

Beyoncé's *Renaissance*: Banal, lifeless musical output as “major cultural event”

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Renaissance is the seventh studio album from mega-celebrity and “musical superstar” Beyoncé Knowles-Carter. It is her first official solo album in over six years, excluding recent releases such as 2018's *Everything is Love* (released as a collaboration between herself and her real life husband, billionaire rapper Shawn “Jay-Z” Carter) and 2020's visual album *Black is King*. It is billed as “Act I” in a three-part series of material compiled during the pandemic.

The album has been praised as a work of “genius” (*Variety*), as “revolutionary” (NPR) and as “unmitigated ecstasy” (*New York Times*). According to the hip hop media publication *The Source*, all 16 songs from the “trailblazing” album “have landed a spot on the Billboard Hot 100 chart,” something only a handful of female entertainers have accomplished.

In reality, the appearance of a new Beyoncé album is not primarily a musical or artistic development. It is, first and foremost, a dual economic and political one. A portion of the US recording and entertainment industry depends on the massive commercial triumph of the album, and that other leading American “industry,” identity politics, led by the *New York Times*, ties its racist and nationalist program in part to her success. For these reasons, “reviews” by and large mean plaudits. The performer suffers in this process, because she will almost never hear honest criticism.

That the release of *Renaissance*, in all its banality, is treated as a major event is itself revealing, a sign of cultural stagnation and decay. Once upon a time, the release of a record by a significant popular artist might have meant an interesting or revealing shift, a new approach to music or to social realities. Such things were widely anticipated for what they potentially indicated about the state of the world, for what they might encourage (or stifle) in popular thinking and feeling. But did anyone expect anything important from *Renaissance*, aside from the sales it might generate?

Renaissance emerges in the midst of an unprecedented social, health and political crisis. Vast numbers of people have fallen victim to infection during the COVID-19 pandemic. In regard to the pandemic, Knowles-Carter writes—in liner notes at her Instagram social media page—that creating “this album allowed me a place to dream and to find escape during a scary time for the world.” She writes further that the music “allowed me to feel free and adventurous in a time when little else was moving.”

Knowles-Carter's vocals often ricochet, transform and shape-shift; going from deadpan to conversational, from a staccato rap-like delivery before switching to a sultry or melodic tone in the chorus. “Gold links, raw denim/ You know that we do it grande/ You know that I'm gon' be extra/ When that camera go, ‘Pop, pop, pop, pop, pop, pop, pop’/ Keep 'em waitin' like dot, dot, dot, dot, dot, dot,” she raps

on “Energy.”

The lead single, “Break My Soul,” ostensibly an ode to leaving a depressing, dead-end job, is noteworthy in that it speaks about a social issue outside of the singer's own experience. However, her attention to this topic is fleeting and proves a brief detour before she turns back toward her preferred self-absorption.

After lyrics that recount how “I just quit my job... Damn, they work me so damn hard,” and refer to being forced to be at “Work by nine/ Then off past five,” the singer stops short. She then directs the listener toward the dance floor, where she's “lookin' for a new foundation.”

Renaissance includes numerous nods to LGBTQ+ groups and issues. “We dress a certain way/ We walk a certain way/ We talk a certain way... We, we make love a certain way, you know?” insists a sampled voice recording on “Alien Superstar.”

One is struck at first, despite the racist connotations, by the seriousness of such lines as “I just entered the country with derringers/ 'Cause them Karens just turned into terrorists” on the aforementioned “Energy.” However, this clear reference to the January 6, 2021 fascist coup attempt engineered by former President Donald Trump is trivialized by being juxtaposed to such lyrics as “Poppin' our pain and champagne through the ceiling.”

The inability to speak meaningfully when important subjects are broached reaches its most jarring levels near the album's end. One can only laugh derisively when confronted, on a song entitled “America Has a Problem,” with lyrics such as “Know that booty gon' do what it want to.”

Layers upon layers of vocal effects are added. In fact, there is an unsettled and frantic quality to much of the album. Many melodies on *Renaissance* have a pleasing and danceable quality, the product of months of work by some of the finest producers, musicians and studio technicians the multi-platinum singer can hire. Vocally, Knowles-Carter more than keeps up with the fast-paced pop music atmosphere.

However, despite the polished sound produced by the album's more than 60 musical contributors, *Renaissance* ends up feeling constricted and largely lifeless. The thought content and emotional level add up to very little.

This is not surprising, given the processes involved. An individual familiar with the record business offered this comment on the production of such “blockbusters”:

“Records of this type are made with the record companies' CEOs and Senior execs. An entire committee decides on repertoire. It typically begins with a smug A&R (Artist & Repertoire) vice president. These days that job belongs to someone young, because the accepted wisdom is that a young person is more in touch with youthful audiences. The reality, however, is that A&R people are quite

disconnected from the world of the vast majority of people who work for a living. Their relationship to the working masses is limited to interaction in fancy restaurants ordering from a menu or at a dance club getting drinks.

