

Travis Scott: Astroworld

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If you see Travis Scott as a hack, *Astroworld* won't change your mind. If you've always liked what he did – the extravagant dark-fantasy aesthetic, the patina of danger, the overwhelming size and sound that made every idea feel important – but just wish he'd make a great album already, *Astroworld* is a revelation. This is an album for the fans. Luckily, he has a lot of those.

Scott has long been an acolyte of Kanye West, whose greatest skill many fans argue is curating albums – assembling the right beats and collaborators and concepts and fitting them into the perfect arc. This feels like the conclusion to that approach in rap. Though Scott raps harder than he has since early tapes like *Owl Pharaoh*, he's a master of ceremonies for an album whose guests are frequently uncredited, though a quick Google search reveals many of the names. Tame Impala and Thundercat show up to lend indie cred, Stevie Wonder to add hall-of-fame cred, Swae Lee and the Migos guys for trap cred. It's a high-art canvas, a brainless tentpole blockbuster, a gesture towards the rockist cult of the album – it's a rap record in 2018.

It's almost overwhelming when it starts. "Stargazing" drowns in Auto-Tune, Scott's robo-voice forming such intricate lattices it feels less like a song than the Singularity; it's one of the most

gorgeous rap hits since “Lifestyle.” Then the beat changes, with Scott sobering up and rapping properly and bragging about his injurious concerts. A lot of these songs (“Stop Trying To Be God,” “Sicko Mode”) tack on half-finished codas and interludes and distractions and side-quests once they seem to be over. Given that streaming charts reward more songs per album, it’s curious he wouldn’t shear these interludes and make them individual tracks. Perhaps he likes the allure of the multipart song and wanted to give his music a healthy sense of grandeur.

Astroworld can be hushed and crystalline, as on throat-clearing interludes like “AstroThunder” and rich pad symphonies like “Sicko Mode” with Drake. At other times, it feels designed to incite feral, eyeball-clawing mosh pits, as on “No Bystanders” – whose goonish “*fuck the club up*” refrain evokes not only similar chants from Waka Flocka and Three 6 Mafia, but the “*kill people, burn shit, fuck school*” refrain from Odd Future’s “Radical,” one of the first rap songs designed for moshing. It’s easy to see his intent on a lot of these songs: “Coffee Bean” is meant to be an emotional glimpse of the “real” Scott, but it’s clearly a pastiche of Drake’s in-my-feelings songs. But because you “get” what he’s doing doesn’t mean he’s not doing it – and he’s doing it very well.

Astroworld is inevitably a little overwhelming. Though its 58 minutes feel robust rather than overlong – worrying rumors it’d be a double album were quickly squashed – it’s still a lot of high-energy, live-oriented rap to take in one sitting. Its replay value will probably be in its individual bangers, at parties, during workouts. To equate it to America’s most reliable big-budget form of entertainment: it’s not great the way *The Dark Knight* is but in the way *Thor: Ragnarok* is. It doesn’t work because of truth and depth and pathos but because the right people and a big enough budget came together to make something spectacularly entertaining.