

Harry Styles: Harry Styles

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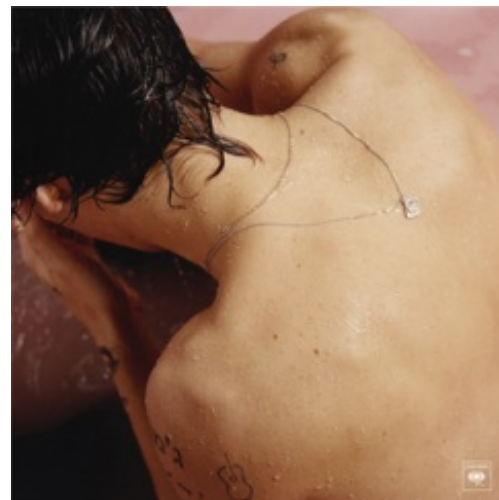
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Has this been done before? A pop star shedding his boy-band roots by burrowing into his dad's record collection rather than embracing the bad-boy posturing of rap or the lasciviousness of R&B? The only precedent that comes to mind is Nick Jonas' *Who I Am*, with its Muscle Shoals sheen. But that was sold as a low-stakes side project, while *Harry Styles* takes on the unenviable task of presenting its hero, the hottest guy in One Direction, as a solo star. It aims to make a splash. A Bigger Bang, from the sound of it.

This is a fun house approach to rock 'n' roll that, more than any other pop-star record, brings to mind the '70s-indebted indie rock of bands like the Ty Segall Band, Girls, and the Men. (The cover sure looks like a Sacred Bones sleeve.) It's a castle built from classic vinyl, and you can imagine Styles slotting it between *A Hard Day's Night* and *Harvest*, just waiting to play it on his expensive sound system on break between tours.



Classic rock signifiers abound, and they skew blasphemous. "Sign of the Times" rips its gospel choir from nothing less than the Beatles' "Across the Universe," while "Carolina" slips in not only smarmy Lennon harmonies but a bored Beck vocal, Brian Jones percussion and a violin that seems to moan from the bottom of Jack White's toolbox – while managing to sound like Stealers Wheel's "Stuck In The Middle With You" on top of all that. The sheer amount Styles manages to rip off in each song is astounding.

Pick any song off your local classic rock station and you'll hear it in *Harry Styles*. Hard Stonesy booze a la Aerosmith and ZZ Top? "Kiwi." Lush California coke folk? "Ever Since New York." Floyd? "Two Ghosts," an almost comical rip of "Wish You Were Here."

You'll also hear a lot of rock's worst, scummiest tendencies, especially in its attitude towards women. It'd be fair to express astonishment nobody was there to whisper over Styles' shoulder that the phrase "good girl" was rightfully killed by Robin Thicke's "Blurred Lines," but it'd also be fair to wonder if another record exec wasn't there to tell Styles that it'd be really rock 'n' roll to make "she's a good girl" the chorus of "Carolina." As in so much rock, there's a lot of Madonna-whore bullshit here, with Styles focusing lustily on the erotic potential of the unsoiled objects of his desire – "just you wait and see," he sings of his "Only Angel," "when it turns out she's a devil in between the sheets."

"Kiwi" even uses that sleaziest of all rock metaphors – sex as candy – in painting a portrait of a boozy bad girl who must be crazy, because she says she's having his baby. This is the kind of sexist sleaze that might actually lead one to become disillusioned with pop, that is to turn away from artists like Harry Styles and towards artists like One Direction. Rock music's identity is still inexorably intertwined with the attitude that woman is the devil, that innocent girls are just bad girls that the singer hasn't corrupted yet. It's as bad as the rap and R&B tropes of women as gold-diggers and sexpots, and if you think rock 'n' roll deserves to die for this reason, *Harry Styles* won't change your mind.

The admirability of Styles choosing such a strange path for his high-stakes solo debut is offset by the queasy question of whether or not more stars will follow his lead if this album sells a million copies. The last thing pop music needs is a bunch of ex-boy band stars strutting around in leather like they're fronting the Strokes and talking shit on their female fanbases. It's surprising there aren't more given that rock has historically been shorthand for "real." If

you want to scrub your sanitized past, there are worse ways than courting a genre that prides itself on the elbow grease that goes into its making. Styles isn't aiming for that here, but there's no saying those following in his footsteps won't.

- Label:
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