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Billie Eilish Gives us a Glimpse of the Future of Pop Music:

A Review of *When We All Fall Asleep, Where Do We Go?*

We Go?

Unlike Lana Del Rey, Lorde, Halsey, and the other alternative-pop singers who preceded her, Billie Eilish provides a game-changing, music industry shifting album that will likely change pop music for years to come.

*When We All Fall Asleep,
Where Do We Go?*

Released March 29, 2019

Label: Interscope

Length: 42:56

Available at [Target](#)

\$19.97(vinyl)

\$13.99(CD)



Introduction

The then 17-year-old Billie Eilish released her highly anticipated debut album entitled *When We All Fall Asleep, Where Do We Go?* on March 29th, 2019. The album was immediately met with critical acclaim and rose the Billboard 200 charts, eventually becoming one of the best-selling albums of 2019. To add even more to the emerging



Billie Eilish celebrating her historic 6-Grammy winning night

success of the album, Eilish made a clean sweep of all of the main categories at the 62nd Annual Grammy Awards (January 26, 2020), where she took home awards for “Best New Artist”, “Song of the Year”, “Record of the Year”, and “Album of the Year”.

In a year that saw the return of Taylor Swift from a two-year hiatus and the release of Ariana Grande’s massive record “Thank U Next,” that broke a Billboard Hot 100 record for most songs in the top 5 simultaneously by one artist, 2019 still remained the ‘Year of Billie Eilish’. Nearly one year after its release, the album’s impact is already beginning to surface in pop music. The artistry in *When We All Fall Asleep, Where Do We Go?* will change how we view pop music as its relevance continues to grow in 2020.

Who is Billie Eilish?

“Billie Eilish” born Billie Eilish Pirate Baird O’Connell on December 18, 2001, to a former actress, musician, and current teacher at an improvisational theatre school in Colorado and former actor and musician Patrick O’Connell, in Los Angeles, California. Eilish grew up in Highland Park with her older brother Finneas O’Connell where both were homeschooled by their mother. She implemented songwriting, dancing, and acting classes on both starting at age 11.

The first song that Eilish recorded was intended to be used for a dance class. According to *USA Today’s* Patrick Ryan, “In 2015, Eilish’s dance teacher asked the then-13-year-old if she could record an original song for an upcoming recital. She and her brother uploaded the wistful pop ballad “Ocean Eyes,” to SoundCloud soon after, which quickly caught the attention of various music blogs and her now-co-manager Danny Rukasin.” “Ocean Eyes” was an overnight sensation and helped launch Eilish’s career.

The German-based SoundCloud platform is typically associated with launching underground hip-hop musicians with Post Malone, Lil’ Pump, and Chance the Rapper into the mainstream notoriety and had helped Interscope Records find its new superstar. Eilish later re-released “Ocean Eyes” in 2016 to be the lead-single off a debut EP effort in 2017 titled “Don’t Smile at Me”. Although Eilish’s EP never surfaced well in the mainstream, she quickly grew a following off of the work, and the EP has subsequently [sold over a million copies in the U.S. as of 2020](#). Eilish is notably an avid vegan and environmentalist and has been incredibly open with her struggle with Tourette’s syndrome and depression, which greatly influence her songwriting.

My First Impression of Billie Eilish

Paradoxically, I was introduced to the Generation Z, teenage angst icon by my 49-year-old mother. At first, I dismissed Eilish as a teenage alternative to Lana Del Rey (I always have a cynical outlook about

teenage culture and the media associated with it, even when I was a teenager myself).

The more I listened to Eilish's "Don't Smile at Me" EP, the more I began to realize that Eilish was more than just a Lana Del Rey for teens. Sure, Eilish employed similar haunted balladry, dark, theatric



Still photo from Eilish's "Bad Guy" music video that has garnered 995 million views on YouTube

production, and whispery vocals, but instead of relying on 60s iconography and pop culture to depict the gloomy hopelessness of her songwriting, Eilish utilizes horror in aspects of her elaborate music videos and heavy, at-times unsettling production.

After listening to Eilish's EP during my high school year of 2018, I was completely sold that she was likely going to be the next big alternative-pop breakout in a similar vein to Lorde and Halsey, but I had tempered expectations for this debut album. Mainly because it was very much a "homemade" record, Eilish and her brother Finneas recorded this entire album in her bedroom, and with Eilish not adding any other producers, songwriters, or any other voice in this project. I had doubts about whether Eilish and Finneas could pull off a full-length studio album without any outside input or influence.

Billie Eilish thwarted my concerns by releasing a sublime album complete with some of the best production work, intimate songwriting, and enigmatic vocal performance and inflections from Eilish herself. I consider Eilish's album a 'modern masterpiece' and probably the most '2010s' album I have heard. From the hushed vocal performance, to the thorough, diligence in the production and instrumentals featured in this album, this album seems like it was catered to be listened to by headphones.

Album Analysis

The album kicks off with Eilish's biggest hit and arguably the song that lifted her into stardom, "Bad Guy". "Bad Guy" is one of the most exuberant tracks on the album, with an ear-worming bassline and synthetic riff that bookends a refined chorus. The song includes an outro that is unrecognizable to the rest of the song and some abstract sounds included throughout the track, including a maniacal high-pitched laugh before the outro. Lyricism, the song is straightforward. Eilish provides her take on power dynamics in relationships and seemingly denouncing "posers" or "fake-machoism". Despite the idiosyncratic production that still gives the song an alternative-edge despite sounding like a pop song, Eilish was able to find crossover success as "Bad Guy" was one of the biggest hits in 2019.

