

Beyoncé's *Black is King*: A self-absorbed ode to “blackness”

Nick Barrickman
14 September 2020

Black is King is a musical film and visual album written, produced and performed by US singer Beyoncé, and released July 31 on the DisneyPlus streaming service. The work is inspired by music also performed by Beyoncé in Disney's 2019 remake of the animated film *The Lion King* and features an all-black cast of actors, musicians as well as behind-the-scenes personnel.

Beyoncé's movie-album has been referred to by certain critics as a “masterpiece” and holds an overall rating of 98 percent on film aggregator *Rotten Tomatoes* based on 55 reviews. The formulaic film follows a loose coming-of-age narrative starring a young African prince (played by Folajomi Akinmurele).

According to interviews, Beyoncé was inspired to create *Black is King* after learning about the plight of the South African composer Solomon Linda, who was the original writer of the 1960s international hit “The Lion Sleeps Tonight.” According to one account, Beyoncé wanted “to tell the real story of what happened and show Africa in its regalness and its beauty, because we weren't always slaves.”

The history behind “The Lion Sleeps Tonight” is complex. Linda's 1939 a capella song “Mbube” (“Lion”) was performed in Zulu and later adapted by a number of folk artists, including Pete Seeger and the Weavers as “Wimoweh” in the 1950s. The musicians may have been under the impression it was a traditional folk song. In 1961, the doo-wop group The Tokens recorded it as “The Lion Sleeps Tonight” and it topped the charts in the US. Through various circumstances and lapses, some inevitable as music crosses cultural and national boundaries, and others perhaps not so innocent, Linda was never given proper credit as writer for the international hit.

Linda's experience is sad and unfortunate. The weakness of *Black is King* is that whatever may have been legitimate about its aims has been buried under a deluge of identity politics and racist mythmaking, as well as the self-absorption and hubris that are the trademark of Beyoncé's musical persona. (As it turns out, the only reference to Linda appears in interviews with various individuals involved in the production of *Black is King*, making his story largely irrelevant to the piece as a whole.)

While the size and complexity of the effort are striking, the subject matter and content of the album are decidedly limited. Although certain melodies, choruses and overall set designs are catchy and even arresting at times, this is about the limit of the album's appeal.

The main focus of the album is Beyoncé herself. In a work ostensibly dedicated to righting historical wrongs, the singer is nearly ubiquitous, appearing in dozens of designer outfits by a list of who's who from Paris to New York and Los Angeles. One doesn't need to agree with the claims that Beyoncé has committed the cardinal sin of “appropriating” African culture to note her self-focus lends otherwise interesting cultural and landscape scenes a tawdry quality.

The visuals and music to the more upbeat “Don't Jealous Me” and “Already” (featuring Lord Africana and Shatta Wale, respectively) and “My Power,” as well as on the down tempo “Brown Skin Girl,” are catchy, but otherwise unimpressive. The dozens, if not hundreds, of artists and personnel involved in *Black is King* must be credited with crafting an album that is, at the least, very well produced. The drum programming of “Brown Skin Girl” is particularly warm, giving the rhythm and blues-tinged song a lively boost.

Associated with a less self-centered project, the presence of these varying influences and elements

might mark a powerful testament to human unity and cooperation.

The overall self-absorption coincides with the album's notion of the supposed "royal" heritage of the black-identifying population. The themes of heritage, "bloodlines" and "returning to one's roots" make a constant appearance on *Black is King*. At one point a narrating voice declares "I can't say I believe in God and call myself a child of God, and then not see myself as a god."

In one of the few critical comments on *Black is King*, the *Washington Post*'s Karen Attiah noted that the "message that black boys and men are kings and royalty plays like a propagandistic loop through 'Black Is King.'" Attiah added that like the film *Black Panther* before it, "'Black Is King' nurtures the notion that the only Black African men who deserve to be celebrated and admired are royal ones, and not the healers, the thinkers, the farmers, the craftsmen."

This repugnant worship of the aristocratic principle is not accidental. According to *Forbes*, Beyoncé and her husband, the rapper Shawn "Jay-Z" Carter, are billionaires when their wealth is combined. As of 2018, Carter was worth over \$900 million while Beyoncé is worth \$350 million. Carter's appearance on the song "Mood 4 Eva," in which he boasts of being "the first one to see a 'b' [billion] out these housing buildings," manages to steal the show for the most conceited and obnoxious wealth flaunting on the album.

The racist conceptions behind the album have won the praise of various commentators. "In a move that is both culturally and monetarily astute, Beyoncé is centered on a Black audience that is too often overlooked," says Kinitra D. Brooks in the *Post*. Fleshing out the views on the album, Brooks adds: "As the question 'Who are you?' repeats again and again, it becomes clear that the film is most interested in what Black folks say to each other and about each other. White people are welcome to watch, but they are not the focus."

This is simply foul. What none of the various upper middle class cultural critics bother to explain is how anyone can create an enduring work of art, which by definition sets as its goal the portrayal of life as it is, while adhering to unscientific and regressive racist views. Nor is it explained how it is possible (although we have some idea) for an "artistic" idea to be

"monetarily astute."

That such retrograde conceptions prevail in portions of the cultural and entertainment establishment is another sign of the immense degradation of art and culture within a diseased capitalist social system. Rather than "returning to their [racial-ethnic] roots" and excluding others, working people require an accurate appraisal of reality, their common interests and the state of society as a whole. Self-obsessed, multi-millionaire charlatans need not apply.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact