

Darkside, MIKE and Sharon Van Etten: New music amid intensifying crisis

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27 March 2025

The first few months of 2025 have witnessed a remarkable intensification of social and political crisis. Tensions and turmoil are reaching new heights. Moves toward war and dictatorship, including the abduction and “disappearance” of immigrant students and others, are nearly daily occurrences. Have these startling developments found expression yet—as they must—in popular music? How prepared are the artists in general for what is unfolding? This article will consider three new albums by established artists in electronic music, hip-hop and rock.

Nothing

Darkside’s latest album *Nothing* is its first as a trio. Electronic musician Nicolas Jaar and multi-instrumentalist Dave Harrington have added drummer and percussionist Tlacaél Esparza to their lineup. Esparza’s thoughtful contributions range from percussive accents to drumbeats and provide a bit of grounding for the compositions. The album might be described as dance music for cosmopolitan bohemians.

The melodies here are usually little more than snatches, but many of the songs undergo interesting timbral and dynamic shifts. “SNC” begins with a repeated, descending bass figure and electronic percussion. A flanged clavinet suddenly plays a funky chord progression that leads to a disco chorus with typically hedonistic lyrics.

“Are You Tired? (Keep on Singing)” shifts from keyboard washes in minor chords to a full band, featuring 12-string guitar, playing in a major key with a laid-back, Laurel Canyon vibe. Intriguing lyrics (e.g., “Mother country has got her arms / On where you live. / You don’t get to choose”) are unfortunately not clarified or developed, here or elsewhere.

The two parts of the “Hell Suite” undercut their apparent attempts at serious commentary with vague

lyrics and jokey singing. The Spanish lyrics of “American References” and “Sin el Sol, No Hay Nada” are similarly elliptical.

On his own albums, such as *Piedras 1* (2024), Jaar has shown sensitivity toward historical and political issues like the crimes of the Chilean dictatorship (Jaar himself is Chilean-American). On *Nothing*, vague hints about political issues suggest a reluctance to engage with them seriously. Like the lyrics, the music could benefit from greater elaboration and discipline. These musicians seem capable of more substantial things.

Showbiz!

The latest effort from prolific New York rapper MIKE, *Showbiz!* overflows with brief, sample-dense songs. In a slurred, mellow baritone, MIKE muses about his life, offers general encouragement and, occasionally, boasts. He raps against a background of soul, techno and 1980s pop samples that have been sped up or otherwise altered. The resulting aural collage is diverting but calls for closer examination.

At rare moments, MIKE refers to social problems and everyday struggles. “Growin’ out of poverty is toughening,” he acknowledges on “Artist of the Century.” On “Burning House,” he notes, “My debt pilin’ up with fees,” and “Everybody gotta leave, somebody gotta lead.” Though encouraging, these passing thoughts never develop into a consideration of social inequality or much of anything else.

Instead, MIKE spends most of his time pursuing various dead ends. He views the world as a rule through the lens of racist politics. This orientation comes out in MIKE’s expression of support for Tigray (a separatist region of Ethiopia) and his reference to people who “be appearin’ black, but they never black,” among other comments. His frequent allusions to prayer are equally counterproductive. But worst are

MIKE's repeated endorsements of pot smoking and drinking, which never clarified any problems for anyone.

Underlying these false approaches is MIKE's notable inward focus. His mumbling and his terse, low-definition lyrics, many of which describe his own experiences and feelings, suggest an artist talking to himself. Notwithstanding MIKE's few comments about economic challenges, what emerges most clearly is his complacency. His recommendation of simple perseverance, coupled with religious faith, is woefully inadequate.

Sharon Van Etten and the Attachment Theory

In recent years, singer-songwriter Sharon Van Etten has moved beyond her initial folk-oriented style into new territory. Her latest album, *Sharon Van Etten and the Attachment Theory*, represents another departure, in that Van Etten wrote it in collaboration with bandmates. Another surprise is the group's open and skillful evocation of post-punk and gothic bands like New Order and the Cure.

The musical results are generally enjoyable. The ghostly "Live Forever" establishes the sonic landscape, which includes synthesizer washes, electronic percussion and nimble basslines. The tempo increases moderately with "Idiot Box," then again with "Indio." Several of the melodies have staying power, yet none of the songs galvanize or challenge the listener the way that New Order or the Cure did at their best.

Van Etten's singing, skilled though it is, contributes to this shortcoming. She often does not project enough to establish a firm presence, as though she is uncertain about whether to commit herself fully. At rare moments, she becomes more forceful, her voice flashing some grit.

The lyrics, full of generalities and banalities, don't help matters either. Van Etten wonders, for example, whether she'll see her lover in the afterlife and offers the novel admonishment that we spend too much time looking at our TVs and smartphones. She avoids raising larger questions, at least in any concrete way. As a result, the lyrics, which generally and innocuously appeal to emotion, largely fail to move the listener.

Van Etten's willingness to take a new direction would be more encouraging if she were moving forward. But the faithful recreation of post-punk music and the abstract lyrics don't suggest such progress.

Confusion amid social shocks

It is too early to draw sweeping conclusions. That many popular musicians, emerging from a stagnant and reactionary period, are unprepared for the social counterrevolution and the challenges it produces does not come as a surprise.

These artists are not blind to the sharpening attacks, reflected in the images of theft and smothering on *Nothing* and in the vague protests of *Sharon Van Etten and the Attachment Theory*. For its part, *Showbiz!* tends to reflect the artists who remain fairly complacent and passive. Great shocks lie in store, including the emergence of mass popular opposition, which must bring into far sharper focus social reality, in the process strengthening and deepening musical efforts.



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