

Tove Lo: Blue Lips

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Tove Lo, the Swedish pop star at the center of Max Martin's Wolf Cousins collective, comes across as a real, messy person. That's the key to her appeal. She likes to have sex and get drunk, but not in a glamorous champagne-popping way so much as a true-to-life way that involves stained bedsheets and morning-after regrets. She's instantly likable, with a great sense of humor, and despite the shambles of her life being her favorite lyrical conceit, she projects a self-confidence that's easy to mistake for maturity.

She could bank on "realness" like Halsey and Lorde have done, but what's interesting is how grandly she presents her music. *Blue Lips*, her third album, is supposedly the conclusion of a two-album cycle that included her 2016 release, *Lady Wood*. The album is meant by itself to chronicle the rise and fall of a relationship, and indeed, the first half is loaded with randy love songs while the second half is devoted to frustrated balladry.

As a result, her music ends up pulled in two directions: towards rock-solid, realistic pop on one end and art-pop flights of fancy on the other. She should abandon the latter, because it's less central to her appeal: we listen to her not for proggy highs but sympathetic lows. Then we could take out the distracting interludes and half-songs like "Bitches" and let the rock-solid pop songs, which she's more than capable of writing, stand on their own.

There's nothing here as instantly singable as "Habits (Stay High)," the self-medicating single that shot her to fame, though a few come close. "Stranger" relies on kinky roleplay for its chorus, and the way she sings "*I am lonely, lonely heart*" communicates sexual need while sounding desperately unsexy: it's reminiscent of Max Bialystock playing the ravishing stable boy in *The Producers*. And "Cycles," a great bit of pop writing, catches her in the act of bullshitting a poor sap who thinks he has a chance.

Some of Lo's more cloying songwriting idiosyncrasies remain, especially her insistence on telling you how drunk or high she is—one perfectly good song is distractingly titled "Hey You Got Drugs?"—and her love of disposable neologisms. But to her credit, she makes a great chorus ("Struggle") out of the memey phrase "the struggle is real," namely by rhyming it with the perfectly pop "when you don't tell me how you feel." The trendy phrase doesn't matter as much as the timeless yearning into which she drops it.

These are all songs that play to what makes her great, and they make the artsy affectations feel even more useless. Halsey's *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom* from earlier this year suffered from a similar problem. Perhaps pop's inferiority complex means artists are less confident in the ability of their work to speak on its own and are more comfortable waving flags that tell you they're making "art" rather than letting it register as art on its own. Missy Elliott never had to make a two-album, four-chapter pop opera.

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