

# Willow: The 1st

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11/12/2017

Has Willow Smith ever met an idea she didn't like? The youngest progeny of Will and Jada might have more creative rein over her work than anyone else who can feasibly be called a pop star. She never sounds like she has anyone hovering over her shoulder telling her what to do. Sometimes, we wish she did. Smith has ambition, but she lacks taste, and her second album *The 1st* is one idea after another—some great, some good, some inconsequential, many cringe-worthy.

Look how the album starts. "Hey, Mom," she exclaims over pizzicato strings that suggest the opening of a heartwarming family movie. "*I met a boy/ He plays guitar/ He likes Quentin Tarantino/ And really sad songs.*" The next lyric is "*anxiety attacks,*" and seconds later she claims to come from space. It's not promising.



Guitars, Tarantino movies and sad songs have all become telltale signs of the patrician, patronizing soft boy who's fixing to fuck you over. It's possible this lyric is a clever update of the old girl-group tradition of pining for a boy that's bound to break your heart. If so, it'd be the only place she displays any kind of wit or nuance. She'd rather her music sound smart than be smart, hiding behind purple prose and third-eye pseudoscience rather than writing lines that hit hard.

"*Happiness and contentment come from zero comparison,*" she intones gravely as "And Contentment" opens. This line means you can only be happy if you stop comparing yourself to others. It's a good sentiment, but couldn't she say it more simply? Too often her language is the kind a student uses when they don't understand the reading but still want to get a good grade.

Take the lyrics away and this isn't a bad album. For one, it's ornate in a way few pop albums dare to be. The first half of the album, from "Boy" through "Israel," drowns Smith in strings that would make Nelson Riddle blush. These kind of frills aren't fashionable in today's age of cutting-edge minimalism, and they give the album the feel of a classic baroque-pop opus, like Van Dyke Parks' *Song Cycle*. The whole thing is only 34 minutes long, which is its only sign of restraint.

The latter half is better because its ideas are visceral rather than intellectual. "Warm Honey" is a healthy, earthy soul song where Willow's falsetto swoops through the canyons between the drums. "A Lonely Road" works its clichéd title into a rambling but surprisingly sticky hook. And choruses don't hit much harder than the one on "Human Leech," which in eleven words captures the kind of toxic love Willow might spend a lesser song agonizing about in tortured poetics.

But let anyone loose in a room with unlimited imagination and unlimited budget and you're bound to get a lot that works and a lot that doesn't. The hit-to-miss ratio is too skewed towards the latter for *1st* to merit repeat listens. Between this and her last album, the even stranger *Ardipithecus*, there's not much evidence Willow will ever make an album that lives up to her admittedly scary ambitions. But she's an auteur, and the charts could always use more of those.

- Label:  
Interscope/Roc Nation
- Release Date:

October 31, 2017