

Beyoncé – BEYONCÉ (2013)

Written by bluelover

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01 – Pretty Hurts 02 – GhostHaunted 03 – Drunk In Love (Feat. Jay-Z) 04 – Blow 05 – No Angel 06 – YoncePartition 07 – Jealous 08 – Rocket 09 – Mine (Feat. Drake) 10 – XO 11 – Flawless (Feat. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie) 12 – Super Power (Feat. Frank Ocean) 13 – Heaven 14 – Blue (Feat. Blue Ivy)

In the year of the internet troll, Beyoncé might just be 2013's very best. Having hinted at an album since she performed at the Super Bowl back in February, Beyoncé has spent most of 2013 releasing songs for films (Rise Up), adverts (Grown Woman for Pepsi and Standing On The Sun for H&M) and DVDs (God Made You Beautiful) but not, it seemed, for her fans. It was, frankly, turning into a complete mess. Then, early this morning, and without warning, she dumped her self-titled fifth album on iTunes, complete with 14 songs and 17 videos (it's a "visual album" because Beyoncé "sees music" you guys, keep up).

So why the delay? Rumours had been swirling that following the relative lack of success of her last album 4 (no top 10 singles in America, only one here), an early incarnation of the album simply didn't have enough singles on it, while snippets of interviews with various collaborators (The-Dream, Pharrell, Ryan Tedder, Timbaland), hinted at levels of perfectionism last seen in pop's halcyon days of Michael Jackson. Whatever the reason, it must be slightly galling for her ever-patient label to listen to the Janelle Monae-esque Haunted and hear Beyoncé half-rap the following, "All these record labels be boring/ I don't trust these record labels, I'm torn." They might also be surprised to learn that Beyoncé – by far her most experimental and multi-layered album – doesn't really contain an obvious Crazy In Love-style banger. In fact, only the opening Sia collaboration Pretty Hurts and the joyous, echo-laden heart burst of XO are immediate choices for singles, with most of what comes in between shifting from velvet-soft slow jams like the D'Angelo-indebted Rocket (opening line: "Let me sit this ass on you") and the swaggered-up don't-you-know-I'm-Beyoncé-isms of ***Flawless.

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As with Justin Timberlake's recent 20/20 Experience albums, a lot of the songs on Beyoncé unfurl slowly, stretching out to the six-minute mark and often feeling like two songs stitched together. So Haunted starts out as a minimal, weirdly robotic spoken-word section before morphing into the percussive, doom-laden second half. On Partition's first half she delivers another half-rapped verse with a delicious snarl, even delivering an overview of the album's raison d'être in "Radio say speed it up/ I just go slower." As she coos "Yoncé all on his mouth like liqueur", flashing paparazzi bulbs take us into the second section, which is basically about having sex in the back of a limo ("He Monica Lewinskyed all on my gown").

In fact, sex crops up quite a lot throughout. It's all over Blow's delicious throwback funk and the atmospheric thump of the Crazy In Love sequel, Drunk In Love, which features Jay Z seemingly ignoring the pair's current vegan diet as he raps about how he likes Beyoncé's breasts for breakfast. It's not all happy families however; the dark-hued, Lana Del Rey-styled romance of Jealous casts Beyoncé as a spurned lover, while the icy mechanics of No Angel (a Pitchfork-friendly collaboration with Chairlift's Caroline Polachek) recasts the slow jam as something otherworldly.

Perhaps with radio stations having all but deserted her – in America at least – Beyoncé has realised that she doesn't need them. Her superstar aura is now strong enough to hide the fact that, 4 aside, the majority of her albums have been fairly inconsistent, almost like vehicles for singles rather than a cohesive body of work. With album sales stalling across the board and the focus shifting to touring, Beyoncé's got the tour out of the way first – with this year's Mrs Carter jaunt – and released a singleless, multi-layered, head-spinning album second. Maybe she knew what she was doing after all. ---Michael Cragg, theguardian.com

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