

THE MUSICIAN



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is the singer's most
adventurous record, if not
necessarily her best.

Let's see, we've got The Fantastic Intro Song, The Volcanic Piano Ballad You Were Prepared For, The Song Where She Cries, The Forlornly Swagging Song, The Corny Slightly-Too-Pop Song, The Corner Slightly-Too-Pop Song, The Song Called "I Drink Wine," The Stupendously Sweet Song, The Stupendously Mean Song, The Song Where She Sings "Right Now I Truly Hate Bein' Me," The Volcanic Piano Ballad You Weren't Prepared For, and The Extra-Forlornly Swagging Song. Where would you like to start? Excellent choice! "Complacency / Is the worst trait to have / Are you crazy?" sings Adele deep into 30, her fourth album, her ostensible divorce album, her wildest, if not quite her best, album. "You ain't never had / Ain't never had a woman like me." Also: "It is so sad / A man like you / Could be so lazy." Backed by somber finger picked acoustic guitar and terse drums, she sounds both furious and funereal, like Leonard Cohen seething through an especially barbed Real Housewives confessional, and even her kinder pronouncements ("How can you not see just how good for you I am?") are delivered as though she's slowly shaking her head in disgust, and I told you this was The Stupendously Mean Song. It's not about the guy you think it's about, but still: sheesh. "Woman Like Me" (one of three tracks produced by Inflo, from the fantastic British R&B collective Sault) is by far the most confrontational moment on 30, which vacillates between abject loneliness and steely resignation, between fresh-divorcée frivolity and bleary hangover piteousness, between fixation on a past love and cautious exaltation over a new one. "Woman Like Me" is immediately preceded by "All Night Parking (With Erroll Garner) Interlude," a lovely and amorous detour (produced, as is more than half the record, by frequent Adele collaborator Greg Kurstin) drenched in sun-shower piano arpeggios (courtesy of vibey Michigan musician



Joey Pecoraro's 2017 sample of a blissed-out 1964 jam from jazz pianist Erroll Garner), and I think you'll agree that "The Stupendously Sweet Song" is a way less confusing title for that one. And plenty apt, too, given the coquettish jazz-club lilt with which Adele purrs the verses (complete with even flirtier backing vocals):

A further wrinkle, though: Per this month's Rolling Stone cover story, "Woman Like Me" is not about her ex-husband, Simon Konecki, nor is "All Night Parking" about her new boyfriend, Rich Paul, and in fact both songs are about a mystery guy she dated in between, and so really we're dealing here with a brisk two-song suite about a post-divorce love affair that started with butterfly-inducing promise but quickly collapsed into exasperated despair, so then she started sitting courtside with LeBron's agent instead. Huh. That's what I get for trying to mine this record for tabloid intrigue. As a purely musical matter, Stupendously Sweet to Stupendously Mean is quite the whiplash transition, but given the news that Adele prevailed upon Spotify (which owns The Ringer) to remove the Shuffle button from all album pages, it's clear that 30's precise track list, and the emotional chaos in

which it revels, is of paramount importance to her. Not all of it works, and it's all quite chaotic, but you couldn't accuse any of it—not one luxurious, immaculately sung second of it—of complacency. What I have always liked about Adele—and what has only slightly bored me—is her grandiose pop-soul consistency, the airtight 45-minutes-or-so run times of her blockbuster albums (2011's *21* is still my favorite for the

I don't know how you got through to me
(I'm so cold)

It's all happen in' so easily (like, oh my God)
It's so hard to digest, usually I'm best alone

But every time that you text
I want to get on the next flight home
And dream next to you
All night long

raucous Godzilla-in-Memphis ebullience of "I'll Be Waiting"), and her near-total vanishing act between album cycles. She pops up every few years, sets the charts aflame (both *21* and its 2015 successor *25*, hit diamond status stateside), sucks up all the Grammys with a giant cartoon vacuum cleaner, and then bounces, luxuriating once more in the enviable placidity of her private life. So much for that. Her 2019 separation from Konecki

teed up 30—which at 58 minutes and change still somehow feels much longer by comparison—to be a heartbroken reckoning, and "My Little Love," a.k.a. The Song Where She Cries, is in part her attempt to explain her divorce to the fractured couple's 9-year-old son, Angelo. Adele does this via sad little voice-memo mother-son interludes ("I love your dad because he gave you to me") that punctuate the mournfully percolating electro-soul of the song itself (which rises, gravely, to a grand chorus of "I'm holdin' on / Mama's got a lot to learn") before climaxing with Adele, in a solo voice memo, conceding that she is paranoid, stressed, hungover, and lonely, and by now, oof, yeah, she's audibly sobbing. The whole thing sounds like the personal/maternal reckoning of the club-going lady from Drake's "Marvin's Room," and it also sounds unabashedly personal and stridently messy, as Adele records go. This new volatility keeps even the more conventional Adele-type moves on 30 from sounding too familiar: A line like "I had no time to choose / What I chose to do" from "Easy on Me" (a.k.a. The Volcanic Piano Ballad You Were Prepared For) is therefore infused with drama, with real-life pathos. It helps, too, that she sings the hell out

