

# Social problems begin to come to the fore in Billie Eilish's debut album

Elliott Murtagh and J. L'Heureau  
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Eighteen-year-old pop star Billie Eilish is the first artist born in the 21st century to top the *Billboard 200* music charts. Her 2019 debut album, *When We All Fall Asleep, Where Do We Go?*, was the most globally popular album of the year, breaking a slew of sales and streaming records, including the biggest North American debut of the decade by any individual or group.

Eilish has been labeled the “voice of her generation” and swept her first appearance at the Grammy Awards, held in January, alongside her 22-year-old brother, Finneas O'Connell, Eilish's producer and co-songwriter, with each winning five awards.

The duo, who made the album in O'Connell's bedroom at their parents' house, won for record of the year, album of the year and song of the year, with Eilish winning best new artist and best pop vocal album and O'Connell winning best nonclassical engineered album and best nonclassical producer of the year.

Eilish's album was released in the midst of a crisis-ridden reality to which, both consciously and unconsciously, much of her music responds and which it reflects, taking up the problems, for example, of global warming, drug addiction, suicide, fear and loneliness.

Eilish grew up in Los Angeles, and was homeschooled by her parents, who are, among other things, film and television actors. Billie has explained in interviews that she grew up poor, living in pre-gentrified Highland Park, where she “couldn't go outside past dark because it was too dangerous,” with the sound of gunshots frequent.

In 2015, at the age of thirteen, she recorded vocals for Finneas's song, “Ocean Eyes,” which they uploaded to the music-sharing website SoundCloud on her fourteenth birthday. The song, a simple, catchy and slickly produced pop tune with a subdued feeling, reminiscent of singer Lana Del Rey, instantly went viral and scored the siblings a major label record deal with Interscope Records, owned by Universal Music Group.

Following this success, Eilish and O'Connell coproduced and released a handful of singles and an EP, entitled *don't smile at me* (August 2017). In this early phase of Eilish's career, her music generally seems to be focused more on attaining a particular in-style pop sound than on expressing something genuine or original. The music often sounds tired and perfunctory, with lyrics that add up to a picture of confused despair. *When We All Fall Asleep, Where Do We Go?* was released last year on March 29.

The most popular song on the album and the second most streamed song of 2019, “bad guy,” helped establish Billie's new

sound. She departs from her earlier overproduced pop music, and utilizes sparser elements with her now trademarked intimate, close-miked vocals that jump between being dry and affected.

The song's lyrics are based on the trite conception that to be “bad” is to be cool:

I'm that bad type  
Make your mama sad type  
Make your girlfriend mad tight  
Might seduce your dad type  
I'm the bad guy, duh

The song features staccato vocals paired with a thumping bassline, driving drumbeat and a steady stream of handclaps and snaps, yet comes off as lethargic and not having much of anything serious or urgent to say. Though the song features a slightly nontraditional pop song form and semi-intriguing production, the musical content is incredibly simple, cycling through an unchanging 1-4-5 blues chord progression throughout.

In “xanny” (slang for the antianxiety medication, Xanax), Eilish sings a ballad (again moving back and forth between unaffected and heavily affected vocals and between genres throughout) opposing the recreational use of anxiety medication.

She sings “I don't need a xanny to feel better,” as well as exclaiming, “I can't afford to love someone who isn't dying by mistake.” This critique of youth drug culture comes amid a nationwide opioid crisis. Eilish explained, “I don't want my friends to die anymore,” in an interview about the song.

In “all the good girls go to hell,” Eilish sings a song about climate change written from the perspective of a disappointed God.

Commenting on the first line of the chorus, “Hills burn in California,” Billie said, “That's a natural thing to have now—a huge part of L.A. on fire and there's nothing you can do. The skies are all gray and orange, and that's natural. There's school shootings all the time and *that's* normal. That's f\*\*ked! This is our normal world and it's not weird to us because it's what we've [young people] always had.”

In an interview, Billie is asked to clarify the meaning of the song's verse lines:

Man is such a fool  
Why are we saving him?  
Poisoning themselves now  
Begging for our help, wow!

