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Understanding *Blonde*: From Advertising to Lyrics

Frank Ocean's *Blonde*, released independently in 2016, is his second (and most recent) studio album, and arguably his masterpiece. Coming off the high that was his first mainstream record *Channel Orange* (2012), Ocean put out an experimental project: an array of sounds and stories that ultimately tell tales about his love life, depression, drug abuse, and his general place in the universe. The 17-song tracklist runs exactly an hour long, features artists like Beyonce and André 3000, and received praise for its uniqueness and attention to detail¹. While winning over critics at a variety of publishers, Ocean's album, like most pieces of media in the modern world, was also the subject of negative reviews, including one by The Telegraph's James Lachno, who prescribed the album as being "messy, pompous and pointless", falling flat of Ocean's previous works by being overhyped and unappealing. However, as Lachno professes his opinion, he ultimately indicates that he has a misunderstanding of how an album should be received and more specifically, how Ocean's music is to be listened to.

Regarding the reception of *Blonde*, Lachno haphazardly misconstrues the album and its songwriter's place in the art world. Lachno initially claims that the album had become "hyped to a ludicrous degree" in order to "synthesize a sort of mythic aura" surrounding the project, such that no matter the product, the album was doomed to fall short of its immeasurable expectations.

¹ For instance, the 9th track, "Nights", features a beat-switch in the middle of song that divides the album exactly in half, with each side being mirrored across "Nights" to show different perspectives on life. Also, the song "Futura Free" ends with an individual asking "how long a light year [is]", to which Ocean responds in a fourth-wall-esque break by having the track run exactly 9.4 minutes (a light year is 9.4×10^{12} km long).

Importantly, he compares the rollout of Ocean's album to that of Kanye West's *The Life of Pablo* (2016), in which the project was "so long in gestation" and "so culturally omnipotent" that it could never "live up to its hysteria". However, this comparison is flawed - West's album and hype was a lot more self-centered and commercialized than Ocean's was ever made out to be. West proclaimed his work to be "a living, breathing, changing creative expression" in a now-deleted Twitter post and filled Madison Square Garden with hundreds of models for his clothing brand during a listening party before release, whereas Ocean's rollout consisted of solely cryptic social media posts and livestreams. More than the buildup of hype, the lyrics of the two artists' finished products display the falsehood of Lachno's thesis. While in West's 9th track on his album, "I Love Kanye", he flaunts his egoism, telling the audience that he loves them "like Kanye loves Kanye", Ocean remains reserved. In *Blonde*'s final song, "Futura Free", Ocean admits that he's "just a guy", that he's "not a god", and thus should not be treated as such. The two works of art are undeniably different; West goes for the "cultural omnipotence"² that Lachno describes, but to claim the same for *Blonde* is untrue - Ocean is much more accepting of his role as an artist rather than a deity.

Despite the differences in the two marketing campaigns, that is not to say that one is better than the other: the rollout for each of the artists' albums fit their projects. To provide another example of this, in 2021, on the brink of releasing his project *Donda* (2021), West levitated above Mercedes-Benz Stadium as an outro played for his listening party - something that is undeniably self-absorbed, but also undeniably fitting. As a parallel, Frank Ocean's rollout of *Blonde* featured a 45-minute "video album", which was harshly criticized by Lachno as being "smudgy" and "confounding". However, looking one step further reveals the reasoning behind

² Kanye also views himself as a god: on his project *Yeezus* (2013), which itself is a play on the name Jesus and his preferred name "Ye", his song "I Am A God" is as direct as can be regarding his vanity.

this part of the rollout, which is the fact that Ocean was feuding with his record label at the time, and published this half-finished album as a means of escaping his limiting record deal, so that he could create art that he felt truly represented himself, regardless of the marketability. Taking into account this idea makes *Blonde* more fulfilling, as the listener now understands that Ocean is truly being himself, and that he worked hard to allow such creative freedom. With this sentiment in mind, Lachno's idea of "the music [speaking] for itself", which is the next argument he makes in his critique, is missing the point of interpreting art. For any of the aforementioned projects (*The Life of Pablo*, *Donda*, or *Blonde*), to have an understanding of the art is to have an understanding of its background and compliments. Actions that take place outside of the music alone add meaning to the songs: Kanye views his project as divine and Ocean sees his work as hyper-personal. In these situations, to have the "music speak for itself" would lend itself to an incomplete interpretation of the art.

