

Lil Uzi Vert: Luv is Rage 2

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Barely five years ago, the debut studio album was the ultimate test of an MC's marketplace viability and artistic acumen. Now, they're indistinguishable from mixtapes. Only in pop's Wild West era could one of the most hyped young rappers in the world put out a "studio debut" billed as a sequel to a two-year-old mixtape, that openly advertises a clothing brand on the cover and that shuttles the hit it's ostensibly meant to sell all the way to the butt end of its tracklist.

That hit would be "XO Tour Llif3," one of the best rap singles of the year and the biggest smash yet from the ascendant Atlanta rapper Lil Uzi Vert. There's not much else on *Luv is Rage 2* like it; in fact, it really doesn't have much to offer in the way of songs. Most of what's here are exercises where Uzi goes on tangents and designates whatever sticks in his head as hooks. Sometimes we get great stuff, like when he plays Ping-Pong with his own voice on "444+222." Other times, we get groaners like "*Leonardo DiCaprio/ Watch out boys, I might bag your hoe.*"



It might feel appealingly freewheeling if it weren't so dark and dense. *Luv is Rage 2* is bad-trip, monochrome psych, full of ugly sounds half-cloaked in distortion. Uzi doubles and triples his vocals, ad-libs relentlessly and spits whole verses through the phone filter alt-rock circa the middle of last decade made its specialty. It's an intriguing mess. But it's wrong for Uzi, a cartoonish character who bounces on top of his beats and works better in the pop-song format—and it's a lot to take over 56 minutes, every moment jam-packed with too much information.

The fleshed-out singles are few and far between, but they're the highlights. "Neon Guts" uses a great emo image as the hook for an incense-scented, vibraphone-laced Pharrell production that reminds us how weird his beats could get before he became the lovable star in the Smokey hat. "The Way Life Goes" is gorgeous, its ascending synth hook bearing just a whiff of Lil Wayne's "Lollipop." And "XO Tour Llif3" actually ends up working great at the tail end of the album.

Uzi is unequivocally best at pop songs. We know that from *The Perfect Luv Tape* and *Lil Uzi Vert vs. the World*, neither of which were great but at least had the appealing symmetry albums take on when they're comprised entirely of potential hits. It's strange that *Luv is Rage 2* skimps on the hooks so hard, especially at the point in his career when he should be cranking them out. *Luv is Rage 2* is selling spectacularly, so the issue isn't that this approach is damaging his commercial prospects but that it's led to a far less appealing album than what could have been.

Lil Uzi Vert's appeal is easy to understand. He's likable and rakish, combining the upbeat whimsy of a comic-book hero with the gritty good looks and provocative fashion sense of a decadent rock star. His voice is a wonder, raspy and bratty, adept at both overpronounced pop-punk anguish and slurred soul melisma. He deserves an album that understands his appeal, but at this rate it looks like we might have to wait for a greatest hits compendium down the road.

- Label:
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