Another standout track from the album is "Xanny", where Eilish denounces drug use by stating: "I'm in their second-hand smoke/Still just drinking canned coke/I don't need a xanny to feel better." Eilish provides a very buzzed-out vocal performance with her even slurring her words towards the end of the track while the production starts with very percussion-based, mainly driven by piano and drums until the chorus where Finneas provides some of the heaviest bass-hitting production he provided on this album. "Xanny" is an enthralling track that just demands the listeners' attention. In "All the Good Girl Go To Hell", Eilish uses allegorical allusions to the Bible to convey a dystopian world

Track Listing

1. !!!!!!!
2. Bad Guy
3. Xanny
4. You Should See Me
in a Crown
5. All the Good Girls
Go to Hell
6. Wish You Were Gay
7. When the Party's
Over
8. 8
9. My Strange
Addiction
10. Bury a Friend
11. Ilomilo
12. Listen Before I Go
13. I Love You
14. Goodbye



ravaged by climate change. The jovial production juxtaposes with the lyrical matter that is seemingly from the perspective of the mystical figure (possibly the devil) criticizing mankind's stupidity by stating:

Hills burn in California,
My turn to ignore ya,
Don't say I didn't warn ya,
All the good girls go to hell.
'Cause even god herself has
enemies,
And once the water starts to
rise,
And Heaven's out of sight,
She'll want the devil on her
team.



Still photo from Eilish's controversial "All the Good Girls Go to Hell" music video.

“Bury a Friend” is, similarly, a very ear-catching track but for different reasons. It is easily the most unsettling tracks Eilish has made as she describes the song as being “from the perspective of the monster under my bed”. The heavy production on this track is more reminiscent of Kanye West’s 2010 album *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*. The chorus utilizes vocal layering and modulation to make Eilish’s voice sound ominous and monstrous at times. The lyricism is ambiguous with the chorus posing several different questions from the perspective of “the monster” such as “Why aren’t you scared of me?/When we all fall asleep, where do we go?” Even though Eilish has never outright stated the true meaning behind this song, which has led to an outpouring of theories and speculations from fans, I feel that the song is from the perspective innermost darkest thoughts and “the monster” is simply Billie’s personification of that. In the lyrics: “Today, I’m thinking about the things that are deadly/The way I’m drinking you

down/Like I wanna drown, like I wanna end me”. From the first verse right-away, Eilish references suicide, and she continues in the second verse stating: “Honestly, I thought that I would be dead by now/Calling security, keeping my head held down/Bury the hatchet or bury a friend right now.” I feel that the lyricism of this verse is again, an indication of Billie’s suicidal thoughts and Billie reasoning with “the monster” or “herself”. Admittedly, “Bury a Friend” was a song that I disliked at first listen due to its monotone delivery and confusing lyricism, but once I began noticing the intricacies in the lyricism and the production, it slowly became one of my favorites off the album

There is not a skippable track on the entire album. Even the songs that scale back on production, provide some of the most engrossing lyricism about depression, suicide, and rejection. The tone of the album ranges from gloomy, to eerie, to outright strange at times, but that is what makes Billie Eilish such an enigmatic figure. Her album is unapologetically unpolished, and it works to her advantage on most of these tracks.

The Way Billie Eilish is Shaping the Music Industry

Billie Eilish’s debut album has been frequently compared to the fellow alternative breakout star from New Zealand Lorde. Although I see some striking similarities in the subject matter, I feel Eilish has expanded upon what Lorde accomplished in *Pure Heroine* by making unconventional pop music mainstream. But will Billie Eilish’s sound remain “unconventional”? According to the ever-changing pop music landscape, it appears that Eilish’s debut album has already left a significant impact on the music industry. Her quasi-goth style has already been adopted by many up-and-coming and debuting pop artists this year, including a possible indie-fluke hit entitled “Trampoline” that was derivative of Eilish’s production style and vocal

inclinations. Some other artists already gaining some comparisons to Eilish are up-and-coming artists such as New Zealand singer BENEE who found a moderate hit in collaboration with Gus Dapperton entitled “Supalonely”, and Clairo, who although being around since 2017, has only recently found success after Eilish’s breakout. Doreen St. Felix addresses Eilish’s rising popularity among young listeners by noting, “I’d argue that Eilish’s creepy confrontations of loss, fear, uncertainty, and death are what young listeners need. A generation that was born into a war and is accustomed to having videos of massacres autoplay on their devices should have limited patience for prefab bubblegum pop.”

The Album Resonates Even More in a Pandemic-Ravaged Country

I recently decided to give Eilish’s album a relisten a few weeks ago, and the lyricism hits home even more now than it did in 2019. According to a Kiplinger Finance and Forecast Institute poll conducted in July 2020, approximately 53% of American adults admit that their mental health has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Hearing Eilish’s whispery vocals, dreary production, and lyricism about hopelessness and death, the album almost invoked an emotional reaction from me in the middle of a car ride. Even though Eilish’s work was written before the pandemic, a lot of the lyricism resonates so well with the current political climate the United States finds itself in.

Conclusion

Eilish is continuing to release new music with her James Bond theme song “No Time to Die” and early 2020 hit “Everything I Wanted”, scoring her four more Grammy Nominations at next year’s Grammys and is still profiting off the historic success of her debut album. However, I am anticipating what she has to offer in her sophomore effort with the current political climate.

Not only that, the future of pop music in-general. The 2010s began as an era for bombastic hooks and bright, fun, and colorful production, which is a stark contrast to the music dominating the airwaves now. Even though arguably Lana Del Rey and Lorde are who began the trend to more subtle, lower-tempo vocal performances and production, Billie Eilish is who cemented it as a mainstream norm for pop music.

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