

Revisit: Lady Gaga: Born This Way

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Born This Way is a relic from a time when gayness itself was camp—the era of Adam Lambert, Ellen DeGeneres, George Takei and inspirational rainbow-posting from Facebook pages most of us have long since unfollowed. Gay marriage was the struggle du jour and the Westboro Baptist Church was an endearing boogeyman. As much as the turn of the '10s did to normalize queer folks and queer media, the mainstream gay rights struggle was Obama optimism at its most myopic, passing by non-binary, trans and POC members of the LGBTQ community as well as more pressing issues than marriage, like poverty and employment discrimination.



Pop was lousy with allies shouting vague slogans about how you can be whoever you want to be. Songs like “Firework” or “We R Who We R” praised misfits and outcasts but could have just as easily been about Juggalos. But no star captured the climate like Lady Gaga, whom many gays of my generation still remember as Mother Monster. An out bisexual, she fostered safe spaces for queer kids at her shows and donated tons of cash to anti-bullying foundations. She could also come across as daft when she engaged with these issues on more than a physical level.

Many point to *Artpop*, her underperforming and not-exactly-underrated 2013 record, as the iceberg that sunk the Gaga ship. But when “Born This Way” dropped at the post-meet-dress peak of Gaga’s cultural cachet, a bubble burst. The song rocketed to number one on name alone. Gaga admitted she wrote it in 10 minutes. Critics charged it sounded like Madonna’s “Express Yourself.” Fans denied that resemblance furiously, even in spite of themselves. It was almost industrially noisy. It faded from view as “Bad Romance” and “Just Dance” remained ubiquitous (the great “The Edge of Glory,” released soon after, is Gaga’s last entry in the pop canon). And what the hell were those words she was using? “Chola?” “Orient?” “Transgendered?” It failed as both a big single and some kind of rallying cry for unity; its parent album is rarely heard in 2018.

Is *Born This Way* some sort of masterpiece skipped over in the moment? Hardly. Gaga has one great album, and that’s *The Fame Monster*. *Born This Way*’s entire hour-plus stretch is too exhausting for front-to-back listen, but it’s worth mining for playlist purposes, and some of its deep cuts are likely beloved in levels of Monster fandom deeper than mine. “Government

Hooker” is Gaga at her high-camp best, duetting with a fake Vincent Price over industrial synths that shriek and shred. “Bad Kids” has one of the best, prettiest choruses in the Gaga catalog.

But *Born This Way* is worth revisiting to see just how fast pop ideology can age. Just as the flower-power anthems of the Woodstock era shriveled up and stank once hippies realized loving each other didn’t solve shit, *Born This Way* stands as a time capsule of a quaint and retrospectively silly era for gay rights. Even “Hair,” its best single behind “The Edge of Glory,” is instantly dated to the early-‘10s based on its subject matter (“*I’m as free as my hair,*” she sings). And the title track stinks up the whole bunch, being both instantly dated and a failure.

Nonetheless, it’s worth remembering just how important Lady Gaga was to so many queer kids—myself included. She was the first contemporary star I remember that spoke directly to the LGBT community, and upon coming out as a gay teen as “Bad Romance” was clobbering the charts, I was entering directly into a world where she was the soundtrack. I still have a soft spot for her, and I think she’s a great pop star, or at least she was before she went all “authentic” on *Joanne*. I still listen to *The Fame Monster* often. But is she still something important in my life? Well, I’ve got some queer friends who’d be happy to laugh with me about that over drinks.