

# Review: Lil Yachty, *Teenage Emotions*

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Daniel Bromfield



Had Lil Yachty risen in the 1980s, back when parents spent most of their time playing their kids' records backwards, he might have caused moral pandemonium. The 19-year-old Atlanta MC calls himself "King of the Teens," samples *Rugrats* and *Super Mario* in his work, explicitly orients his music towards the youth, and traffics in a hyper-positive, candy-colored aesthetic that seems as wholesome as a Ben Monero comic — until he opens his mouth. Lil Yachty is vulgar even by the standards of Atlanta's gleefully hedonistic rap scene, and it's easy to imagine middle schoolers picking up his debut album *Teenage Emotions* and being enthralled by the knowledge that *no, this isn't something mom would let me listen to after all — where can I hear more?*

A huge chunk of this album is about sex, and Yachty is explicit enough in his rhymes that we can actually sniff out some of his fetishes. On three occasions he raps about putting his dick so deep inside a girl she can feel it in extra-vaginal locations (toes, chest, spine). On four songs he raps about fucking a yellow (presumably mixed) girl, and on

another four he raps about fucking people's moms. Just like 50 Cent or Eminem (my generation's entries to X-rated media in many cases), Yachty's attitude towards women is troglodytic. It's jarring to hear him sing praises to his mother on "Like a Star" and then bark at his bitch to clean up his piss on the next song, "DN Freestyle". That's before he brags "she can't argue with a dick in her mouth" on "Priorities".

But unlike 50 Cent and Eminem, Yachty at least maintains a veneer of progressivism. He's like Bowie: a problematic figure whose image of giving voice to the world's outcasts makes him inspiring even against your better judgment. There are two dudes kissing on the cover, never mind that world-class homophobes Migos appear on the album's most club-baiting banger. It's inspiring to hear him flip off rap conservatives in his interviews, especially if you're queer (like me) and sick of value systems that encompass homophobia but not skinny jeans. The abuse hurled at Atlanta's new trap wave is so often gendered (words like "soft," "fruity," and "feminine" come to mind) that it's refreshing to see a young rapper stand up to it, even by pinkwashing.

The moments when his music really comes alive with joy are the best on *Teenage Emotions*, and they're often the less rap-oriented moments. He's often pegged by detractors as "not hip hop" and indeed doesn't even think of himself as a rapper. Maybe we shouldn't either, because he's a great pop star, down to the charisma and the instantly recognizable image and the way he centers himself and his quirks in his music. "Bring It Back" is exuberant synthpop clearly inspired by M83's "Midnight City", and Yachty matches the gargantuan, gated drums with loser-in-love melodrama. "Made of Glass" is a baroque-pop ballad clearly inspired by his beloved Coldplay, and he yearns like a robotic Chris Martin. You feel he's had it in his mind forever.

The best song here is "Better", an affectionate, steel drum-driven sendup of saccharine cuddle-pop. "Let's lay on the hood and look at the stars and name them whatever/you always call that one Trevor," he croons. You think he's going to say some Hallmark shit a la B.o.B.'s "Airplanes", but he takes a Weezian left turn into the ridiculous — and then comes back with a line so sincere and heartfelt it hurts: "Let's grow old, rocking chairs and play checkers." Like his buddy D.R.A.M., Yachty's best as a writer when he alternates nastiness and childish joy. Let's not forget the first words many of us heard him say, on D.R.A.M.'s "Broccoli" were "Hey lil' mama would you like to be my sunshine?/Nigga touch my gang we gon' turn this shit to Columbine."

There are too many moments on *Teenage Emotions* where the childish joy is absent — or where it seems to only make itself known by accident, as when Yachty ends his attempt at a battle rap with "you stinky and dirty like farts!" on "X-Men". The first third of the album lacks so much of the carefree insouciance on which Yachty build his brand. The bitch brags on songs like "Broccoli" are harder to take seriously because the contrast between his persona and the X-rated shit he's saying is so obvious. Too often here he sounds like another 50 Cent or Eminem, a macho MC who won't inspire most people to do anything except have more sex and be a bigger asshole. There's some talk about two personas, the innocent Yachty and the badder "Lil Boat", but I don't buy it. His debut tape was called *Lil Boat* and it came on like a strawberry-scented breeze.

Much of *Teenage Emotions* feels unnaturally serious, as if he has something to prove. Which he does. He's scapegoated more than anyone as the epitome of "what's wrong with rap" as defined by a generation raised on the rapidly ossifying gems of the '90s East Coast-West Coast war, and on songs like "X-Men" and "DN Freestyle", he seems to kowtow to their demands, rapping his ass off and embracing negative aesthetic to which he stands as a contrast. He shouldn't. Instead of bowing to the time-honored tenets of hip hop, he should transcend them. **B**

**MINUS**