

Solange: When I Get Home (album review)

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When I Get Home

Solange

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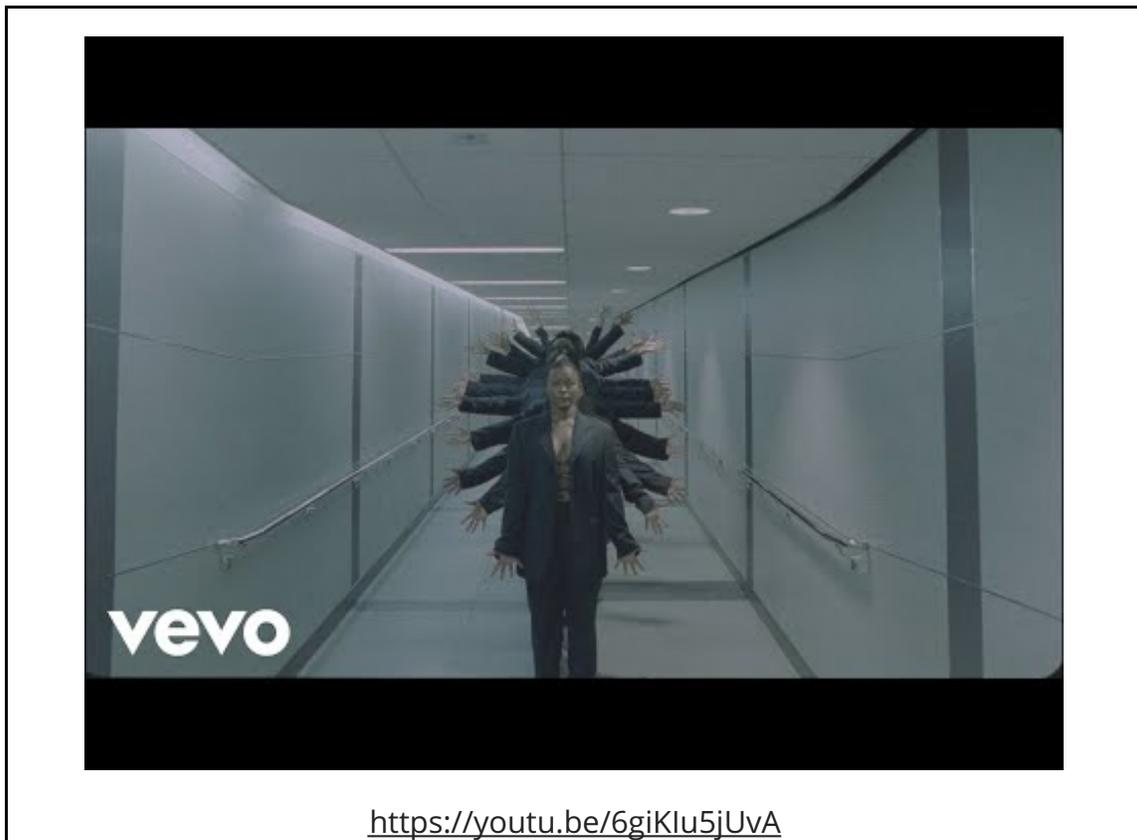
Solange repeats "I saw things I imagined", or some variation thereof, 16 times in the first minute of *When I Get Home*. Sometimes it's just "things I imagined". Sometimes she emphasizes one word over another. Sometimes she burrows into her throat and her voice emerges a little deeper and duskier than before.



If that sounds a bit daft to you, it comes with the territory. *When I Get Home* requires a little bit of suspension of disbelief—maybe not quite an inclination to believe in the supernatural, definitely a willingness to let reality slip. The more she repeats the phrase, the deeper the mystery becomes until an upward keyboard trill interrupts and the record blossoms to life.

When I Get Home's biggest risk is that it sounds a little stupid. In contrast to the tersely worded polemics of 2016's *A Seat at the Table*, the lyrics here often come up blank or are hard to understand. Words like "dreams" are repeated. Pearly synths form florettes as Solange perpetually sighs in a faraway coo. Small wonder it's inspired by Stevie Wonder's pseudoscientific *The Secret Life of Plants*.

But anyone who's heard *A Seat at the Table*, one of the best polemical albums of recent years, knows Solange is a smart woman. Detractors who can't see her as anything but the scion of an aristocratic pop family, the Knowles clan of Beyoncé fame, will confuse its effortlessness with a lack of effort and use it as fodder to argue she did nothing to earn her success. An interlude on the record lands as a preemptive criticism: "Do nothing without intention."



It's especially common for female artists and artists of color to face accusations of flubbing lines that'd be seen as clever if written by, say, Elvis Costello. Recall Lil Wayne's lasagna lyric. Or her sister Beyoncé's "algebuhh" line on "1+1=2". *When I Get Home* isn't dumb. It just deals in the abstract, and abstract art will always draw the "my kid could paint that" criticism. As much as *When I Get Home* plays like a dream, its logic is sound.

The theme of *When I Get Home* is, of course, home. For Solange that technically means Houston, which here means collaborations with Houstonians like Devin the Dude and staggered beats from the chop-shop of DJ Screw. The connection is much more obvious in the black cowboy fantasia of the album's visual component, which debuted in nine venues in that town from her mom's old hair salon to the only black-owned bank in Texas.

But the music itself feels like a sort of cocoon enclosing the singer. It doesn't use reverb and distant samples in the way ambient music does, to suggest the world opening up around it. It leaves great amounts of space between the beats, as *A Seat at the Table* does, and then ties up the ends with searching synth chords (jazz band Standing on the Corner backs her for much of the album). The sense of engulfment is uncanny.



<https://youtu.be/83LeK-t-kTw>

"Holistic" is a common new age line, but that's what *When I Get Home* is. Six of 19 tracks are interludes. Its songs don't typically dally much past three minutes, and those that do end up far from where they began. This isn't the half-assery of latter-day Kanye or the wabi-sabi of Rihanna's *Anti*: this thing is really meant to be taken as a piece. "The one" is clearly "Almeda" with its snippy Playboi Carti verse list of black-owned things, and even that song kinda appears out of the mist.

When I Get Home sounds worse when you break it into its individual parts. After about four listenings the feeling sets in that this thing could use more songs and fewer miasmas. "My Skin My Logo" spends far much time goofing around before it bursts into "Strawberry Letter 23" histrionics at the end. These revelations take away only slightly from the first few listens, when it was fun following the smoke to see which way the wind blows.

It doesn't exactly reveal new worlds with repeat listens. It just becomes more familiar, which is probably the point. You start to anticipate things, like that wondrous choir-synth on "Sound of Rain" or how her voice gradually breaks into laughter on "My Skin My Logo", or that part on "Way to the Show" when she sings "drop it down low to the floor" and the most incredible funk burbles pop out of the distance.

One of my favorite things about *When I Get Home* is it doesn't end abruptly like so many albums do, casting us out into the crickets and car noises the real world. That'd be depressing. This thing really *ends*. She says "goodnight" like she's walking a good neighbor to her door, then reprises a melody from "Things I Imagined" to bring it full circle. The whole thing wraps up with a spectacular chord. It's perfect.

Rating: