

Beyoncé's *Cowboy Carter*: A masterpiece of corporate kitsch

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Cowboy Carter (2024) is being lauded as American singer Beyoncé's latest masterpiece and the cultural event of the spring—and perhaps of the year. The *New York Times* has again led the chorus of hosannas, implying that the album is daring, provocative and progressive. In fact, it is none of those things, and such twaddle says more about the needs of America's ruling elite than about the album.

As we previously commented, a new release by Beyoncé is a commercialized corporate event, not an artistic one. It provides a spectacle through which the establishment can promote racialist and gender politics, as it reaps huge profits. Each new Beyoncé album is hailed as a breakthrough for women, black people, gays and lesbians, etc. We are told that Beyoncé is an artist and a rebel whose albums must be analyzed and interpreted.

The singer's latest act of supposed barrier-breaking is the production of a country-influenced album. With *Cowboy Carter*, Beyoncé has allegedly "reclaimed" country music by exposing its "hidden" black roots. Country music (like the blues, jazz and rock and roll, to name but a few genres) developed through contributions from numerous nationalities and ethnicities, above all, from *oppressed layers that expressed their strong feelings and conditions through music*.

Though critics and liberal columnists are praising Beyoncé's putative artistic boldness, the singer herself acknowledged her country move as a feint. "This ain't a country album. This is a Beyoncé album," the singer posted on Instagram. She's right. *Cowboy Carter* is a pop album with country touches that become fewer and farther between as the album progresses. Many of the songs feature the dance beats and production flourishes that Beyoncé has long favored. The acoustic guitars and

spoken contributions from Willie Nelson, Dolly Parton and Linda Martell largely serve as window-dressing. Beyoncé doubtless seeks to wrap herself in the prestige of her musical betters.

Cowboy Carter is a professional product, not an artistic statement. The music is autotuned and scrubbed clean of imperfections. Any socially significant themes have been excluded; nothing here challenges or inspires the listener. Much of the album reflects the self-absorbed concerns of such wealthy entertainment industry layers and their ilk. Their world is artificial and their feelings are insular and removed. They belong to a social layer obsessed with money, wealth and fame.

Apart from a few covers, each song was written by a committee of as many as a dozen people. Unfortunately, these committees were unable to write memorable melodies. Littered with banalities, the lyrics alternate between motivational pop, sexual come-ons, threats against would-be rivals and greeting card verse.

As a singer, Beyoncé is competent, but never gives the impression that she has any strong ideas or deep feelings. In "American Requiem," she makes vague references to the state of US society and urges, "Can we stand for something? / Now is the time to face the wind / Now ain't the time to pretend / Now is the time to let love in." As vapid as her manifesto is here, she makes it clear her concerns are mostly with herself: "It's a lot of talkin' goin' on / While I sing my song." Yes, in the midst of a powerful popular radicalization taking place in response to war, fascism, pandemic and inequality, the bulk of her song is a chorus devoted to herself: me, me, me! "Can you hear me? (Huh) / Or do you fear me? (Ow)"

In the album's most played song, "This Ain't Texas," one gets the sense she wants the world to

ignore reality so she can go ahead and party. “All of the problems / Just feel dramatic,” she lectures everyone. And after telling her listeners to park their Lexus (perhaps her idea of the common man’s car?), she adds, “Don’t be a bitch, come take it to the floor now.” Whatever coming storm or heatwave she refers to in the song, she adds, can be drowned out with whiskey and dancing the world away.

On songs like “16 Carriages,” she is all vibrato and melisma, and no soul or smarts. “I’ve got art to make,” she declares pretentiously. On “Daughter,” she follows through on this threat by launching into the 17th-century Italian air “Caro Mio Ben.” Her flashy interpretation will not impress anyone who has heard a few minutes of genuine opera singing. Rather, it has the effect of an attention-seeking child doing a handstand.

On several songs, Beyoncé refers to herself, her husband Jay-Z and her children. The worst example is the vapid “Protector,” in which the singer vows to support her daughter as she grows to adulthood. The song is overstuffed with motivational clichés.

The occasions when Beyoncé nods in the direction of working people are fleeting and unconvincing. On “16 Carriages,” she professes to be “overworked and overwhelmed” and to have “something to prove.” These lines ring decidedly false.

“Ya Ya,” a party song, refers to people “workin’ time and a half for half the pay” who “ain’t got no money in the bank.” Neither Beyoncé’s singing nor her luxurious lifestyle persuade us that she understands or cares deeply about the struggles of the working class. She doesn’t help matters by promoting stereotypes in lines such as “keep my Bible on the dash.” Beyoncé’s reference to someone who “can’t watch the news nowadays” reflects her own indifference to the world’s crises.

In fact, “Ya Ya” is illustrative of the disjointed and superficial character of the album. The one verse that briefly references the lives of working people is sandwiched between a frivolous opening verse and a series of other hyper-sexual verses following it. The reference to Beach Boys’ *Good Vibrations* is merely vulgar: “She’s pickin’ up good vibrations / He’s lookin’ for sweet sensations.”

She fares no better when she sings other artists’ songs. With “Blackbird,” Beyoncé joins the long and dishonorable tradition of turning Beatles songs into

mush. Moreover, the allusions the song had in a different era to the civil rights movement (as Paul McCartney has acknowledged) and social struggle have a far different meaning coming from her self-satisfied milieu.

Even worse is her cover of Dolly Parton’s “Jolene.” The original song is an affecting and sisterly appeal from a married woman to her husband’s would-be mistress. The wife acknowledges the other woman’s beauty and charms, but asks for respect and compassion. Beyoncé throws these lyrics out the window and addresses the would-be mistress with arrogance, scorn and implied threats. This backwardness desecrates the song and reflects the sense of entitlement and privilege that Beyoncé herself feels as a wealthy celebrity.

Including 27 songs and lasting for nearly 79 minutes, *Cowboy Carter* is bloated and self-indulgent. When it is not objectionable, as on “Jolene,” it is largely unctuous or insipid. The dance songs are expedient if the listener doesn’t insist on melody, meaning or musicianship. Taken as a whole, the album is the musical equivalent of a bag of cheese puffs. It is not meant to be listened to attentively. It’s appropriate for restaurants, airports, elevators and waiting rooms. The album cover itself, with Beyoncé seated on a horse in cowboy attire, conveys its kitschy and frivolous character.

The acclaim and attention this album has received in the corporate press are out of all proportion to its merit. The heavy-handed promotion of *Cowboy Carter* by the music industry and by upper-middle-class critics has the pernicious social effect of dulling aesthetic judgment among the youth. How are young people to develop sensitivity and discernment regarding the arts if they are told relentlessly that albums like this are significant cultural events that must be analyzed, interpreted and praised? Such hogwash can only stunt the younger generation’s cultural growth. Moreover, what good can it do Beyoncé to never hear an honest word of criticism?



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