I've never seen the sky this color before
It's like I'm notice in everything a little bit more
Now that all the dust has settled
I rebut all my rebuttals
No one knows what it's like to be us

of it, as naturally she sings the hell out of everything: the smoky bombast, the bellowing virtuosity, the vibrant personality. "Strangers by Nature" (a.k.a. The Fantastic Intro Song, produced in a rad one-off by Childish Gambino cohort and *Black Panther*/The Mandalorian scorer Ludwig Göransson) is a genuine marvel with a jazzy delicacy, every syllable achingly fragile but burnished with gold: The pronounced jazziness, in tandem with the messiness, may call to mind the spectre of Amy Winehouse, whose Old-Soul-With-Fresh-Wounds approach to 21st-century R&B also seems to animate Adele on the digitally tweaked strut of "Cry Your Heart Out" (a.k.a. The Forlornly Swagging Song) and the string-drenched older-soul grandiosity of closer "Love Is a Game" (a.k.a. The Extra-Forlornly Swagging Song). In a perfect world Adele and Amy would've been friendly but fierce lifelong rivals—on the charts, on the Grammy stage, and in quote-unquote the streets—and in that world, too, listeners who



prized grittiness, and volatility, and a little quote-unquote danger would've always gravitated to Amy. But Adele, on the laid-back piano lope "I Drink Wine" (a.k.a. The Song Called "I Drink Wine"), finds a resigned and appealingly exhausted volatility all her own, grappling with a hedonism that doesn't feel all that hedonistic: "So I hope I learn to get over myself / And stop tryin' to be somebody else," she adds. That sentiment is a less forceful variation of the way she described 30 as a whole to *Vogue* in October: "It was more me divorcing myself. Just being like, Bitch, fuckin' hot mess, get your fuckin' shit together!" (The reporter, Abby Aguirre, added that Adele "exploded into

a laugh that sounds like a balloon buzzing around a room as it deflates.")

The prim super-excellence of Adele the Singer has always clashed somewhat, for me, with the delightfully profane

brashness of Adele the Public Figure, and 30, like her other records, doesn't quite make use of all her bawdy business, but this one does find intriguing new sides to her: "Hold On" (a.k.a. The Song Where She Sings "Right Now I Truly Hate Bein' Me") flashes a heightened vulnerability, rising to a grandiose bellowing chorus you'll see coming but welcome anyway, while not quite dishonoring the uncertainty she admits along the way: As for the Slightly-Too-Pop Songs, "Oh My God" (a.k.a. the corny one) has an appealing boom-clap vigor to it: "I know that it's wrong," she wails, "but I want to have fun." But "Can I Get It"—the cornier one, and Adele's second

Every day feels like the road I'm on.

Might just open up and swallow me whole.

How do I feel so mighty small.

When I'm struggling to feel at all?

collaboration with pop gurus Max Martin and Shellback, after 25's far superior "Send My Love (To Your New Lover)"—leans toward generic radio appeal, what with the peppy acoustic guitar, the whistle-melody chorus, the forced infectiousness. At the moment I remember the names of exactly two of the 50-odd bands on modern pop/rock radio who combine spare folk-adjacent platitudes with flashy car-commercial aspirations (those two bands are the Lumineers and Of Monsters and Men), and I don't intend to learn any more of their names, and I



don't need Adele trying to beat them at their own game, even if she can, or at the very least even if she can out-sing the bejesus out of all of 'em. I want Adele to loosen up; I want her to avoid that dreaded "Real"-Singer-Betting-Next-to-a-Grand-Piano role the Grammys are eager for her to play. But the far better parts of 30 encourage her to branch out while still letting her return, with an extra little jolt of a thrill this time, to her fabled strengths. Which brings us, finally, to the album's penultimate track, "To Be Loved," a.k.a. The Volcanic Piano Ballad You Weren't Prepared For, a cowrite with singer-songwriter Tobias Jesso Jr., wherein Adele repeatedly howls, "Let it be known that I tried" with increasing, frightening, legitimately shocking fury, almost losing control but never quite losing control. It's a lot. It will be too much if you value subtlety in any way; it may still not be enough if you find Adele on record, anyway a little too subtle and restrained compared to her magazine interviews. As both a personal and a musical matter, 30 knocks Adele off her carefully laid path, just by here and there, but the effect is tremendous, or at the very least conspicuous. What a path, though, and what a colossal voice that keeps leading you down it, too.