

SOS: A look at singer–songwriter SZA’s chart-topping album

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Singer–songwriter SZA began 2023 on a high note: her latest album, *SOS* (2022), was at the top of the Billboard 200 chart. The album has held that position since it was released in December. As of this writing, its reign has lasted four straight weeks.

SOS is the highly anticipated follow-up to SZA’s debut *Ctrl* (2017), which blended R&B with indie rock, trap and alternative music. *Ctrl* was a commercial success that made the singer a star and earned her four Grammy nominations.

Like its predecessor, *SOS* has received a generally warm reception from critics, one of whom effusively labeled SZA “a generational talent, an artist who translates her innermost feelings into indelible moments.” But does the album justify this fulsome praise? A more objective assessment would note the contradiction between SZA’s apparent sincerity and the banality of much of the musical activity.

SZA was born Solána Imani Rowe in St. Louis, Missouri, and raised in Maplewood, New Jersey (some 20 miles west of New York City). Her parents were executives: her mother at AT&T, and her father at CNN. Although her mother is a Christian, SZA was raised a Muslim like her father. When she was bullied in middle school after the September 11 attacks, she stopped wearing her hijab. SZA has been writing and recording songs since at least 2011 and released her debut EP *See.SZA.Run* in 2012.

SOS continues and expands the eclecticism of *Ctrl*. Overall, it is an R&B album with insinuating rhythms that maintain a moderate-to-slow pace. But a flute here, a classical guitar there, an ’80s keyboard over there and even a celesta add unexpected timbral variety to these songs. In addition, there are several forays into hip-hop, one radio-friendly rock song and a conventional ballad that includes a lyrical nod to Hall

and Oates. Yet the album does not become a hodgepodge, thanks to the uncluttered, unfussy production. Songs like “Notice Me” manage to create a lush atmosphere using only a few instruments.

SZA’s singing also helps these apparently disparate elements to cohere naturally. She is at home in various settings without radically altering her approach. Although the hip-hop songs are the most stylistically distinct on the album, she adopts a conventional rap delivery for them while remaining recognizably herself. SZA shares certain weaknesses with other R&B artists such as Alicia Keys, however. Her singing is often nasal, and she occasionally veers toward screaming.

The vicissitudes of love and sex are the main themes of the album, which is at its strongest when something of SZA’s personality shows through. “Kill Bill,” a song of jealousy, is among the most memorable moments. SZA gently sings, “I might kill my ex: not the best idea. / His new girlfriend’s next. How’d I get here?” The attractive, airy melody turns the mildly amusing joke into something a bit more human. “Rather be in jail than alone,” SZA sings, and the admission has a ring of truth to it. SZA seems to be revealing her vulnerability.

“Gone Girl” provides a similar moment. Over quiet electric piano chords, SZA makes her romantic demands. “I need more space and security,” and “I need your touch, not your scrutiny. / Squeezing too tight, boy, you’re losin’ me.” These simultaneous desires for romance and autonomy are nearly universal, and SZA earns the listener’s sympathy by expressing them. The confessions of insecurity on “Special” have a similar effect.

In contrast to the smooth textures of the rest of the album, the hip-hop-inflected songs “Smoking on My Ex Pack” and “Forgiveless” bristle. Their energy

provides a refreshing change of pace. Moreover, “Forgiveless” includes a recording of freestyle rapping by the late Ol’ Dirty Bastard (a.k.a. ODB) of the Wu-Tang Clan. His clownish unpredictability provides comic relief, which is rather welcome at the end of an overlong album. In contrast with ODB, SZA sounds flat and one-dimensional (as many people would).

Other songs stand out for bad reasons. Yes, “F2F” shows that SZA can sing comfortably over the electric guitars of a pop-oriented rock song. But its predictable dynamic shifts and bland chorus could have come out of a can. The song is a generic, mass-produced effort. The now-meandering, now-monotonous “Shirt,” which comes later in the album, is another bore.

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These low points reflect the significant weaknesses that characterize *SOS*. Many of the songs are based on little more than a series of vocal flourishes: variations without a theme. Only at the chorus does a wisp of melody appear. The varied arrangements compensate for this to an extent. They evoke an atmosphere of physical comfort, even luxury. Nevertheless, the mood is similar throughout the album, and the songs blend together. Most do not rise above the status of artfully realized make-out music. Listening to the album is like being pleasantly intoxicated, with all the limitations that implies.

The lyrics are another problem. A few colorful lines (“You still talkin’ ’bout babies, / And I’m still taking a Plan B.”) stand out, but there are too many clichés (“Is it too late for us?”). Inspired phrasing is largely absent, as are keen observations and thought-provoking statements. We can relate to the sentiments that SZA expresses, but she doesn’t ring any changes on them. The romantic lyrics are not profound, nor is SZA a good enough singer to make this lack of substance irrelevant. Moreover, SZA’s frequent use of crude language suggests laziness and immaturity. But this problem is far from hers alone.

Truly excellent and enduring music offers more than this. Romance and sex are perfectly legitimate themes, but they demand to be explored in fresh ways. Moreover, SZA does not comment at all on the momentous events that have occurred in the five years since *Ctrl* was released. The pandemic, the growth of fascism and the masses of people struggling to get by

merit no mention on *SOS*.

Through no fault of her own, SZA was born into a social layer not known for looking beyond its own navel. Yet she leaves even most of her own experience unexplored. Why hasn’t she examined, for example, how her newfound celebrity affected her life? What if she drew upon her experience of being bullied to write about bigotry and who promotes it?

SZA has said that *SOS* is her last album. Whether she was serious is unclear. But if she doesn’t release any more music, the reason could well be that she simply doesn’t have a great deal more to say.



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