

Madonna – ‘Hard Candy’

Album Review By Alan Bennett Ilagan

Twenty-five years after Warner Brothers released her first self-titled album, Madonna delivers the final record of her contract to the WB corporation - a delicious assortment of ear candy, and a fitting return to where it all began.

“Are you getting hard?” the promotional ads ask on behalf of Madonna’s new album *Hard Candy*. It’s a cheeky tagline befitting this sticky and sweet confection of hip-hop, dance and pop, and if the reaction to preview single ‘4 Minutes’ is any indication, the answer is a resounding ‘Yes.’

When word first escaped that Madonna was working with Timbaland, Justin Timberlake and Pharrell Williams, it appeared that the Mother of Reinvention had finally succumbed to mounting commercial pressures amid a hip-hop-dominated U.S. Though her last album, *Confessions on a Dance Floor*, tore up said spaces around the world, it went undeservedly ignored in this country, particularly on the radio – a minor annoyance that has plagued her since 2003’s *American Life*. While *Confessions* remains her best and most cohesive album of this millennium, *Hard Candy* gives it a stiff run for its money.

She’s delved into hip-hop before, on 1994’s *Bedtime Stories*, when she enlisted the aid of Dallas Austin, Babyface, and Nellee Hooper to give her some street cred. This time she’s fully immersed herself in the current sound of hip-hop-pop, employing Timbaland, Timberlake and Williams for production duties. That triumvirate forms the driving force of her new sound, and they are easily her most famous-in-their-own-right production collaborators. Madonna’s genius has been reining in her various producers and stamping their stuff with a killer pop sensibility. That ability was put to the test with *Hard Candy*, and it lends the album most of its compelling drama. For the first time, Madonna’s not the only one in charge, and it’s a refreshing, and telling, change of pace.

She herself admitted that it took some adjusting to “sharing diva space” with her cohorts, but it results in some of her most adventurous work to date (even if it lacks any original aspect of daring when compared to what’s already on the radio).

The album gets off to a rocky and unpromising start, with the patchy ‘Candy Shop’. It’s not the sweetest beginning, and the song doesn’t go down as easily as past pop trifles.

Full of double-entendres that are more slick than sweet (and way below par for the woman who, as most of us remember, wrote the book on sex), it's one of the weakest songs on the album, but manages to set up the soundscape for the proceedings, and leads up to the grandiose first single '4 Minutes.'

It's a jangling thumper of a song, a duet between Madonna and Mr. Timberlake, with Timbaland's unmistakably bass-heavy bottom pulsing throughout, and a soaring trumpet blast signifying the uniting of two pop superstars ready to take on the world. The savvy combination works on a number of levels, and has already yielded Madonna another record: she surpassed Elvis Presley to become the artist with the most Top Ten singles – 37 total. This hook-filled stomper is filled with more bells and whistles (quite literally) than her last two albums combined, but that points to a minor problem that hangs over the heavier tracks: with so much going on, the musical style (as expected) sometimes threatens to overwhelm Madonna's voice, especially when she dips into her lower register. Luckily, her high notes manage to slice through the thick timber (lake and land), and when she reaches those heights and cries, "Grab a boy!" it's a reminder of how potent a great pop song can be.

She gives up a surprisingly-hefty bit of control, ceding to Timbaland's modern-day musical prowess and Timberlake's clipped vocal styling. At its heart, however, it's still Madonna's show, and there's no question about that as she stakes her greatest claim on follow-up single 'Give It 2 Me'. "Give me the bassline, I'll shake it/ Give me a record, I'll break it," she promises on one of the cheekiest songs since her 80's hey-day, and the drive, determination, and unabashed brazenness of it is a giddy throwback to the innocence of those virgin days. On 'Heartbeat' she repeats the long-tread Madonna mantra that dancing is life. In the grand tradition of 'Into the Groove' and 'Vogue', it reasserts that the pulse and lifeblood of her career has always been on the dance floor.

A sense of urgency informs the entire album, from the tick-tocking time bomb of '4 Minutes' to the immediate demands of 'Give It 2 Me', which opens with Madonna asking, "What are you waiting for, Nobody's gonna show you how/ Why wait for someone else to do what you can do right now?" The call for timely action continues with 'Beat Goes On' as she warns, "You don't have the luxury of time," and *Hard Candy*, while certainly not her most cutting-edge or trend-setting album, is one of her more timely works – finding her ensconced in the current sounds rather than paving new ground. As such, it may prove disappointing to

those looking for the next big thing. For now, she's earned the right to coast a little, especially when referencing past musical moments. Many of the tracks display a powerful retro vibe, echoing and expanding upon her own jumping-off point. 'Beat Goes On' and 'Dance 2Night' are straight off the 70's dance floor, even if the former tacks on an unnecessary rap by Kanye West. Both are irresistible soft sway disco treats, beckoning the listener to return to a more innocent time. (Who ever thought that the disco tart tramp she was branded early on would look so quaintly innocent today?)

Unlike many of her pseudo-star contemporaries, Madonna got where she is through hard work and unrivalled ambition, never acting as though she were entitled to anything, and 'She's Not Me' takes a definitive swipe at her competition –romantic and professional. "She started dying her hair and wearing the same perfume as me/ She started reading my books and stealing my looks and lingerie," she accurately accuses of all those following in her wake. She stalks her rivals amid a catchy tune with funky hand-claps, a meaty hook and an infectious bass, adding electronic flourishes and even a few inspired bursts of electro-clash – a winning formula she continues on 'Incredible,' a sunnier track that still manages to ache with yearning.

Her work with Timberlake (another pop star with his own romantic trail of heartbreak) doesn't always result in frothy sweetness, as heard when they slow things down on 'Miles Away' and 'Devil Wouldn't Recognize You.' The bittersweet tone to these compositions gives off a decidedly ambivalent take on love. As always, she finds salvation on the dance floor, and escapes into the pop world that's been her home all these years.

Closing the album is the Enigma-like 'Voices', which quietly finishes with orchestral lushness, winding up with the toll of a bell. It's an elegant ending to an artist's loyal reign at a single music label, and Warner Brothers should tip their hats to the girl who's consistently delivered such winning material. She may never have the musical talent of Alicia Keys or the vocal range of Mariah Carey, but she's got guts, an unwavering work ethic, and a keen understanding of the power of a perfect pop song. Almost 50 years old, she keeps pumping out hits with the confidence and bravado that she herself arguably originated. After all the reinventions, she's still Madonna, and in a quarter century no one else has even come close.