

T-Pain: Oblivion

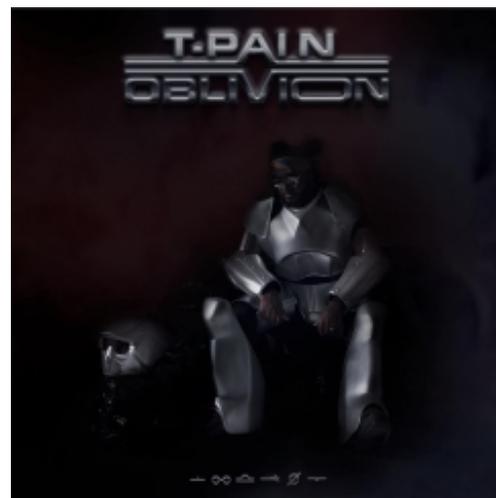
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Oblivion, T-Pain's first album since 2011, begins with a challenge. "I did everything for the culture at gun point with the mask off," he spits on "Who Died," his rap voice still kiddish and eager. "I ain't cry about it, I ain't lie about it, I just kept working my ass off!"

Does the phrasing sound familiar? *Culture* is Migos' biggest album, and "Mask Off" is Future's biggest hit. Ever since T-Pain made the hugely popular decision to slather his voice in Antares Auto-Tune pitch correction, he's been scapegoated for the software's ubiquity thanks in part to a misconception that it's a ruse to mask a lack of singing skill. Now, a new breed of rappers is using it to make some of the biggest and best music in the world, and T-Pain's expressed understandable anger at being mocked for the same tricks that his progeny are riding to Pitchfork points and nine-digit streaming numbers.



Oblivion is the godfather showing the kids how it's done, I suppose. But he's made a crucial mistake, which is to undermine his artistic legacy and focus on his commercial legacy. There's a strong case to be made for T-Pain as an auteur. He played almost every note on his debut *Rappa Ternt Sanga*, and his productions here are revelatory. But too much of *Oblivion* comprises C-grade club tracks that rip cynically from T-Pain's imitators instead of one-upping or making a case for the O.G. as a mind to match them.

T-Pain seems to think his name alone is enough to make these tracks better than their competitors. There are a few good bangers, especially "That's How It Go," which might have made a better opener for the album ("bitch, who left the refrigerator open?" he screams hilariously at the beginning). But for most of it—and, as it runs an hour, "most" is a lot of music—it's all amateur trap beats, flimsy hooks and sexism egregious even in the depths of R&B (it's impossible not to hear "little whore" as an ad-lib and not wince).

The album's saddest moments involve the fake Travis Scott ad-libs on "Straight" and "I Told My Girl." It's hard to say why these are here. Maybe they're a mean sideswipe at Scott. More disheartening is the possibility T-Pain wanted Scott for the album but didn't have the clout or budget. At times, *Oblivion* plays like an Asylum mockbuster of Scott's *Birds in the Trap Sing McKnight*. Even the cover has a similar big-tent goth aesthetic.

The moments where T-Pain steps to the fore as a producer are so dazzling they make all the other tomfoolery even more frustrating. "She Needed Me" is almost Gas-like, with its blur of bass drum buried deep in synth drones. "That Comeback" is a silly pussy ode that he could have phoned in but instead piles up with jazz chords and tricky harmonies. Most impressive is "May I," which runs more than seven minutes and opens with more than a minute of proggy bass noodling before T-Pain and someone named Mr. Talkbox merge their voices into an amorphous lattice of robotic angels. Eventually, we come to recognize which tracks are T-Pain productions, because they're just... better.

And every now and again, we get a snatch of T-Pain's personality. He can still be funny when he wants to be. "Pussy on the Phone" details a new advance in sexual technology that might be inspired by David Cronenberg's *Videodrome*. "Cee Cee from D.C." delightfully brings back the old soul chestnut of girls whose names just happen to rhyme with where they come from. "Textin' My Ex" is a sadsack portrait of sexual desperation; it's great until it turns out the ex is actually down to forget everything and hook up. Why write such a perfectly hopeless song, then do a 180 and give the guy a happy ending?

T-Pain should stop chasing hits and focus on making good art pop that could get big on word of mouth: the Carly Rae Jepsen approach. An hour of music on the same scale as “May I” might be one of the best albums of the year and cement the critical standing he’s long coveted. It’s odd he’s chosen to push along his legacy by imitating his imitators instead of reminding us why everyone wanted to imitate him in the first place.

- Label:
RCA
- Release Date:
November 17, 2017