

Queen

Nicki Minaj

Young Money / Cash Money

20 August 2018

Nicki Minaj and Eminem may or may not be dating. But at least they can chat over drinks about how, as a rapper, Minaj invokes on her fourth album *Queen* famously said, things done changed in the hip-hop game. Em hasn't made much worth a damn in the last 15 years, and even the stuff that was ever ostensibly worth a damn now scans as meathead Bush-era trolling, as wretched as *Family Guy*. As for Minaj, it's only been four years since she was at the chart-rap vanguard. "Trini Dem Girls" and "Four Door Aventador", not to mention "Anaconda", were popoptimist staples after *The Pinkprint* dropped. "Truffle Butter" got a healthy amount of club play and remains one of the decade's better bangers. But trap and SoundCloud rap have taken over since. *Queen's* title implies it's meant to function as a coronation for one of the biggest rappers ever, but it's more the sound of Minaj fighting to keep that crown on her head.

Those who wished she'd just make a hard rap album instead of "compromising" to pop as she did on *Pink Friday* and the second half of *Roman Reloaded* might feel validated. The rapping-to-singing proportion is higher than on any of her releases since her mixtape days. There are no obvious pop-radio hits like "Starships" or "Pills n Potions," though perhaps that's because the overlap between rap and pop is greater than it's been since the first half of the 2000s and it's commercially safer than ever for her to spit instead of sing. Either way, hooking up with the Weeknd for a blustery goth-R&B ballad ("Thought I Knew You") and Future for the millionth pale retread of Juvenile's "Ha" ("Sir") is at least as cynical as manufacturing a bunch of dance-pop songs for the second half of your album—and a lot less entertaining. Its nods to Atlanta come across less like canny fusion and more like what happened to Prince around the time new jack swing took over, or to Stevie Wonder once gated drums and synth bass became the sound of the future.

Though she evokes her hometown influences and brags about not using ghostwriters, her vision for rap is far from conservative. She allows herself acres of Auto-Tune on "Hard White", and she certainly hasn't turned her back on the pop-radio ballads that kept her in the chart pantheon, with "Come See About Me" and "Bed" fattening her royal robes with fluffy feathers.



The only song that really fulfills her promise to NYC rap history is "Barbie Dreams", where she runs down a list of real-life rappers that want a piece of her in the bedroom. It's based on Biggie's "Just Playing (Dreams)" by way of former Minaj rival Lil' Kim's "Dreams". It's also a little like Serge Gainsbourg's sleazy travelogues of his real-life sexual conquests, or perhaps Noel Coward's risqué take on "Let's Do It (Let's Fall in Love)" starring the celebrities of the 1950s.

Coward, though, would sniff at homophobic potshots like the one Minaj takes at the effeminate (but straight) Young Thug, mocking his nonexistent lisp and implying he needs to be "tested". Though Minaj has many gay fans left over from her ascendancy at the time of inspirational be-yourself unicorn pop, one wonders how many will jump ship when she follows a line about "switchin' like a sissy" with a verse from archetypal hip-hop homophobe Eminem that shouts out "Georgie Porgie" author Q-Tip. One wouldn't expect a rapper who built her image on being "schizophrenic" to be particularly sensitive towards disabled people, but a line like "shout out to Designer cause he made it out of special ed" is still gross.

Minaj's homophobic and ableist lines don't get in the way of the album too much, but they feel like the kind of things comedians like Gilbert Gottfried take to documentaries like *Can We Take a Joke?* to bitch about not being able to say in the era of consequence. Her language is what aligns her most with rap's past, and though it's not hard to find rappers saying reprehensible shit, it's a lot easier to listen to your average 2018 rap album without wincing than one in, say, 1992. What Minaj needs isn't to make an Old New York album. What she needs is an album where she can rap (or sing!) free of the pressure to be the queen or to stay on top of the kids. Maybe once she's semi-retired and comfortable many years from now, she'll come out of seclusion with something great. But Nicki Minaj has never sounded comfortable, least of all when she's running around making sure everything's tidy for her own coronation.

Rating:

Related Articles Around the Web