

Lorde: Melodrama

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6/25/2017

Lorde's new album *Melodrama* is so good it's made us forget the year's other big Lorde-related news story: that she was the proprietor of onionringsworldwide, an Instagram devoted to reviewing onion rings around the world. After the cat got out of the bag, Lorde shut down the account. Why? Well, being pelted with onion rings on tour would be pretty unpleasant, she confessed on Jimmy Fallon. Understandable. But later in the interview, she let slip a more revealing reason: "It reads like the kind of thing a pop star would do to be relatable."

This is key. Lorde knows relatability sells, and lord knows she's hawked it. So much of her appeal stems from the fact that she's a "real" teen—albeit a very bright one—seemingly molded not by the pop industry but by parties and shitty mixed drinks and awkward hookups. Her biggest single, "Royals," struck a chord with listeners in its disillusionment with the glitz and glamor espoused by celebrity culture. But never does she seem like she's selling real life or dishing out cheap quotables to superimpose over sunset shots. Never does she heap on the cheap signifiers of "realness" pop stars use to distract fans from the fact that they're product. Halsey, whose success would be unthinkable without Lorde, calls herself an alternative artist who writes hits. Lorde correctly refers to herself as a pop star.



Melodrama rejoices in the simple fact that pop and art are not mutually exclusive, that the boom-boom-boom of a big radio song can express more truth than a thousand sad-eyed singer-songwriters. It's a fact that, even after *Anti* and *Emotion* and *Lemonade*, even after *Purple Rain* and *Thriller* and *The Velvet Rope*, still gets short shrift. Lorde's observations about teenhood and hedonism and sex will be relatable to many, but her musical decisions are consistently surprising, refusing to kowtow to established signifiers of merit like rootsiness (no banjos here) or originality (delightful references abound). It trusts its audience to accept that a pop album can also be art, and vice versa.

"Liability" is a stripped-down piano ballad that's supposed to be the emotional crux of the album, the one where she goes home from the party and reflects on just how lonely she really is. But then she sneaks this in: "*I'm a little much for e-a-na-na-na-everyone.*" Most singer-songwriters wouldn't dare slip a hook so naked into a confession so stark, but Lorde is correct in predicting it won't defuse its impact. If anything, the connotations of pop as a place for emotions to run free and blow up to the level of, well, melodrama only makes the line hit harder.

As befitting a chronicler of her generation, she loves to stutter, adding breeziness to lines that might otherwise be clunky. The words "Homemade Dynamite" don't look like they'd fit nicely with a hook, but look how easily "*blowing shit up with homemade d-d-d-dynamite*" melts into sugar in her hands. Even better: "*I overthink your p-punctuation,*" from spectacular centerpiece "The Louvre." "*Punctuation*" is a big word, but the stammer shrinks it so it fits into her pop scheme. And wait until she spells out the name of one of the easiest albums for two art-damaged kids to bond over on "Hard Feelings/Loveless." These are classic, even archaic, pop cues—more in line with the silly bubblegum of the '60s than the sophisticated indie pop she's associated with.

Melodrama is more referential than your average pop album, but in a playful way. She good-heartedly slips into the guises of other pop stars on a couple songs. At the end of "Liability," she puts on the faintest Rihanna affectation, which I'd like to imagine was her flippant response to one of her studio bosses suggesting she sing a little more like that most imitated of pop singers. "Supercut"—which concludes the flirtations with house that began on *Pure*

Heroine's "Ribs" and continued through "Green Light" and a few partnerships with Disclosure—finds her messily drawing her words out of her consonants in the fashion of the great, open-hearted Swedish star Robyn ("it's just a ssssupercut of us"). It's hard not to think of her good friend Taylor Swift on "Writer in the Dark," where she threatens to ruin a guy's life through song if he fucks with her.

The spirit of Kate Bush hangs over this like a morning fog, and though she's the go-to reference point for any female pop auteur with a vision, the references are undeniable, especially as Lorde lets the chorus of "Writer in The Dark" unfurl into a feral mewl. The "what is this tape?" snippet of dialogue that divides the two parts of "Hard Feelings/Loveless" instantly evokes the horror-movie sample from Bush's "Hounds of Love." And there's something *The Dreaming*-like about the incongruous arena-rock guitar that shimmers beneath that the song, or way the horn sample on "Sober" seems to burst through the window like a ransom note.

This might have something to do with producer Jack Antonoff, a noted '80s fetishist and no doubt the architect of the minute and a half of *Disintegration*-style guitar that closes out "The Louvre." Still, it's hard not to see parallels between Lorde and Bush. Both proved themselves fearsome auteurs through songs they wrote at a young age. Lorde was 16 when she released *Pure Heroine* and is now 20; Bush was 19 on her debut *The Kick Inside* and as young as 13 when she wrote it. They were immediately trumpeted as both great artists and potentially ubiquitous hitmakers, Lorde conquering the world with "Royals" and Bush with "Wuthering Heights"—through which she proved her gumption by demanding it be released as the lead single instead of the more conventional but far less interesting "James and the Cold Gun."

Bush, a cult hero in the States and a superstar in England, is respected as a visionary by even those who don't enjoy her music. But her creative control came back to bite her in the ass when she released *The Dreaming*, a violently uncommercial album that at times resembled a Renaissance nun trying to recreate Sly Stone's *There's A Riot Goin' On* through samplers and synths. It flopped on the charts, and likewise, the gambles Lorde took on "Green Light"—its endless build, its creepy sing-song hook, an arrangement that actually evokes classic house rather than the pale imitations of it sold as "deep house"—didn't translate into sales. It's so far peaked at a meager #19, and it's not unlikely Lorde will always remembered for "Royals."

One of two things could happen. Lorde could have her creative control ceded to those who can't afford to lose money on her. The other path, which would be the more fruitful, is that her higher-ups could use how good she is as a selling point instead of worrying about hits, as Scooter Braun's done with Carly Rae Jepsen. Even if her name doesn't make it to the top of the charts anymore, it could still be a reassuring seal of quality. *Melodrama* is rightly earning raves, and will go down as one of the better pop albums of the decade. The album proves Lorde is the real thing, at least as an artist. But if this is Lorde's final form, it might be the only time we ever see it.

- Label:
Lava/Republic
- Release Date:
June 16, 2017