“It’s mankind that’s a f\*\*king fool. ... We are literally the flu. ... A lot of it’s about global warming and the world being so ruined by us.” This superficial, pessimistic view blames man-made global warming on humanity as a whole, instead of the capitalist class, which controls the world economy and determines its activities based on private profit and not social or environmental need.

The seventh track on the album, “when the party’s over,” has the most serious tone so far, pointing to the difficulty of letting a partner go after a breakup. The chorus reads, “Quiet when I’m comin’ home and I’m on my own. I could lie, say I like it like that, like it like that.” The melancholic song features a chorus of Eilish’s vocals accompanied by piano without any percussive elements or drums. The track’s non-reliance on sound effects or production trickery is noteworthy, especially since the song became a number-one radio hit single.

With “bury a friend,” which features the album’s title in its lyrics, Eilish performs a nightmarish song—complete with horror sound effects—exploring the possibility of a monster under her bed. She has stated that the song “inspired what the album is about.”

The chorus includes the lines, “Cannibal Class, Killing the Son, Bury a friend, I wanna end me.” Eilish, who has described herself as her “own worst enemy,” commented on this theme of self-hatred: “I feel that seeing that someone else feels just as horrible as you do is a comfort. It’s a good feeling. It’s someone to scream with.” But while empathy is useful, empathy alone or mixed with horror runs the risk of glorifying these negative feelings.

The darkest track on the album is “listen before i go,” a devastating song from the perspective of someone on a rooftop who has given up on being alive and is about to jump off. The song’s lyrics read like a suicide note, embellished with distant sirens, rainfall and screams, as well as a strained vocal performance that sounds as though Eilish were taking her own final breaths. “I’m not okay, I feel so scattered” is sung in the verse, while the chorus reads:

If you need me, wanna see me  
Better hurry ‘cause I’m leaving soon  
Sorry can’t save me now  
Sorry I don’t know how  
Sorry there’s no way out  
But down  
Down

About the song, *Variety* said, “You’d be hard pressed to find many other recent pop songs that feel as directly reported from the young-and-despondent front as this one does.”

It is worth noting that the artists have explicitly stated that their album is a conscious reaction to world events. Billie has stated,

“Things are so f\*\*ked, I’m just gonna make art about it,” while Finneas has said that he and Billie realized that the album “was kind of a grim reflection of the time that we’re growing up in.” Referring to remarks by various “grown-ups,” who question the “awfully dark motifs” in the album, Finneas observed in a radio interview, “Have you f\*\*king looked outside? ... What are [they] talking about?! This [album] is just about the world.”

Knowing this, the album’s title can read as a child-like inquiry into trying to understand the unconsciousness of a society in crisis, probing who we are and what drives us. Unfortunately, the album doesn’t provide much illumination along those lines.

In a *Time* magazine article about the album, Billie stated, “I really care about the world, and global warming, and animals, and how everything is ending, and I feel like nobody’s really realizing it.” This contradictory mix of caring and resignation is embedded in Eilish’s debut album and, ultimately, comes off as more of an embrace of the prevailing darkness supposedly looming over society than a show of opposition.

Overall, while inconsistent, Billie Eilish’s music at times shows some originality and expresses an authenticity and candor that separates her from her hyper-produced pop star contemporaries, whose overly polished music creates distance from the listener in a way Eilish’s does not. Social problems peek through and gain the foreground in Eilish’s music much more so than with other pop singers, and the fact that Eilish has begun to take up serious subject matter seems to have interested her generation.

However, even when Eilish’s lyrics take up substantial and more universal subject matter and her song production explores interesting territory, the music—specifically the harmony—is severely limited. The seemingly ubiquitous practice in Western popular music of regurgitating simple chord progressions that don’t stray into new terrain stifles the development of the language of music, exchanging its infinite possibilities for catchy melodies dressed up in shiny production. In an era of immense social crisis, popular music should reject the unchallenging in favor of its opposite: a striving to reflect the urgency and seriousness of the times, while pushing the language of music in every direction.



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