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Album Review: [\*Ultraviolence\*](#) by Lana Del Rey

Lana Del Rey -- the woman, the myth, the mystery. To many, she is an elusive songstress, a siren heeding her own call in the dark of night. To others, she is simply another manufacture of the industry, with an image created purely to move records. Del Rey, whose real name is Elizabeth Woolridge Grant, cemented her place in the music industry almost a decade ago with 2011's "Video Games", a haunting ballad about a deep devotion to one's lover. From there, she went on to widespread commercial success with her debut album, *Born to Die*. Yet despite countless live performances and interviews, the world still knows close to nothing about this mysterious woman who exudes the secretive glamour of a weeping starlet from an Old Hollywood tragedy. This air of mystery has not gone anywhere on her sophomore album, *Ultraviolence*.

Highly anticipated after the success of *Born to Die*, Del Rey comes back more enigmatic than ever, with a more mature look and sound that is evocative of the messy, raw rock music of the 1960s. It is also interspersed with various other styles of music that is, like Del Rey herself, all-American. Elements of jazz, blues, psychedelia, and even surf music a la The Beach Boys are all present within Del Rey's snappy comeback.

Although it has been five years since the release of *Ultraviolence*, the work still holds incredible significance to the world we inhabit in 2019. The same type of classic sound that

contributed to the success of the rock movement when it first emerged, is the sound that is both emulated and molded for a modern audience by Del Rey: metallic, twangy electric guitar paired with octave-jumping siren calls on tracks like “Shades of Cool” and “Sad Girl,” alongside the deep reverb of bass twanging and strong, persistent drum beats in backgrounds give every song a common thread, while still keeping each one unique and sonically rich.

*Ultraviolence* takes its listener on a sonic journey, one that tells a narrative of tragedy and addiction. Even if the thought of listening to an hour of rock-heavy sadcore music doesn't sound particularly appealing, Del Rey's ability to effortlessly convey an emotional story through sound should not go unacknowledged. Even if you have never listened to, or even heard of *Born to Die*, the evolution is evident. The striking vocals are indicative of Del Rey's increased confidence in her own abilities as a singer, as well as the seamless marriage of expressive, take-no-prisoners lyrics with bold new instrumentals that by all means shouldn't work together, but do so well. Despite her singing from her lonely perch atop an ivory tower of melancholia, this album and its tracks beg to be noticed.

Although she retains many core elements of her classic Americana persona, there appear to be some notable departures from her debut album with this record. *Born to Die* was saturated in hues of pastel pinks and gold glitters, lush with a baroque-pop sound that danced the line between bubblegum pop and indie rock. With it, Del Rey seemed to invite the entire world to look at, listen to, and pay attention to her. Her theatrical portrayal of the highs and lows in a whirlwind romance play out in vivid, fast-paced imagery of liquor, diamonds, and heart-shaped sunglasses reminiscent of a *Lolita*-esque facade of innocence. In her previous era, Del Rey played a seemingly naive, wide-eyed young girl who found solace in the companionship of

material goods and older men, despite being perpetually pensive on the inside. In *Ultraviolence*, however, she is utterly and entirely alone. She sings from the perspective of a woman who, after reaching unparalleled levels of success and surrounding herself with the rich and famous, feels incredibly isolated -- even when she is with her lovers. These men scorn her, ignore her, even commit acts of violence against her, yet she cannot help but go back to them to escape her own loneliness. And lonely she is.

Throughout the album's 14 tracks, Del Rey makes one theme potently clear: addiction. For an hour and five minutes, she takes *Ultraviolence*'s listener on a drug-fueled journey of rock psychedelia. She even dedicates an entire song ("Florida Kilos") to the seductive appeal of little white lines. However, drugs aren't the only thing she finds herself addicted to -- toxic lovers appear to be her true vice. In the title track, "Ultraviolence," she sings, over soaring violin chords and slow, syncopated drum kicks, about "Jim" who "hit me and it felt like a kiss," referring to him as her "cult leader." In "Old Money," she boldly declares to her lover, "If you send for me, you know I'll come." This song also [uses the melody of the song "What is a Youth,"](#) from Franco Zeffirelli's 1968 adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*, thus further cementing the themes of tragically doomed love stories. In her cover of Jesse Mae Robinson's 1950s hit "The Other Woman," she sings about being the "other woman" in a relationship with a married man, one who is destined to carry out penance by living alone all her life. In these scenarios, *she* is the one being used by these cold, faceless men who may or may not genuinely love her. However, she isn't all powerless damsel -- on tracks "Money Power Glory" and "F---ed My Way Up to the Top," she sings about weaponizing that same type of manipulative emotion, as well as her own sexuality, in order to gain money and notoriety. She taunts other women who would dare to even

