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The Contrast in being a Rock God and a Gentleman: A Review of Harry Styles' *Fine Line*

"Style is the answer to everything.

A fresh way to approach a dull or dangerous thing

To do a dull thing with style is preferable to doing a dangerous thing without it

To do a dangerous thing with style is what I call art."

-Charles Bukowski, "Style"



Released	13 December 2019
Genre	Pop Rock
Length	46:37
Label	Columbia
Producer	Jeff Bhasker, Kid Harpoon, Tyler Johnson, Greg Kurstin, Sammy White

The year is 2019, I am sitting in my small Ford Focus in a parking lot on my college campus. I am a freshman, I am stressed, I am in need of a good relief album. The date is December 13th, finals are in full swing, and I actually just found out I have the flu (this was pre-pandemic and I had a final to take, do not judge me). I stick in my AirPods and check the trending albums on my way to the music building on campus. *Fine Line* has just been released and I queue it up to play. The major and minor chords fill my ears and I feel an overwhelming sense of peace and happiness. Such is *Fine Line* as a whole.

I. Introduction

Harry Styles has chosen to use his musical superpowers for good and not evil. With the powers vested in *X Factor* and the superstar status of One Direction, Styles has blessed the world with his album *Fine Line*; an album full of old-soul with mellow grooves of the 1970s. Essentially, this album can be compared to the “Dad-rock” genre, such as Bruce Springsteen and Steely Dan, for women. *Fine Line* has taken a nostalgic sound and compared it with soaring pop sensibilities. With Styles’ previous self-titled album, this record proves to be his freedom record, breaking away from his preconceived notions of boyband pop and indulges his psychedelic whim and musical possibilities.

In this album, Styles depicts the ups and downs of falling in and out of love. He tells stories of having sex, living life, being kind, and being in love. This album is composed of 12 total tracks, three which were released as singles before the final release. Two of the singles, “Adore You” and “Watermelon Sugar” have infected mainstream radio stations and TikTok audios and feature fun lyrics and groovy melodies that are impossible to ignore. This album was

released on December 13, 2019, and the album received 109 million streams in its first week after release.

II. Journey to Success

Harry Edward Styles was born on February 1, 1994, in Bromsgrove, Worcestershire, England. While in school and performing for *The X Factor*, a television music competition where contestants compete to be the best singer out of a large group of competitors, Styles worked for the W. Mandeville Bakery. He auditioned as a solo artist for *The X Factor* however, he was cut before finals. Simon Cowell, a judge on the show, put him together with fellow competitors Zayn



Figure 1: Photo shows (in order) Liam Payne, Louis Tomlinson, Harry Styles, Simon Cowell, Zayn Malik, and Niall Horan

Malik, Louis Tomlinson, Liam Payne, and Niall Horan to form a group for the remainder of the competition. This was the beginning of the world-renowned boy band One Direction. While the group only placed 3rd overall in the competition, Cowell signed them to his music label immediately following the end of the competition in 2010. This boy band delivered the most popular pop hits of the 2010s, such as “Story of My Life” and “What Makes You Beautiful” and proceeded to produce five studio albums and 91 songs total. They also amassed a total of 4 headlining tours in their career as a band.

Despite the group splitting for a lengthy hiatus and not having yet to return, Styles began releasing his own solo projects in 2017. His self-titled album included the epic single “Sign of the Times” and the album debuted in the familiar number one spot on Billboard that he was

accustomed to with One Direction. While fans had to wait two years for his next single, “Lights Up” came in October of 2019. Once *Fine Line* was released, he achieved his first number one single “Watermelon Sugar” and was then nominated for three Grammy awards that same year.

III. Track List

While his first self-titled album resembled Beatles affectations and also took inspiration from the 1970’s *McCartney*, the album released by

Paul McCartney in which McCartney proved that he did not need the Beatles in order to be successful,

Styles’ *Fine Line* shows his creativity and

personality coming through his beats and ballads.