The lackluster understanding of the context of Ocean's music is a running theme throughout the critique, as Lachno's next section transitions into the songs themselves. For instance, he considers the "misspelling of 'Blond' on the album cover" to be "[seemingly] flippant", and lacking care. Again, looking one step further reveals the detail behind this assignment. The misspelling is extremely purposeful, as the double-interpretation of "blond" (male connotation) and "blonde" (female connotation) illustrates a deeper meaning behind the romance of the album: that Ocean is bisexual. Similarly, his disgust with the apparent "perverse" nature of the "chipmunk [level]" pitch-shifted vocals in the record's opening track "Nikes" is misguided. While the vocals are certainly different from Ocean's true voice, they are altered with a purpose, that being to convey different perspectives³. As a coming-of-age romantic diary, the

³ From an interview Ocean did with the New York Times, when asked about his use of multiple voices on songs: "Sometimes I felt like you weren't hearing enough versions of me within a song, 'cause there was a lot of hyperactive thinking..."

higher pitched vocals might represent a prepubescent era of Ocean's life, his voice remaining shrill up until the halfway point of the song, where the transition into an unaltered sound shows his age. On the other hand, as a social commentary, they might represent the luxurious and mystical nature of the titular 'Nikes' that convey materialistic desires, where the lowering of the pitch generates emotional depth behind the glitz of the angelic harmonies of the former half. Regardless of one's interpretation of the change, to brush it off as a one-off meaningless occurrence shows a fundamental misunderstanding of the art, a sin in the world of critiquing.

Above confusion about the title and vocal inflections is Lachno's misinterpretation of what the makeup of the album represents. Lachno lists several issues he has with the project, but perhaps the most damning is his negative assertion that the "curation of a 'vibe' has taken precedence over the songs". This is not at all a negative concept. Ultimately, albums are (though a primitive way of saying it) 'vibes'. They are meant to elicit emotion through a story, which is exactly what *Blonde* accomplishes. While every song might not be the most beautiful sonic arrangement, each track adds to the cohesiveness of the record, and for Ocean's album in particular, each number illustrates that life is often turbulent. He does admit that *Blonde* has "moments where the fog clears and everything gorgeously coalesces", but fails to recognize why these moments are so appreciated. The abrasiveness of the last 30 seconds of "Ivy" and the anger Ocean feels about a past relationship make the beginning moments of "Pink + White" all the more beautiful, just as the high and lucid melodies of the first half of "Nights" make the drug-adjacent crash in the second half all the more impactful. Much like his opinion on events leading up to an album's release, Lachno fails to recognize that songs are not only stand-alone pieces and can take up different meanings when curated together. In his ideal world, albums

would just be ‘greatest hits’ playlists with no other meaning than just being pleasing to the ear, limiting the possibilities for story-telling through sound and the art of album-making as a whole.

Though Lachno’s review is an isolated work, it represents a much larger and more general problem in the media, which is the need for instant reactions. Published just 10 days after *Blonde* was released, he certainly appealed to a demographic and almost undoubtedly drove traffic to his page, but at the cost of a true analysis of what makes *Blonde* so unique⁴. As a self-proclaimed Frank Ocean “superfan”, Lachno would surely have appreciated the chance to incorporate quotes from interviews with Ocean as well as artists who worked on the project, but a limited time constraint likely prevented him from doing so. Regardless of this speculation, the product that Lachno ended up putting out feels like a rushed-out critique of a half-listened-to album, characterized by various misinterpretations and a fundamental lack of understanding of what *Blonde* (and more so music) is and is not.

⁴ Much of the faults within Lachno’s review are condemned in Virginia Woolf’s “How Should One Read a Book?”, which illustrates the importance of letting works sit in one’s mind before attempting to judge them, as the “friction” of the work of art limits one’s ability to properly critique directly after ‘finishing’ a book or an album.