try and take her place, whether it be at the top of the charts or by her man's side. On the six-minute electric guitar frenzy "Cruel World," she dons her iconic 'red dress' to celebrate letting go of her crazy, controlling ex-lover the only way she knows how: parties, drugs, and lots of bourbon. On this album, she shifts between two personas: the needy woman who will always return to her man no matter how bad he may be, and the femme fatale who is willing to go to any means for her own personal gratification. She is purely addicted -- to love, to drugs, and to power.

Del Rey is no stranger to [criticism of her persona](#); her persistent portrayal of the angst-filled, moody, eternally twenty-something woman who drops 20th-century Americana symbols (e.g. Elvis, beat poetry, or Woodstock) in almost every song, was met with a plethora of backlash when she first debuted on the pop music scene. Critics accused her of being simply a wannabe of a forgone era, one who dons sadness as an aesthetic rather than an emotion. With *Ultraviolence*, she seems to have embraced this sad-girl persona in its entirety. Even the cover art for the album is drastically different from her previous era: a moody black-and-white portrait of her clinging to the door of a vintage car, with lips pouted and dark makeup smeared along her under eyes. But ultimately, she is not just the "concept character" she projects to the world -- beneath the layers of melodramatic camp that drape all of her work, there lies a real woman, one with very real and raw emotions that she croons through smokey clouds of poetic license. *Ultraviolence* is the realest representation of that woman thus far.

## **Rules:**

Stephen Thomas Erlewine, a contributor for entertainment website Pitchfork, has written multiple album reviews, including one on band Fleetwood Mac's iconic self-titled album *Fleetwood Mac*. In this review, along with his review of the original soundtrack to the film "Bohemian Rhapsody," he uses certain rules that I try to adhere by in my own review.

**Rule 1:** Erlewine begins his piece by introducing some background on the artists, therefore putting into context the work which he is about to review. He explains in-depth the history behind the bands themselves, as well as the relationships between the members. This helps the readership listen with knowledge of what went into the music, and perhaps make sense of some of the coded messages within the lyrics. Music is often written within the context of the songwriter's life, so understanding the events surrounding the artist can help one to better understand the music.

**Rule 2:** Erlewine goes on to explain the influences behind the sound of each album, such as the hippie movement and the rock music of the '60s for Fleetwood Mac, and the original music of Queen, of course, for "Bohemian Rhapsody." These musical influences have a heavy hand in determining the overall sound and feel of the album as a whole, as well as the quality of the music. Erlewine stipulates that artists should interpret their influences in a manner that is original and creative, not just a rehash of music that people have already heard.

**Rule 3:** Erlewine also explains the modern significance of both albums, as *Fleetwood Mac* is by no means a new release, and the commercial peak of Queen's music was in the 70's and 80's. He describes *Fleetwood Mac* as still being fresh years after its release, and goes on to explain why and what aspects of it make this the case. This is similar to *Ultraviolence*, as it has been five years since its release. However, like the albums that Erlewine reviews, it has several elements that make it a classic for modern listeners despite its age. Explaining this is important, as it gives the piece relevance to its readers, and entices potential listeners for the album who may not have listened when it was first released.

**Rule 4:** Erlewine describes the relationships between the lyrics, vocals, and instrumentals: how they work alongside each other and balance in order to create the sound that comes across. The harmony (no pun intended) between these three sonic elements is integral to determining the quality of a piece of music, as they must balance each other out and come together in a way that is both creative for the artist and appealing for the listener. The lyrics should be original and meaningful, and the vocals/instrumentals should be strong and work with each other; one element shouldn't overshadow another. Erlewine describes how these elements work together on each of the albums he reviews, as they are ultimately the deciding factor in the rating he gives each of them.

**Rule 5:** The sound and aesthetic of the album is also discussed. This describes the mood and feelings evoked when listening to the music, as well as the type of the audience they may be catering to. *Fleetwood Mac* is nostalgic, as the strong '60's influence draws upon "hippie

mysticism” and “rock rebellion” to create something that evokes those same emotions, and can appeal to a broader, more popular audience outside of just indie-rock. By describing the mood and aesthetic, Erlewine is able to convey the general sound and tone of the album before the reader even listens to it.