The new directions of One Direction: what do the solo projects tell us?

This morning, One Direction’s Liam Payne dropped Stripped Down, his debut single, which can best be described as something that certainly exists.

That is, unfortunately, the nicest thing there is to say about the track – particularly when compared to the solo work of Payne’s contemporaries Harry Styles, Niall Horan, Zayn Malik and Louis Tomlinson. Over the past year, the four seemed to have called dibs on certain sounds and musical influences, leaving Liam to try and marry the worlds of Ed Sheeran and Justin Bieber, to no avail.

But we’ll get to that in a second.

Here’s who it seems the boys of 1D are modelling themselves after. Whether they’re succeeding is another thing entirely.

Since he quit the band long before the boys called a hiatus, it’s not surprising that the singer’s debut (Mind of Mine, released in March 2016) seemed to dramatically strive to establish itself as the musical antithesis of One Direction. Between interviews that saw Zayn slagging off the band and his aesthetic rebrand that saw him secure a collaboration with Donatella Versace, Malik seemed keen to distance himself from the artist he used to be in the most dramatic sense.

Which explains why he took the Abel Tesfaye road of singing about sex, drugs, and a combination of the two. But where the Weeknd took years to earn mainstream recognition (and worked his way through the industry), Zayn’s fanbase was already built in – which is why his rejection of One Direction seemed particularly harsh. So while Malik is a smart, talented, and multi-dimensional person, his debut lacked the authenticity that defines his fellow R&B artists. Not that he can’t come back from that: having spent the past year opening up about his anxiety and keeping his head down, he could emerge for his sophomore effort as a grown-ass man, aware that the best artists are the sum of all parts – boy bands and all.

With Harry, it’s a toss-up between Bowie and Jagger and even Robbie Williams – particularly when you consider the sweeping nature of Styles’ first single, Sign of the Times. (Enter: Millennium.) But thanks to tracks including Carolina, Woman, and even Kiwi, the future Dunkirk star seems to have modelled his full-length debut after the expansive nature of Jagger and co – at least if you take into account how varied the Rolling Stones discography gets after leaping away from garage rock.

Which is something Styles seems to have emulated and recognized, from his stage presence (which he showed off on James Corden’s Late Late Show all week) to his sense of fashion to the way his album reads like a generous tribute to British rock. No two songs are the same, nor are two tempos. Like Jagger, the singer sings primarily about women, his complicated relationship with them, and the experiences that come with being a young man. What will be interesting is whether he reinvents himself similarly as his career continues – dance moves and all.

Is this a stretch? Absolutely. But because Just Hold On saw Louis collaborate with Steve Aoki and do his own singing, it seemed the 1D alum was channeling 2017-era Harris (who’s been singing his own songs) while simultaneously maintaining the DJ’s long legacy of working with big names.

It’s still a generous likening, especially since Louis has only delivered one track with no announcement of a forthcoming full-length. But that could also be a strategy: where his compadres are actively working the circuit, Tomlinson seems content to drop a banger every so often, leaving fans to thirst after him, instead of vice versa. His longevity, however, will depend on whether he gets behind the production board or begins working the DJ booth. Because as great as Calvin’s Harris’ vocals are, I don’t think any of us need entire albums of them.

Here is a thing none of us were prepared for. Where Our Town seemed to solidify Horan as the next Shawn Mendes or Ed Sheeran, Slow Hands was on Bieber-circa-Girlfriend levels of catchy, thanks especially to a slowed-down, seductive beat.

Like Bieber via 2012’s Believe, Slow Hands reintroduced Horan to his fans as an adult. But where Zayn used shock tactics to differentiate himself from his past, Niall borrowed from the pages of Bieber’s book, and used his songwriting to prove he wasn’t just some dude with an acoustic guitar. He could sing well, he could creatively adapt for a grown-up solo venture, and he still cherished his existing fan base and the legacy of his former self. Which Justin did, once upon a time, too: while Bieber leapt from child prodigy to rebel without a cause, his musical evolution never really faltered, and his career was kept afloat by the legacy he refused to condemn or distance himself from. So if Niall considers himself another Bieber, that would be brilliant: he would arguably be setting himself up for even bigger and better success, fortunately too old to relive Justin’s 2013 ventures.

I ... don’t know, you guys. I mean, you can see what Liam wanted to do: he wanted to grow up musically, borrowing from the gospel of Zayn by simultaneously throwing shade at One Direction while singing about sex and parties. The problem is, Strip That Down is even less believable – partially because Zayn has been candid about his partying and personal turbulence (where Liam is now a father) and because Zayn only ever dissed 1D in interviews, not in his actual music.

However, Strip That Down is largely a thirst trap, appealing to a tired brand of heteronormativity through Liam’s references to “girl”, whoever she may be. (Because my dudes, he’s certainly not speaking to Cheryl that way.)

You can see the way he takes the Ed Sheeran approach to vocals, but loses the heart by bragging about how many women are hanging off him, and you can also hear the way he’s using the Nick Jonas approach to post-band life by adopting slick beats while peacocking. The thing is, Sheeran and Jonas have both mastered their art by making songs seem sincere or as part of an in-joke with their audiences – they’re not delivered on a platform built to broadcast their own greatness.

So here’s hoping that Liam’s next single features more of what he’s actually good at: singing. Because while you know he’s thinking of himself as a cross between Sheeran and Jonas, he’s coming off as a salty brat who has no reason to complain about anything.