army of writers and producers, forty-four in all. Most of the production was helmed by a relatively unknown hip-hop producer named Boots. Press releases are emphatic that Beyoncé had at least a hand in writing the lyrics on every song.

Though not a huge deviation, *Beyoncé* is musically a bit more experimental than her previous albums. We find her moving away from standard ballads and pop structures and toward more studio manipulation and stripped-down electronic production. The tempo of the songs range from slower, contemplative productions ("No Angel," "Heaven," "Superpower") to up-tempo, electro-fueled songs ("Drunk In Love," "Ghost/Haunted"), to bass-heavy, "trap" beat songs ("Partition"). The studio itself, as opposed to a backing band or an orchestra, is the primary instrument on most of the music.

There are occasional moments of spontaneity and ear-catching qualities within the production. For instance, a slower, funk-driven song like "Mine" unexpectedly turns into a faster, electro-backed duet (with the lamentable rapper Drake). The finger snaps and trap beats of "Partition" at times turn into bass-heavy, dancehall rhythms.

As with all her previous albums, though, the real emphasis is on Beyoncé's powerhouse vocals. She certainly sets out to *convey* intensity in much of what she sings. However, one is struck by how little her growls and belting, on the one hand, and her lilting lower register cooing, on the other, actually

communicate.

Beyoncé's voice very often fails to reach genuinely *moving* levels. Oftentimes, this is because the lyrics and the ideas or feeling behind the music are so weak. But there is also a machine-like, cold efficiency to the manner in which she approaches songs (compare for instance, her version of Etta James' "At Last" from the movie *Cadillac Records* to the original). One finds on the latest recording a lot of strained, upper register bellowing, dramatic voice-range shifts (sometimes mid-song) and even rapping.

In terms of its emotional content, the album reveals almost nothing about social life or stress, to say nothing about the complexities of a relationship or motherhood. Once one gets past the occasionally exciting musical flourish, there is shockingly little. A sense of being physically closed in comes across, as if the world outside Beyoncé's home and marriage does not exist.

Approximately half the songs on the album are largely comprised of incredibly weak metaphors for sexual desires or acts. One can gather that these songs (particularly "Rocket," "No Angel," "Drunk in Love" and "Blow") are intended to convey intense moments between two people who love each other—however, they mostly come across as vacuous encounters between virtual strangers, closer to pornography than to genuine emotion.

There are a few "light" love songs such as "XO," "Superpower" and "Blue," but their emotional impact is weakened by generally nondescript lyrics—with refrains like "I love you, love you, like XO" or "Nothing I know can break us, they can't break us."

Three songs are to intended to address women's empowerment directly: the feminist essay "Flawless" about gender equality, a song about the pressures of women trying to look good ("Pretty Hurts") and another ("Partition") that combines the two (looking good at a club and having "empowering" sex), which ends with a French movie quote that serves as an album leitmotif of sorts ("Men think feminists hate sex. But it's a stimulating and natural activity that women love").

Interspersed in the songs are details that gradually paint a bigger picture of a person, or couple, who have very different "life and relationship" problems than the vast majority of the working population. Lyrical details in songs like "Drunk In Love" ("Armand de Brignac,

gangster wife," "Louis sheets," "cigars on ice") or "Partition" ("Chauffeur eavesdropping trying not to crash," "Oh there daddy now you ripped my fur") or "Jealous" ("I'm up in this penthouse half-naked") are embarrassing and self-absorbed. The world outside of the penthouse stocked with expensive liquor hardly ever intrudes on the stories.

Ultimately, the album is intended to be a sexually risqué, emotionally honest foray into the contradictions of a loving relationship. It presents this very poorly. If this is an expedition into Beyoncé's married life, one is simply bored to tears. There is much to say about love, passion, heartache, loss, longing, anxiety and emotional excitement that should be conveyed in popular musical, particularly in an era of social and political crisis. Virtually none of this registers in *Beyoncé*.



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