Styles takes the classic-rock genre and turns it

upside down, proving there is more to the genre than

blues and folk sounds. Early in the track list, openers

“Golden,” “Watermelon Sugar,” “Adore You,”

and “Lights Up” bring in upbeat tempos and a

funky groove. After these upbeat melodies, however, come the heart-shattering ballads of

“Cherry,” “Falling,” “To Be So Lonely,” “She”, and “Fine Line”. Styles croons to his past

lovers, his sorrowful tone bringing tears to those listening. In “Falling,” he sings, “Forget what I

said / It's not what I meant / And I can't take it back / I can't unpack the baggage you left.” These

heavy lyrics depict a relationship that went awry, and he cannot take back the words said, and

actions performed to his ex-girlfriend. These relatable verses often create sorrowful memories



Figure 2: Track List and Run Times

for listeners, and they quickly add these songs to their “Crying in the Shower” playlist on Spotify.

Suddenly, the psychedelic drugs hit hard and fast. “Sunflower, Vol. 6,” “Canyon Moon,” and “Treat People With Kindness” change the album mood from depressed to extremely joyous. These songs have a strong ‘70s musical theater vibe, with the beats too good to resist a dance along. When asked about what inspired this album, Styles has said the album is “all about having sex and feeling sad.” With those two aspects in mind, the listener has most likely had experience with having sex with someone and being madly in love with them, bringing around joyous experiences such as the upbeat music mentioned before.

While this album can give its listener a quick dose of whiplash if listened straight through, each emotion is conveyed in a manner such as life; one time happy, one time depressed, and then the manic high after a depressive episode.

IV. Decoding the Cover Art

Fine Line’s cover art features an image of Styles on the cover within a circle. Many aspects can be dissected from this photo: his clothing, the color scheme, the odd black-gloved hand in the bottom cover, and the lens used for the photo. The lens used is a very stark aspect of this photo. Using a fisheye lens in order to create a circular, rounded



Figure 3: Album Cover, *Fine Line*

image is not a new part of photography, but it is unusual to use on an album cover. One metaphor that can come from the circle image that the fisheye lens creates is seen in the planetary orb effect. The edges of the shot appear to curve away into infinity, just like a photo of the Earth does. Styles is creating a world within his music; a world that is self-contained in the disk the music is on.

The colors of the album are blue and pink, which are often used in gendering of male or female, especially when involved in the reveal of a gender of an infant. The title *Fine Line* could also be used to symbolize the fine line between female and male genders, and how oftentimes Styles is criticized for his feminine natures, such as wearing a dress on the cover of *Vogue*, but is only proving himself to be comfortable with his gender and sexuality as a straight man in touch with and embracing his feminine side.

The black glove has never been revealed as having a direct meaning, but many fans have a theory for it. Often times, black leather is used to represent a sexual object or being. The theory is that this glove is inviting Styles to embrace his sexual side within his music and be open about discussing it. The cover already has sex appeal, and the black glove simply adds to it.

Lastly, his outfit is quite distinguishable from the rest of the cover. He is wearing custom Gucci, which is no surprise, considering Alessandro Michele asked Styles to be a face of Gucci in 2018. Styles' stylist Harry Lambert styled him for this shoot, and the pink blouse and wide-legged trousers can be seen as a masculine and also feminine look at the same time. While in One Direction, Styles was often confined to the skinny jeans and tight t-shirts with no style whatsoever. He is freed from those confines and finally allowed to be who he actually is, especially with his fashion style.



Figure 4.1: Harry in One Direction



Figure 4.2: Harry on cover of Vogue

V. Influences

On *Fine Line*, Styles told Rolling Stone that he drew musical influences from legends such as David Bowie, Van Morrison, and Joni Mitchell. While much of the younger generation does not actively listen to these artists, much of the older generations can hear and see why Styles' songs often become smash hits. He also often finds inspiration in Pink Floyd, Queen, and Fleetwood Mac. These three artists are obviously seen as an influence on his music, the same psychedelic patterns weaving throughout their music.

VI. Conclusion

As a whole, *Fine Line* is an emotional, guitar-filled, psychedelic experience that manages to stay relatable and honest throughout the entirety of the album. It is clear that Styles is making music he is proud of and that he loves, instead of catering only to the pop radio stations. His fans love it, I love it, and there is something on there for people who never thought they would be Harry Styles fans. There is something on this album for every person and every human emotion.

"Style is the difference, a way of doing, a way of being done."-Charles Bukowski

about the author

Chloe Foster

Hello! My name is Chloe Foster, and I am a full-time English major at East Tennessee State University. My passions lie in writing, music, my friends, my family, and my two dogs! My love for writing blossomed while in high school, and I then decided to spend the rest of my life making it a career. You can check out more of my work at my website below.



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