“Musical considerations are typically based on sensationalism, effects and artifacts, not melody or harmony. Music production these days utilizes incredible tools: computers can deliver an arsenal of sounds and capacity to manipulate sounds. While this can be enormously creative, it is too often used to either fix and homogenize mediocre performances (especially vocal ones) or add a lot of bells and whistles where there is little or no music to begin with.”

How can music that deeply moves or influences people emerge from such a process?

The singer-celebrity is immersed in—we want to say “burdened by”—an immensely lucrative career. “Her debut album *Dangerously In Love* [2003] sold 11 million albums, 2006’s *B’Day* and 2008’s *I Am...Sasha Fierce* sold 8 million each, and 4 sold approximately 3 million,” writes the entertainment publication *Bustle* in a breakdown of Knowles-Carter’s personal wealth. She is reportedly worth hundreds of millions of dollars.

The article (“What Is Beyoncé’s Net Worth? The Renaissance Hitmaker Makes 9 Figures On Tours Alone”) notes “Bey has received 79 Grammy nominations throughout her career — the highest of any female artist in Grammy history — and has won 28 of those awards.”

As a celebrity persona that has absorbed the outlook and ethos of the modern “entertainment industry,” Knowles-Carter is no longer required to *personally* promote her material. The *Financial Times* notes: “It’s been at least a decade since [Beyoncé has] participated fully in the pop music industrial complex—through which stars will agree to endless interviews, appearances and performances, in exchange for radio plays and spots on influential streaming playlists.”

Undoubtedly, the weight of the singer’s own wealth and fame has skewed her personality and music, often giving her songs an embalmed and unconvincing character. Hardly anything is more damaging, in many cases, to a popular American artist than great success. The result of all the celebrity and hoopla, unhappily, is an absence of spontaneity and genuine personality in Beyoncé Knowles-Carter’s musical output. In her case, as noted, things are even worse because she never pretended to be a rebel. She has eagerly embraced celebrity and money. With them have come pomposity, self-seriousness and musical emptiness.

Our “insider” in the record business observes:

“There are so many pressures to bear, as many as there are social relationships. The artist obviously may have some decision-making power, but that is not to be taken for granted. In her case, she can have quite some clout, but ultimately Sony has to be sold on it, so she may have to accept that a woman that previously pretended to empower women now has to objectify herself half-naked on a silver holographic horse [the cover of *Renaissance*]. I don’t need to give you the political commentary on that. But I will say that for a woman worth half a billion dollars, married to a man worth \$1.3 billion, the process of commerce is not at all beneath her.

“One more note: if you look at the track listing of the album you will notice that every song has a slew of co-writers. (Beyoncé obviously appears first, even if she didn’t contribute to the song—but who would say no to her sharing in the royalties?) Some of them have absurd numbers: the main track lists 9 writers, but others have as many as 24! This is quite ridiculous for one song. Clearly, the creative process is so convoluted and business-oriented that many of the names

appearing in the credits may have as little to do with the song as ‘being’ in the writing room at the time.”

Despite—or perhaps because of—its weaknesses, *Renaissance*’s promotion in the American media has taken on an almost desperate character. *Pitchfork*, the music entertainment publication, proclaimed the release “best new album” for its “rich celebration of club music and its sweaty, emancipatory spirit.” NPR published a lengthy round-table discussion in which the singer’s latest album was described as “revolutionary fun” that is “overwhelming” and “energetic.”

Inevitably, it falls to the *New York Times* to produce the most embarrassingly sycophantic commentary. Reviewer Wesley Morris (“America Has a Problem and Beyoncé Ain’t It”) writes: “If I were a globally famous musician whose every blink gets inspected for Meaning, now might be the time to discover how it feels to mean something else, to seem lighter, to float, to bob, splash, writhe and grind, to sashay-shanté.” Morris is attempting by this verbal sleight of hand to justify the trivial, socially indifferent character of the work.

The *Times* piece is not a review, it is a series of accolades, various forms of flattery and puffery: “Beyoncé’s singing here transcends any price tag. The range of her voice nears the galactic; the imagination powering it qualifies as cinema. She coos, she growls, she snarls, she doubles and triples herself. Butter, mustard, foie gras, the perfect ratio of icing to cupcake.” The album’s “sense of adventure is off the genre’s map, yet very much aware of every coordinate. It’s an achievement of synthesis that never sounds slavish or synthetic. These songs are testing this music, celebrating how capacious it is, how pliable, etc.” How nauseating, etc.

Along with Morris’ relentless obsession with race, he and the *Times* are at work on another front. The American ruling elite, along with the affluent middle class that hangs on its coat-tails, has nothing to offer the population except more of the pandemic, more war, more social reaction. Having helped create and apologize for the unfolding disaster, the *Times* and company turn to the population with “shut up and dance.”

After all, this is the same newspaper that recently told its readers that “people around the world are better off than ever”! For such layers, music, as much as politics, must convey the social interests of the most well-to-do. Consciously or not, this is the primary social aim and significance of Beyoncé’s musical output.



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