

2018 Music That Mattered: 'Whack World' by Tierra Whack

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Instead of a traditional top-10 list for the end of the year, Split Tooth Media is releasing a series of essays about the music that we felt mattered most in 2018. Read why [here](#) and read [other installments](#) here.

"Don't worry about me, I'm doing good, I'm doing great, alright," declares Tierra Whack on her debut album *Whack World* — and, astonishingly given that this is a rapper in 2018, we believe her. It might be hard to believe hearing this dainty, deliberately cute art-pop record that the Philadelphian (and yes, Tierra Whack is her real name) made her name on fast-paced viral freestyles as a teenager, going by Dizzle Dizz. But what carries through from this past vocation, aside from a truly formidable flow she fires off when she feels up to it, is the feeling that you're watching a human being in peak physical and spiritual form. She dares us throughout to bite her style, comfortable we can't. She designs her own bling; she eats her fruits and vegetables; she pops off freestyles just to prove she can. A lifetime of discipline went into what we're seeing here, and if we can come close to what she achieves, she'll... well, she'll be impressed, I guess.

She's at ease on record — less so, we gather, in life. For its whimsy and quick wit, one of the strongest presences *Whack World* is sadness. The music leaves long spaces, as if to allow Whack some room to gather her thoughts. Pads and chords hang pendulously over the music. "Fuck Off" feels like a ribald parody of country kiss-offs until the line "you remind me of my deadbeat dad" introduces real-world

stakes that make us wonder whether or not we should even be laughing at her outrageous fake Southern drawl. The record's most stunning song, "Pet Cemetery," seems like a goof about her dead dog until we realize with a start she's not singing about a pet. "I talked to God today," she declares over pianos that are half *Blueprint 3* and half Brian Wilson. Then the clouds part and God responds "all dogs go to heaven," accompanied by a din of baying and barking. It's unbelievably poignant as she squints to hear the voice of her friend Hulitho, another Philadelphia rapper who was murdered in 2016, through the racket. As the song ends, the gates of heaven close up once again with a cat's meow.



All Dogs Go To Heaven is an apt reference point; like Don Bluth, the ex-Disney auteur behind that VHS classic and films like *The Land Before Time* and *An American Tail*, Whack draws a paper-thin line between whimsy and sadness. (Another song is titled "Bugs Life" after an early film by Pixar, the most reliable tear-jerkers in contemporary children's entertainment.) At times, *Whack World* feels like a kids' movie, its anxieties masked by a palatable patina of whimsy that makes lines of unvarnished truth like that "deadbeat dad" line hit so much harder. Whack subscribes to a distinctive millennial aesthetic, manifested in "wholesome" memes and the soft palette of latter-day emo-adjacent indie rock, that suggests surrounding oneself in cute things to stave off existential dread. Some of us raise plants or cats. Whack likes things like Dr. Seuss, patty-cake, tacos, video games, dogs and hand puppets. "Silly Sam" isn't just a breakup song; it's a *games*-themed breakup song, video and otherwise, cramming in references to as many as possible before ending with a shout-out to Nintendo's most beloved second banana. On another song, swag-biters get compared to Hungry Hippos. And how does she get that swag, you may ask? By eating her fruits and vegetables. *Whack World* is as precious as anything Kimya Dawson ever sung for *Juno*, and like Dawson's music, it doesn't use neoteny as an endgame but to let us swallow sad truths with a spoonful of sugar.

A friend who otherwise admired the album complained *Whack World* didn't "slap." This is true, if beside the point *Whack World* is as much a singer-songwriter album as anything else. Many tracks consist of little more than Whack's voice over a MIDI preset, usually a phased-out electric piano, with the drums as an afterthought if they even show up. She has no apparent interest in making bangers, though perhaps she'll expand on some of these songs on later releases. *Whack World* is powerful chiefly because of what Whack is saying and what it means. This is not one of those "mumble rap" albums where words are made into soup, nor is it in the Biggie-Tupac-Kendrick vein of well-made rap albums that draw from the widescreen scope of gangster cinema. It's a little more like, I dunno, Joni Mitchell's *Taming the Tiger*.

Whack World comprises 15 songs in 15 minutes. I haven't mentioned this yet because it might be the least impressive thing about it. Why Whack has done this I'm not entirely sure, and a few of the songs would certainly benefit from being longer. But at less than three "Sicko Mode"s long it's an easily digestible listen that begs you to play it again after the drum machine of its final track peters out with an overworked tick-tock. And the structure gives Whack yet another opportunity to crack jokes. The meow that closes "Pet Cemetery" comes *right* at the end of the song, as does her Luigi shoutout on "Silly Sam." It's a testament to Whack's talent that an album this minimal — brief enough that some might hesitate to even call it an album — feels so complete. When it ends, we think not of how little we've heard but how much she conveyed.

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