

Ariana Grande: Sweetener

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Ariana Grande's *Sweetener* is the strongest album by an A-list American pop artist since Beyoncé's *Lemonade* in 2016, which is interesting because both albums are about the same thing: monogamy, specifically being a specific famous person in a relationship with another specific famous person. Monogamy is a harder sell than promiscuity in pop. Everyone knows sex feels great, but young listeners are likely to see marriage as an end-game, a cut-off point after which you can't do all the fun things in life like party and travel and walk around naked and smoke weed in your apartment. It's easy for label goon to bang out a song about fucking and be home by lunchtime. Songs about commitment thus tend to come from a more personal place from the artist and better reflect their personality. It's no surprise, then, that Grande's definitive full-length to date both comes on the heels of her engagement to goofball comic Pete Davidson and is her first album where she had a hand in writing most of the songs.

Co-writer credits in pop are often dubious and tend to exist to funnel more royalties to the singer. But what's striking about *Sweetener* is that Grande makes her strongest statements not through her voice—long the selling point for a singer often termed “Baby Mariah”—but her voice as an *artist*, that self-assurance that prompts fans to scream “iconic” from the Internet

cheap seats. Great songwriters have that voice. So do great pop stars. Those specifics can be the difference between an A-list and B-list stars. You know what I'm talking about. Drake cries in hotel rooms and frets about the state of his empire. Rihanna gets high on boats. Beyoncé makes dazzling public appearances and has Warhol-wrecking sex with her husband. And here Grande emerges as a most unbothered of pop singers: comfortable, bemused, blissed-out enough to observe offhandedly just how successful she is as if realizing it for the first time. She no longer needs to broadcast her emotions to the heavens. She barely needs to get out of bed.

The romance on this album isn't the kind for the ages. There are no moonlit trysts on bridges or extravagant king-and-queen coronations. It's the kind defined by a lot of cuddling, cute selfies, compliments on the Internet, pet names, owning plants together, and so on. There's not a lot of sex here, but there's a lot of weak-kneed lust; "Everytime" posits a stoned phone call as the kind of gesture that can bring one to their knees (which sounds like an outsized exaggeration until you realize a lot of guys are awfully cute when they're stoned). There's a song called "Pete Davidson," which is a vignette of contentment with no specific references to a man about whose specifics much has been made. She didn't even write that one. She likely heard it and decided to attach her lover's name to it. Most pop stars sell themselves as sex symbols. Not Ariana—at least not here. You're more likely to come out of this album crushing on Davidson, or else just jealous of the thing they have going. They're probably out for sushi as you read this.

Swaddling it all is some head-slapping production, about half of which was contributed by an extremely locked-in Pharrell—who between this, N.E.R.D.'s "Lemon" and Migos's "Stir Fry," is evidently sick of being an MOR pop star and ready to get his hands dirty again in space-beats territory. "R.E.M" is unreal, its sighing suggestion of a beat warm as pillowtalk and, in its mile-wide chords, as desolate as anything by Basic Channel. "Borderline" could have been made on GarageBand. It's so chintzy most producers would scoff at throwing it at a major pop star, but it's exactly the kind of underground anthem singers like Jessie Lanza and Kelela are so good at, as much gnarly dance abstraction as banger for the ages. Like so many white pop stars before her, she desires hip hop for its sensual cool, but unlike Justin Timberlake or Miley Cyrus, she doesn't use it as a shortcut to cartoon sleaze. She likes it for its momentum; she just sounds so damn *cool* over these beats, and there's never a moment where she seems to be straining.

There's the nagging sense that the *Sweetener* sessions might have produced a masterpiece rather than simply a great pop album had they been headed solely by Pharrell. His vision for Grande is singular and album-oriented, while Max Martin's Wolf Cousins, who contribute most of the rest, apparently focused most of their attention on the individual tracks. It's telling neither of the album's biggest hits, "God is a Woman" and "No Tears Left to Cry," feature a Pharrell credit. Both are good songs. "God is a Woman" is the ideal of the sort of stargazing trap ballad Grande made her métier on *Dangerous Woman*, with an almost prog-rock guitar riff just south of Pink Floyd's "Dogs." "No Tears Left to Cry" pairs the swoon of classic deep house with a

troglydytic synth riff; it sounds like something that could have been big around the time of “Bad Romance” or “S&M.” You’ll be happy to hear them on the radio. But they’re at right angles both to each other and to Pharrell’s more consistent and interesting vision for the music.

This is the rare pop album where the filler is more interesting than the singles. There’s not a lot here that really feels extraneous. Its worst songs, like the Bareilles baby formula of “Breathin” and the Migos cosplay of the title track, at least make sense from a commercial standpoint. Even the acapella Four Seasons half-cover that kicks off the album feels less like a portentous intro than Grande getting a song she loves out of the way. The album’s healthy, classic-vinyl sleekness betrays a disinterest in the high stakes of most pop albums. Chart artists tend to make their best music at their least threatened. If your name is a seal of quality, it’s more easily forgivable, both critically and commercially to make “weird” or low-stakes music. And this easygoing pop album, which slaps fearsomely while slipping by like a summer breeze, is the kind of coronation you can’t force into being. It’s the sound of Grande pulling the sheets over her head to sleep in another hour, her man’s arms around her, as the sun rises over her empire.