

Annie Lennox: Diva/Medusa

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At its best, Annie Lennox's music is as deep, comforting and mysterious as that of Sade, the Blue Nile, or any of the other great sophisticated pop acts from the late '80s and early '90s. But in Lennox's voice there's a certain acidity that grounds us firmly in reality rather than suave fantasy. Ugly, real emotions are never far beneath the illusion, and on her cover of "Take Me to the River" or as she whispers into the mic on "Why," she's ready to kill. Even on something as atmospheric as "Downtown Lights," she never allows herself to disappear into the mix. Helen Folasade Adu never loses her cool, but Lennox ends her best-known solo song, a jaw-dropping cover of obscure British band The Lover Speaks' "No More I Love You's," by bursting into tears.



Lennox was a relative veteran by the time she released her solo debut *Diva* at 37. She'd come to fame in the Eurythmics but had been kicking around since the '70s, as part of Scottish band the Tourists. After her personal and professional relationship with guitarist Dave Stewart ended, Lennox wrote most of *Diva* herself and settled on a new sound: less lean and more immersive than that project's rock-band hijinks, with Lennox's voice in the center of an environment rather than at the front of a machine. *Diva* opens with a wash of pads so lush and pillowy our heads sink right back into it. But the messy lover's quarrel of Lennox's lyrics begins to unravel, and by the end, she's speaking directly to us, mere inches from the mic: "You don't know how I feel."

For an album that creates such an inviting world, *Diva* is pessimistic about the one in which we live. The breakup songs are melodramatic in the depths of pain—"Walking On Broken Glass" is an awfully violent metaphor for such a jaunty skip-to-my-lou of a song—and the love songs like "Cold" and "Stay By Me" concern themselves with transient moments, as if guarding themselves against hurt. "Money Can't Buy It" refers to love, like the Beatles song, but Lennox's rap suggests she doesn't believe her own sentiment, hollowly extolling the joys of money. It works as well musically as you'd expect from Annie Lennox rapping, but it's a great thematic twist of the knife. (Sadly absent from the vinyl release is a bitter version of "Keep Young and Beautiful.")

Diva established Lennox, who wrote with Stewart in the Eurythmics, as an auteur with a clear-cut vision, more than capable of holding her own in the pop industry. Superficially, then, it would seem weird that she'd follow it up with an album of covers. But *Medusa* is, if anything,

an even more formidable assertion of Lennox as an artist. Her choices of covers are ballsy, not because they're left-field but because they're so tried-and-true. Most listeners will know at least three of these songs, six or seven if they're at least entry-level music nerds. But the overwhelming impression from *Medusa* is holistic. Some of the covers are better than others, yes, but they're all united aesthetically in a way that overcomes their familiarity, and in a way that makes sense.

Medusa is, if anything, even more lush and expansive than its predecessor. Her cover of "Downtown Lights" by her fellow Scots the Blue Nile, who collaborated with her on "The Gift" on *Diva* and are probably the closest reference point to Lennox's music, might just upstage the original as far as its glittering evocation of being lost in a nocturnal cityscape. She covers Neil Young's "Don't Let It Bring You Down" in a way that brings out the haunting imagery of castles burning. Bob Marley's "Waiting in Vain" loses its earthbound wistfulness for something more elegant: the penthouse as widow's walk. The electric piano on Paul Simon's "Something So Right" glitters like pearls. And, of course, there's that epochal version of "No More I Love You's."

Even the curveballs work. "Train in Vain" reimagines the Clash song as new jack swing, a direction that black pop-enamored band might have even embraced. She's less successful when she tackles her great love, soul; her grander emotions are better bubbling just under the surface than at the fore. The conversational ease of "I Can't Get Next to You" makes her a lot less convincing as a supernatural figure who can "*make a ship sail on dry land.*" "Take Me to the River" aims for something like rock but ends up with bluster. But *Medusa* is arguably a better album than *Diva*, being as it is a sonically unified celebration of great songs, and it surpassed *Diva* sales-wise to be the Annie Lennox album most likely seen on any given shelf.

Despite their popularity, these albums are only just now seeing a vinyl reissue courtesy of Sony Music. Most people who buy these albums will probably be older music fans engaging with the relatively recent resurgence of vinyl rather than the young, hip crowd to which the medium is typically targeted. This kind of middle-of-the-road pop circa the first half of the '90s has been skipped by the critical reevaluation train, which is currently blazing its way towards the edgy, angsty music of millennial middle-school CD collections. It's not without reason; this music can be corny, never more so than on Lennox's rap. But at its best, the spell it casts renders such quibbles irrelevant, and these two records contain some of the most immersive pop of their time.

- Label:
- Release Date: