

# Revisit: R. Kelly: Double Up

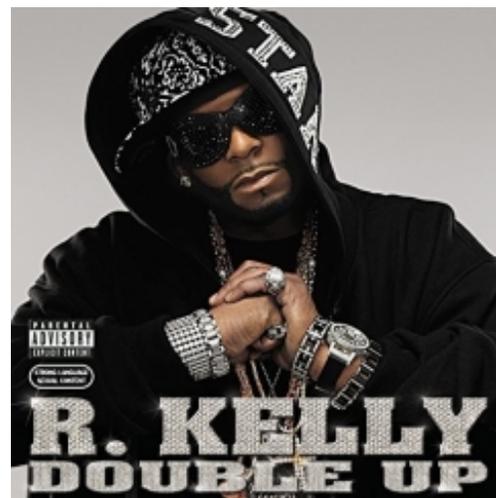
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Listening to an R. Kelly album requires compromise. You'll have to accept that about half the record will be dreck. He's never made a classic album because the spaces between great singles and astoundingly brave caprices are generally filled with failed experiments or garbage crossover attempts. Mostly you have to wrestle with the worldview of a man who is clearly morally bankrupt and monstrously stupid; who sees women as lower than dogs; whose response to being busted for statutory rape was to deny it was him in the video and then troll his listeners by calling himself the "pied piper of R&B." Robert Kelly is one of pop's truest and boldest auteurs. He is also scum.

He's released 14 albums; it's not much fun to slog through any of them front to back, and if you pick the wrong one up it's easy to see why you'd be confused that he's hailed as such a genius, or eccentric, or both. The definitive document of who he is as a man and as an artist is *Double Up*, released in 2007 during the most Teflon point in his career.



The songs you know from *Double Up* are "I'm A Flirt," "Real Talk," and "Same Girl." If you never went to a bar mitzvah around 2007, a primer. "I'm A Flirt" is the kind of song Brian Wilson might have written if he were an unbelievable piece of shit. The piano stomp is as gorgeous as any in pop, its nine-chords hitting with ten-ton weights. There are one-liners aplenty: "*she'll be calling you Kelly when your name is Tommy*," he brags hilariously. T-Pain makes good on his intent to make his voice sound like a saxophone, echoing the melody almost jazzily through pounds and pounds of Auto-Tune. Superficially, it's probably one of two or three prettiest pop songs of the '00s. It's also about how Kelly will steal your girl, and the moral of the story is "*cuff your bitch*."

"Real Talk" is funny, then ugly. It takes the form of a phone call; Kelly's girl heard through the grapevine that he'd been at the club with someone else, and Kelly gets angrier and angrier, finally breaking up with her and telling her to go fuck herself and her other friends. It's a novel idea for a pop song: no chorus except for the repeated mantra of "*real talk*," all speech, sung, no rhymes (Kelly has less regard for rhymes than probably any pop star in history). It's the kind of thing that makes you slap your forehead with disbelief that he has the balls to pull it off. Then you wince as he shrieks "*YOU BOGUS GIRL!*" and brace yourself in case he throws a glass. Even Christgau was terrified.

"Same Girl," by comparison, is a lark, though the video adds an extra twist that's worth seeing for yourself. You might also know the song where he calls himself a "sexasaurus" ("yes, there is such a thing as a sexasaurus," he announced at a post-album tour stop, silencing the haters). That's "The Jungle," which is one of three nearly-identical, themed extended metaphors here; there's one about candy (extremely creepy) and another one about space, which is six minutes long and kind of gorgeous aside from the Uranus joke.

Only someone with a captive audience, a ton of money and a lot of ideas would indulge in songs like "Havin' A Baby" – another extremely literal narrative, which ends with him shouting "*push!*" – or "Best Friend," a three-way with Polow da Don and Keyshia Cole where he's in prison for god knows what and all he can think about is that his two duet partners might be fucking each other. It's worth noting Kelly wrote, played, and produced most of this thing, and the arrangements are pretty damn baroque even on the songs he could have half-assed. This is the kind of truly weird auteur project that's rarer by the day; it seems anachronistic, more of a fit for the '70s that produced Marvin Gaye's *Here, My Dear*.

That's admirable. But like Kelly's sheets, a stink hangs over this thing, and it's impossible to get out unless you're

blind to either the horrific allegations against him or sexism as a whole. Separating the artist from the art is as moot here as when Woody Allen titillates himself in *Manhattan* by observing that his girlfriend still does homework. The same thought process that compelled Kelly to rape a 13-year-old led him to write these songs, in which women exist to be used and violently, furiously discarded.