

# James Blake: Assume Form

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*Assume Form* is mostly about how famous James Blake is. Around a decade ago, a few underground British bass DJs like Blake, Rustie and Jamie xx quietly influenced what would become the mainstream. But Blake has fully embraced pop and maintains a steady stream of features, hiring himself as a goon for marquee pop and rap projects like Travis Scott's *Astroworld* and Kendrick Lamar's *Black Panther* soundtrack. His fourth full-length is modeled as a similar blockbuster, but it's not a lush sprawl of ideas like those albums or Blake's *The Color in Anything* from 2016. It's a well-curated, 48-minute album of frequently annoying pop that's just self-serious enough so you know you're listening to someone who used to be weird.

It's his *Synchronicity*, and it even has its own "Every Breath You Take:" "I'll Come Too," where he'll go literally anywhere his girlfriend goes. Blake is not much of a lyricist, which he used to circumvent by recording astonishing ballads that consisted of a few simple words sung over and over. Here he has nowhere to hide. The solo Blake songs tend to be molassesey four-something-minute beat-wisps over which his voice kind of floats and sputters until it congeals into something cringy like "I'll slow ride in between the cracks between you and him." There's not enough depth to Blake's malcontent beyond being hurt by girls, a far cry from the oceans of feeling from a lyric such as "my brother and my sister don't speak to me/ But I don't blame them."

The guests are useless. The Travis Scott-Metro Boomin song just sounds like something from *Jack Huncho*, taking no advantage of the union of two of pop's best vocal contortionists. Spanish flamenco singer Rosalia's melismas cast jagged beams of light across the cold dubscape of "Barefoot in the Park," but it's not clear why she's here besides the critical goodwill from her phenomenal *El Mal Querer*. Moses Sumney's voice isn't a million miles removed from Blake's, so he weathers the storm well, but far more typical is something like André 3000's inexplicable verse on "Where's the Catch?" "Now this might get a little bit heady," he prefaces it. It's anything but; by then it's more like the next number starting in a bad musical.

*Assume Form* isn't bad because it's a sellout. It's just an album where a lot of decisions seem to have been made for reasons aside from making good music or, clearly given the album's Fincher-dry color palette and constipated pace, having fun. And it blanks on how to present Blake: he doesn't come off well here as collaborator, curator, producer, lyricist or potential pop star. His singing's been better, and the lyrics'

pissy bombast sinks a lot of the goodwill from his tremulous pipes. I imagine a newbie who'd only heard of Blake from this album would go back to it for its guests rather than the presence of its star. His role could be most accurately described as V.I.P., except that makes the album sound kinda like a party, and it's anything but.



<https://youtu.be/em4joakjkv4>