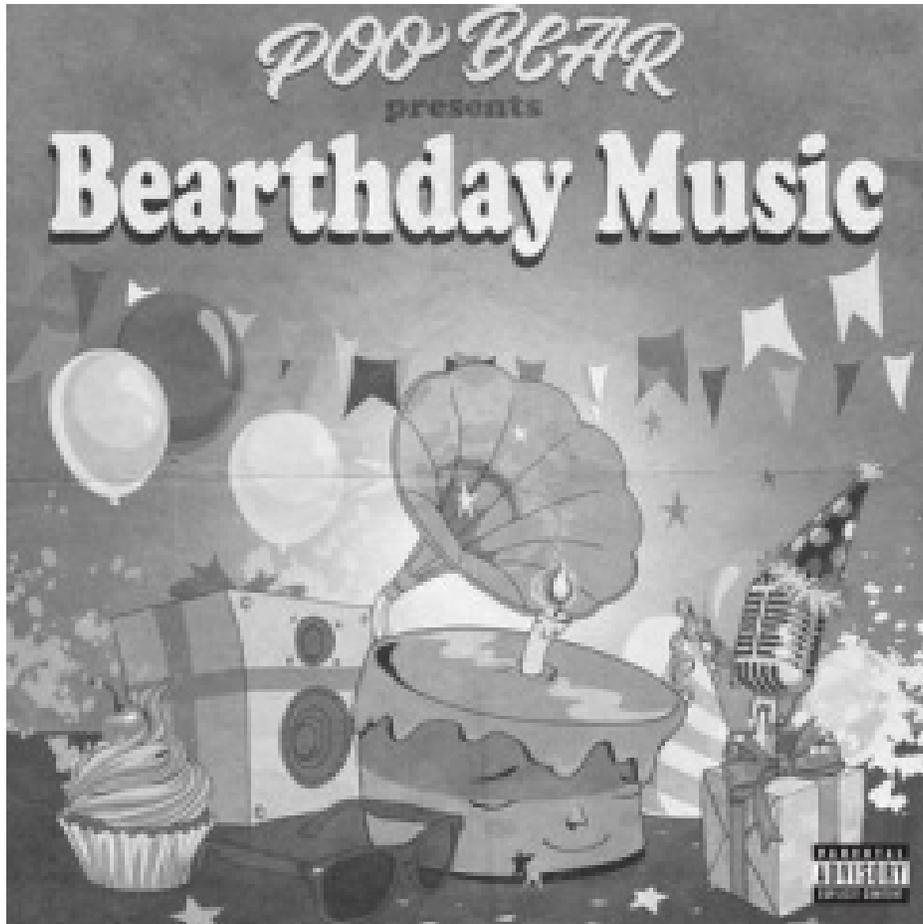


Poo Bear: Poo Bear Presents: Bearthday Music

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May 8, 2018



One of the pop industry's best-kept secrets is the division of labor in songwriting. Singers are typically credited as writers for royalty purposes even if the songs were simply handed to them by assistants in the dressing room. Typically, we can assume whoever isn't the singer, producer or author is the songwriter, but some artists have such individual voices—Beyoncé's good-natured bawdiness, Adele's maudlin venom—that they must have some stake in things, right? *Bearthday Music* is a collection of songs ostensibly written by Justin Bieber scribe Poo Bear. "Songwriter" isn't much of a cogent artist identity, especially in this industry, and though it's common for singers to take on the work of a single songwriter for an album, this is sung mostly by friends, with Poo Bear taking the mic a few times to no great distinction. With guests from Justin Bieber to J Balvin to your usual crop of mononymous EDM divas, this thing should hang together like a David Ayer soundtrack.

But somewhere during the making of this thing, Poo Bear and company stumbled on a sound, and it's a good one. This is mostly chill beach-party pop adjacent to tropical house—except it actually sounds chill, thanks to its decision to foreground acoustic guitars rather than the

squealing samples and Tarzan yells popularized by Bieber's *Purpose*, much of which Poo Bear wrote. *Beartday Music* goes down easier than 95 percent of pop albums, if only because its dynamics rarely rise above *mezzo forte*.

Maybe working with a B-list songwriter rather than an A-list star gave the enviable roster of producers, including Boi-1da, Nineteen85, and Skrillex, an opportunity to turn down the heat from under their sound. Either way, there must have been something in the air during the sessions: smoke, perhaps, or just the easygoing communal vibe of a weeknight folk jam. The diversity of singers and rappers, from huge stars like Jennifer Lopez to ungooglable greenhorns like LAZR, suggest a party where everyone's invited.

The best collaborations are the biggest. Bieber's used sparingly, which is the right decision; his icy diva voice seems beamed in from a bigger and more glamorous world than the one this album inhabits. The Latin stars J Balvin and Juanes feel right at home, perhaps relieved they've found an American songwriter who can write as capably in Spanish as English. The worst moments of the album come from Poo Bear's own roster of vocalists, like Drake clone LAZR and grating SoundCloud rapper Nechie.

Yet the artist who leaves least of an impression is Poo Bear himself. His hooks don't exactly stick in the head for hours. "*The inevitable, yeah, yeah, yeah*" is far from "She Loves You," and if he's writing for the rappers, he can probably do better than "*fucking all the pretty ladies, diamonds look so amazing*." Yet on the one song where he sings lead, "Early or Late," he proves himself a likable singer with a liquid voice and a swooning classic-soul personality. He should do more next time than simply "present."