

Tink: Pain & Pleasure EP

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Daniel Bromfield

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Tink's deal with Timbaland's Mosley Music Group was one of the more disturbing things to happen to a rising star in recent years. The Calumet City singer-rapper emerged early this decade with the astounding *Winter's Diary* series of tapes, which cast her as something akin to a hip-hop Stevie Nicks: an artist at home in Magic Kingdom fantasies but mostly interested in the psychology that leads one to spin those reveries for themselves. When Tim anointed Tink as the next Aaliyah, it felt gross not just because of how badly Aaliyah was exploited by the music industry during her brief lifetime but because Tink's music was so distinctive that crowning her as the next anything seemed beside the point. The singles from her promised album *Think Tink* were nothing special, they didn't chart, and the album was shelved; Tink is now an independent artist.

But it's worth wondering how much better the music on her first indie EP, *Pain & Pleasure*, is than what she might have made with Mosley Music. These six tracks are polished studio R&B that chooses to be solid rather than distinctive, and though only one of the songs here ("Signs") is really bad—the "signs" double entendre in the chorus really isn't worth sitting through Tink singing things like "*confused like a Capricorn/that's why I'm feeling oh-so-torn*"—

there's the worrying sense that she may have left part of herself behind in the music-industry wolf trap. Her writing no longer seems personal, and a lot of songs here are based on Tin Pan Alley gimmicks; "Faded" is about how sex is like getting stoned, "Signs" is about how sex is like astrology, so on.

Her writing acumen is still solid, and she's unexpectedly funny, especially on "Take You Home," which finds her describing sex as "*feeling like a paycheck*." This EP is unrelentingly lusty, and she has a rarer-than-you'd-expect knack for making us understand the pleasure she's feeling. In one of the EP's most satisfying moments, she spends a bar of "Signs" talking about all the drugs her lover reminds her of—then gasps, awed, "*We're not even high yet.*" This is appropriate, as she's less convincing when writing about actually doing drugs. On "Faded," she and her lover are "stoned and high;" on "M.I.A." they're "high and faded." These are synonyms for essentially the same thing; the conspiracy theories about Drake not actually smoking weed come to mind.

Six tracks might not seem like much of a jumping point by which to judge an artist's entire future career, but one expects an artist as distinctive as Tink to embrace their freedom by making music more interesting than this. Tink's only 23 and made most of her best music in her late teens, meaning she may have lost a period of peak artistic growth while she was being smothered by the Mosley Music machine. Much of the early Tink hype gravitated around her potential as a pop star, a near-unrivaled rapper-singer-songwriter triple threat. But what she was rapping, singing and writing about was most important; *Pain & Pleasure* too often forgets this.