

Halsey: Hopeless Fountain Kingdom

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Halsey's a real artist, and she'll be the first to tell you. She's spent long Twitter hours taking apart the themes on her second album, *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom*—what means what, which songs reference other songs, how it's somehow a parallel of *Romeo & Juliet*. She sees herself as an “alternative” artist who's “more than capable of writing radio music.” Not a pop star. This is usually a bad sign. The best pop stars embrace their status, and those who don't tend to fall into stale signifiers of authenticity, like the post-glam rootsy turns from Gaga and Miley Cyrus.

But consider what Halsey's up against. More so than any pop star since Justin Bieber, she's hated for the wrong reasons—not because her music sucks, which it often does, but because she's a label's wet dream of a millennial pop star: social media-savvy, feminist, self-proclaimed “tri-bi” (biracial, bisexual, bipolar). The criticism surrounding the last point is particularly ugly, seemingly implying she's not *really* those things—probably because she's white-passing. She also sang on the Chainsmokers' “Closer,” a song synonymous with '90s-kid-baiting radio pop. She's got a lot to prove, and she'll be damned if she's going to go down as another anonymous, mononymous diva on a world-beating EDM hit, like Foxes or Rozes or Daya or what have you.

So, yes, *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom* is full of the trappings of an auteur project: interludes, half-songs, a loose theme, an intro where she recites *Romeo & Juliet* in the portentous voice of a kid forced to read their poetry aloud. But it's not overlong, overwhelming or overwrought. It's actually surprisingly fleet, sprinting through 13 songs in 38 minutes. That's an average of under three minutes per track, and the deluxe version, at 16 songs in 48, is still pretty breezy. If it didn't obviously sell itself as an epic, it could pass for a low-stakes, between-projects mixtape.

There are no obvious hits, and any song on the album's impressive opening run could be anyone's favorite. “Now or Never” was the safest pick for a lead single if only because it baldly bites Rihanna's “Needed Me.” But the Weeknd-penned “Eyes Closed” is arguably hookier, and “100 Letters” or the sampledelic disco “Alone” could very well have charted higher. The album speeds through these songs, and even half-finished sketches like affectionate Britney homage “Walls Could Talk” are forgivable in that they maintain the breakneck pace of the record.

The productions, mostly by Greg Kurstin and Chance the Rapper collaborator Lido, are your typical half-speed quasi-trap fare. But they give Halsey room to breathe, and, indeed, this is one of the most songwriting-focused pop records of the year. Though the Shakespeare concept should invite all sorts of lofty metaphorical bullshit, Halsey writes directly and simply, mostly about how her insecurities, fears and neuroses translate to her new life as a jet-setting star. She never pretends she isn't a celebrity, but she doesn't write solipsistically about being a *specific* celebrity, like Beyoncé or Kanye. She's a human who just happens to be a pop star.

It's often hard to sympathize with stars, and Halsey makes it clear she's living a hell of a life right now. She travels around the world, parties, spends money and fucks tons and tons of people—both male and female, and indeed her use of feminine pronouns is refreshing in an era where the biggest queer pop stars still downplay their sexuality. She has every right to brag, and she does most delightfully on “Don't Play” (“*out in San Tropez/ Lookin' as fine as a damn Monet*”).

Paradoxically, the braggadocio makes her struggles more relatable. It's often infuriating to hear stars bitch about how much they hate the high life. Halsey likes the high life, but she's still trying to figure it out, especially when it



comes to sex—which is understandable. On “Bad at Love,” she lists her booty calls across the globe but punctuates each one with a reason why they don’t see each other anymore. She usually blames herself, and on plaintive piano ballad “Sorry,” she admits she disposes of lovers because she can’t imagine anyone falling in love with her.

Few can relate to being a star, but anyone can relate to self-loathing, or not knowing what to do in intimate situations, or not understanding someone close to you. Halsey knows relatability sells. If her introspection is a marketing ploy, she’s a hell of a huckster. But if this really is the unfiltered mind of Halsey we’re getting here, she’s learned something a lot of pop artists never do: the best way to keep it real is just to say what’s on your mind and stop giving a shit.

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