

MADONNA – 'MDNA' - ALBUM REVIEW

BY ALAN BENNETT ILAGAN

Leave it to a current zeitgeist lightning rod like Nicki Minaj to proclaim, "There's only one queen, and that's Madonna." It's a pretty accurate summation of the latest album from our reigning royalty. Like its prismatic cover art, *MDNA* is a kaleidoscopic view into the mental and musical psyche of Madonna, thirty years into her unprecedented career.

Rich, complex, and thrillingly diverse, this album, perhaps more than any other Madonna album, offers the most varied vocal styling she has ever exhibited – literally and figuratively. She's almost unrecognizable in some spots, and it's a powerful indication of her powers of reinvention and phoenix-like abilities that she can still summon such surprising sounds.

The dark, twisted, sometimes tumultuous collection of tracks is as revealing as it is catchy. She has yet to lyrically match the majestic heights and musical cohesiveness she mastered with an album like *Ray of Light*, but this comes closer to the revelatory confessional aspect of *Like A Prayer* that serious fans have been clamoring for (both were crafted in the aftermath of ruined marriages). This time around, she finds salvation and strength in the music, using it as her guide, her escape, and her inspiration.

Fleshed out with the genius combination of Martin Solveig, Benny Benassi, and William Orbit (one of her greatest collaborators, and the genius behind *Ray of Light*) *MDNA* offers compelling evidence that Madonna is very much at the top of her game. Opening with the Act of Contrition (the same prayer that closed out *Like A Prayer*), 'Girl Gone Wild' starts things off with a gleeful sense of abandon. "I'm about to go astray/ My inhibition's gone away/ I feel like sinning..." and suddenly we are back to where it all began – on the dance-floor and in glorious defiance. For anyone who dared wonder whether this changed world would cause her to kowtow in any way, Madonna brazenly deflects all ensuing wanna-bes and ex-husbands with this introductory slice of dance-pop, and the racy video already has tongues wagging like it's 1992 all over again.

Rather than reining things in after that gate-busting salvo, she drives full-speed into controversial territory, in the ultra-violent gun-happy 'Gang Bang' – a track that would have gone straight into the banned bin at any point in the go's. The bad girl of *Erotica* is back, with a sinister bass-line and a sick beat, and some hilariously disturbing lines and barely-glossed-over rage. Yet for all its over-the-top psycho-drama, it rings slightly hollow, especially when compared to the more mesmerizing 'I'm Addicted.'

“When did your name change from a word to a charm?... When did your name change from language to magic?” she asks her apparent infatuation, voicing “somewhere between a prayer and a shout.” We’ve all had those nights-at-the-club when we can barely remember how we got there, or how we got home. They’re dim, hazy, and forgettable – they bleed into one another, until you meet that certain someone and suddenly time stills, and they burn themselves into your memory, into your consciousness, and you can’t tell if it’s the music or the moment or some other mind-altering madness. It’s a trippy rush, and even though you know you’re high and drunk on the drug or the love, when the music pumps this hard it doesn’t much matter. “Something happens to me when I hear your voice/ Something happens to me and I have no choice,” she sings, her voice both rising and deepening as the music builds, “I need to hear your name/ Everything feels so strange/ I’m ready to take this chance/ I need to dance.” As the song climaxes and the chorus smashes over it all, ‘I’m Addicted’ offers the sort of spiritual and physical transcendence that can only come about on the crowded floor of a collectively-sweat-soaked night at the club, when the mood is just right and the music rides that crest to the culmination of its breaking point. Most albums might pause for a breather of some filler at this point, but not *MDNA*.

‘Turn Up the Radio’ is the song that should, by all rights, return her to her former chart glory, but even if it fails in that quest, it’s bound to be the summer anthem for gay clubs the world over. An unabashedly joyous romp, tailor-made for blaring in the car with the top down, ‘Radio’ gives us the carefree Madonna that most of us grew up loving.

“When the world starts to get you down/ And nothing seems to go your way/ And the noise of the maddening crowd/ Makes you feel like you’re going to go insane/ There’s the glow of a distant light/ Calling you to come outside/ To feel the wind in your face and your skin/ And it’s here I begin my story.” It’s a story she’s told before, but it’s worth hearing again in this shiny and new form.

‘Some Girls’ is a sort of backhanded ‘Express Yourself’, where the unity of girl power finds an ambivalent critique as Madonna sassily sings, “I’m not like all the rest/ Some girls are second best/ Put your loving to the test.” Sometimes it’s not only the guys who seem out to get her, and this adds a dimension of tension to the increasingly complicated path she’s set forth upon. Luckily, things get as sweet as they are sticky with ‘Superstar’. This saccharine-sweet sugary confection, with dreamy background vocals by Madonna’s daughter Lola (even if barely worth the credit) imbues the album with a sense of hopeful romanticism that balances the darker tracks.

