

Review: Ariel Pink, Dedicated To Bobby Jameson

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Ariel Pink Dedicated to Bobby Jameson

No, this isn't Ariel Pink's "normal" album, in case you were worried. After the nice but innocuous goth-pop of singles "Another Weekend" and "Feels Like Heaven", what a relief it was to see titles like "Kitchen Witch" and "Revenge of the Iceman" among the tracklist! True, *Dedicated To Bobby Jameson* is a bit more stripped-down, somber and sober than the last few Pink joints, especially the broad comedy of *Pom Pom*. But it's still unmistakably an album by the weirdest, flat-out funniest musician to net any sort of indie acclaim in the 2010s.

Pink's essentially in pop mode here, but what keeps the music fresh is its strangeness, as well as an appealing thorniness that made me aware of an underlying thread in Pink's work I've always ignored—paranoia. Someone's always watching on this album: death patrols stalk the streets, Santa's in the closet, and God leers down from the heavens. At times, Pink sounds like a sequestered prophet, broadcasting his ravings to the world through rinky-dink synthpop whose sound palate seems sourced from sun-damaged VHS tapes.

The singer's often tagged as a smirking ironist, and indeed his skill with a hook seems to exist only to be subverted. But this seems less a product of arrogance than confidence. Like Paul McCartney, he's so sure of his skills he doesn't seem to care whether or not people take him seriously. So he embarks on risks most musicians wouldn't put their money on in million years, like opening the album by barking "time to meet your God!" followed by a ten-ton drum fill, and saving the pop single for the second track. He's clearly in no hurry to prove himself.

Another reason Pink can get away with so much is that he removes himself from his music. He's a studio hermit, not a star, and his voice changes on a whim: he can be a pop-punk brat ("Bubblegum Dreams"), a fast-talking comic nerd ("Dreamdate Narcissist"), a dolled-up glam poppet in the depths of orgasm ("Santa's in the Closet"). And his music never seems to be about himself; we don't listen to Pink to relate. *Mature Themes* was allegedly his breakup album, a statement that should sound like a joke to anyone who's heard *Mature Themes*.

Perhaps the elusiveness of Pink, the person, is also why he's essentially Teflon. Pink all but sabotaged the release of *Pom Pom* with his anti-feminist rants and sexist snips towards his female critics during the post-Robin Thicke, pre-Trump season when the rampant misogyny in pop was a flashpoint. Since *Dedicated to Bobby Jameson*'s been released, that's barely been talked about. Wisely, his recent interviews have mostly centered on the album's namesake, an obscure '60s folkie whose ignominious split from the music industry resonated with Pink.

Less wise is his decision to spike the chorus of the title track with one of the most popular transphobic slurs. Either no one told Pink the term "tranny" is incredibly offensive, out of fear of clapback from the artist or simply out of ignorance, or the artist couldn't give less of a shit. Either way is equally likely, and interviews seem to suggest Pink is largely and willfully ignorant of what's offensive and what isn't. Even more worrying is that he's using the word as a weapon, waiting for the liberal sheep to line up with the inevitable thinkpieces—trolling, in other words.

If pop is truly universal, turning it into something exclusionary is a less savory subversion than simply chuckling your way through a chorus. I'd like to be able to recommend Ariel Pink's music, to say that if you're frustrated with the sour self-seriousness of so much indie rock *Dedicated to Bobby Jameson* is the perfect balm. I also entirely understand if the risk he might sing something triggering and traumatic trumps any superficial appreciation you might have for his craft, or if supporting an anti-feminist, slur-happy singer simply runs contrary to what you stand for. Title track aside, this a really good album by a really sketchy guy. **B**