Charli XCX: Pop 2

Daniel Bromfield   January 1, 2018

Charli XCX's best release by a mile, *Pop 2* is perhaps the culmination of the retail mixtape as an outlet for an artist's most batshit ideas. A mixtape carries lower stakes than an album, which means artists can get weird and still make money. Charli's last proper album was the excellent *Sucker*, which seemed to poise the longtime indie darling, who's been floating around in one form or another for nearly a decade, as a mainstream star. But even if she has her name stamped on an enviable number of Top 10 hits—as writer, guest or featured star—she still seems like the same shadowy cult figure she was in her teenage Myspace days. So even if her next album is a sad compromise, we don't need to worry as long as she gets back to her real grind: indulging her whims on the fringe of the chart world.

Its very title implies a second coming of the format. In its inventiveness and unwillingness to condescend to its audience, *Pop 2* hearkens back to the first half of the '00s, when the charts were as fertile a ground for avant-garde ideas as the underground. In these tracks is a kinship with such songs as "Cry Me a River," "Toxic" and "Drop it Like it's Hot." That what was once mainstream now works best in the hipsterverse is hardly a deterrent, and indeed some of the sounds here are so strange they wouldn't have worked on the charts at *any* time, save maybe on an early computer novelty song like "Popcorn" or the "Doctor Who" theme. Her liberation is inspiring.

Pop stars doing low-stakes, free-form projects between their better-promoted releases isn't a new thing. You may recall Miley Cyrus's tripped-out ninety-minute VMA party favor *Dead Petz* from 2015. The difference is that the music here is catchy—fearsomely so. It understands that pop without popular appeal isn't really pop, and it seems to hope for a listener that can connect viscerally with a strong melody or a relatable lyric while keeping an open mind to what else is going on. Do these kinds of listeners still exist in the mainstream? Ed Sheeran, Pandora, and algorithmic playlists suggest otherwise, but my hunch is the noble few who see pop as both commodity and art form will find this album—and, if enough of them ferret it out, it might spawn a sleeper hit or two.

"I Got It" is as good a rap banger as any from Atlanta this year, its hook relying as much on repetition as on Charli's thick British accent. The graceful melodic arc of "Backseat" with pop saint Carly Rae Jepsen scans as gibberish at first—and it's catchy enough as gibberish—until

you realizing she's saying "*all alone, all alone,*" and it hits harder. She relies on simple, time-tested tricks for her chorus, like the repetition of "oh" sounds that drives 90 percent of indie pop. "*Get that dou-ou-ough,*" she wheedles on "Porsche." "*Now you gotta go, go, go, go,*" she sobs on "Tears," and her decision to underline the chorus with a bloodcurdling shriek from Chairlift's Caroline Polachek feels less like a prank than an act of pure confidence, as if to prove she's written an unsinkable hook.

Charli and collaborators sing nearly the entire record through Auto-Tune, which has the uncanny effect of homogenizing the performers; the biggest guest stars (Jepsen, Swedish provocateur Tove Lo) blend in most with the background. The features that stand out are the new faces. Her motley crew hails from around the world: Estonian MC Tommy Cash, German YouTube conceptualist Kim Petras, Korean-American pop star Jay Park, Finnish singer Alma, Brazilian drag queen Pabllo Vittar. Most pop records choose their guests based on bankability, but Charli seems to choose hers just to introduce her audience to some weird new artists—and, perhaps, to create a sort of utopian pop space where a Baltic rapper can land on Anglophone radio without a hitch.

As for the music: my God, the music. It's hard to think of another recent pop album that writhes, squirms and splinters like this one. Hackneyed, tried-and-true chord progressions appear through a glass, darkly. The first chords we hear on "Backseat" are as bland and innocent as on any Chainsmokers song, except they're played on a detuned synth that seems to leer ominously; it lets us know instantly what we're in for. Her voice is slathered in Auto-Tune, but it's not the smooth kind that glides across the surface of so many hits but a fucked-up glitch that bends her voice at right angles. She even uses a helium effect to fake a Mariah Carey melisma on "Lucky"; it's as earned as the sped-up piano solo on the Beatles' "In My Life"—and no less uncanny.

It's no surprise to learn the bulk of the record was produced by A.G. Cook, head of the notorious PC Music label, known for their tongue-in-cheek manufacture of virtual female pop stars. With Cook, Charli has tangled herself up in those same artificial aesthetics, as a song called "Femmebot" makes clear. Everyone knows the other great song about fembots, by Robyn. The point of that song was that she was really human. That doesn't seem to be the point this time, and cosplay lends this music an ironic unwholesomeness. The songs that become poptimist touchstones broadcast their emotions to the heavens— "Dancing on My Own," "Run Away with Me," Icona Pop's Charli-penned "I Love It." Here, the emotions feel freeze-dried, and even pop nerds who choke up at the mere *thought* of a Charli Rae Jepsen joint may smell something fishy here.

Cook avoids the temptation to mold Charli into *his* fembot; she's no one's fool. This doesn't feel like a PC Music album but a Charli album, and though there's plenty to pay attention to, what comes across most clearly is her sheer talent as a hooksmith and songwriter—and her bravery in using those skills for something else than feeding a dispassionate music machine that demands bigger and safer hits. In an era where even our best artists run the risk of selling their souls to the Spotify gods, *Pop 2* is refreshing for its blasphemy.

- Label:
  Asylum/Atlantic
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