

Miguel: War & Leisure

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Listening to Miguel's *War & Leisure* is a little like having stoned sex while CNN is blaring. It'd be fine as a sweaty psych-funk record about fucking, like Miguel's other albums. But he's taken great pains to tell us how he feels about the current political climate, even when we'd rather be thinking about something else. There's nothing wrong with making political music; Miguel's sincerity and conviction are never in doubt. But *War & Leisure* doesn't make much of a case that it *should* have a conscience.



The protest songs are far from poignant. "Now" makes a noble effort but quickly devolves into a stream of brainless shout-outs to places in crisis ("*way down in Houston!*," he yells, as if giving a concert). "Come Through and Chill" is about fucking for its first three minutes or so, which is all good and fine—then J. Cole crashes through the door, rapping: "*Know you've been on my mind like Kaepernick kneeling/Or police killings, or Trump saying slick shit.*" Yes, he compares his girlfriend to police killings.

Maybe if *War & Leisure* had one good topical song it'd earn its right to be sold as Miguel's "political album," as it has been. It doesn't, and the current-events talk quickly becomes a distraction; we just want him to do what he's good at and sing about freaky, mystical sex. The fact that *War & Leisure* doesn't land far sonically from his last album, 2015's much better *Wildheart*, means future listeners will nearly always choose that album over this; this is basically *Wildheart* with a running talking-head commentary.

Where *War & Leisure* succeeds is in subverting American kitsch for its imagery, as on "Banana Clip," a good old-fashioned gun-as-love metaphor. "*Let it ring,*" he says of his love, and we instantly think of "let freedom ring" as well as the great American tradition of firing your gun in the air for no reason. "Criminal" hires Rick Ross, whose persona comes from gangster cinema and is thus rooted in a perversion of the American dream, for a verse. "City of Angels" opens with the line "*fighter jets over my city,*" and the image registers as patriotic before we find out the song's about an apocalyptic war.

"Caramelo Duro," a bilingual duet with Colombian-American singer Kali Uchis, is hard not to read as an assertion of Latinx identity. But that'd be true even if it weren't on a "political" album. No one would complain if Miguel just sang escapist bullshit. This music will never motivate anyone to get out and protest on the streets, so it wouldn't be a loss.

Still, the conscious elements make up a small enough portion of *War & Leisure*'s runtime that they're irritants rather than dealbreakers, and the record's ultimately easy to enjoy. It has a few top-tier Miguel songs, including "Criminal" and "Told You So," whose slippery Detroit-techno beat suggests a weird dance record might be a fruitful next step for Miguel. Hopefully, the union will be in a better state by the time comes out.

- Label:
ByStorm/RCA
- Release Date:
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