‘I Don’t Give A’ borders dangerously on showcasing the fact that Madonna will never make a convincing rapper, but she keeps it just this side of decent, wisely allowing Nicki Minaj to take over the real deal. She ticks off a laundry list of bluntly-put tasks, “Wake up ex-wife/

This is your life/ Children, on your own, planning on the telephone... Gotta call the babysitter/ Twitting on the elevator..." (funny because she doesn't even have her own Twitter account) – and in the quick patter drops the big admissions. "I tried to be a good girl/ I tried to be your wife /Diminished myself, and I swallowed my light/ I tried to become all that you expect of me, and if it was a failure, I don't give a..." In the end it's all about self-empowerment, and nobody does that better than Madonna. Single mother of four, a corporation unto herself, the embodiment of the modern woman – she is our warrior queen: "I'm gonna be okay/ I don't care what the people say/ I'm gonna be all right/ Gotta live fast, and I'm gonna live right."

The melodic magic and sunny sixties retro-vibe of William Orbit finds guitar-laden salvation in 'I'm A Sinner' – a swirling pop song that will challenge anyone not to move along to it. Both silly and serious religious references find her back in the church setting, only she's preaching the gospel of the groove, testifying to the beat, confessing in the glory of the other kind of rapture – and here is where the album soars, almost matching the spiritual abandon of 'Like A Prayer'. 'Sinner' is rife with whispered Hail Marys and a list of saintly men, before the singer cheekily challenges, "All the saints and holy men/ Catch me before I sin again". Who else but a woman named Madonna, a woman who burst onto the scene looking and acting nothing like a virgin, could so stand up to such iconic religious figureheads? She does it all with an irresistible hook and beat to boot, and 'I'm A Sinner' is an engaging song on a par with her best bits of pop finery.

Things turn slightly sour on 'Love Spent', which deals with the monetary madness of her life, mistrust, and the desire to be wanted for more than her money. Starting with an instrumental folk intro (sounds of Mr. Ritchie echoing in the pub) it rounds a dim corner to the introspective, which is where Madonna does some of her best, if not always popular, work. It's hard not to think of her ex-husband in this mixture of regret and longing – the wish for what has already been lost or, perhaps worse, already given away. For love or money, begs the once-material girl: "You had all of me, you wanted more/ Would you have married me if I were poor?" she questions. "You played with my heart/ Til death do we part/ That's what you said."

By the end, she's not so much blaming anyone as wishing for a deeper, richer connection: "I want you to take me like you took your money/ Take me in your arms until your last breath/ I want you to hold me like you hold your money/ Hold onto me until there's nothing left." It reeks of sadness and regret, tinged with anger and resentment, and the wish for something that transcended money and worldly concerns – and suddenly she is like any other divorced person, wondering where the love went. (Here's one of the only points where the dense production threatens to drown out the sentiment, and there is reportedly an acoustic version of this that would be well worth hearing.)

If it's heartache you're looking to find, 'Masterpiece' offers a break in the rushing beats with a melancholy tale of an out-of-grasp object of affection and perfection. "It seems to me that's what you're like/ The look-but-please-don't-touch-me type/ And honestly it can't be fun to always be the chosen one." She may be singing to someone else, but chances are she's also talking to herself.

Gorgeously ending the standard edition of the album is 'Falling Free' – a timeless tale of lessons learned and freedom found – and lost and gained again. Madonna weaves a folk-like enchantment over sparse instrumentation, offering pure blissful relief and release from the previous wall of racing, breakneck beats. This is music that aches and weeps, quietly and beautifully. "Deep and pure, our hearts align/ And then I'm free, I'm free of mine/ When I let loose the need to know/ Then we're both free, we're free to go..." It is a mournful, elegiac note of acceptance, of forlorn forgiveness, of forging onward in the face of heartbreak. As the closing note of the main album, it rings of resignation, and as much as she wants to dance and distract, it's an exquisite signifier that her real freedom might be found solely in her music – where it has resided for almost three decades. It's the one thing she has yet to change.

The additional tracks of the Deluxe Edition offer further glimpses into her emotional state, and a few of these should have made it onto the album proper. Overlooking the relatively tame-in-context f-bombs in 'I Fucked Up', this is actually a very pretty bit of regret: "I made a mistake, Nobody does it better than myself/ I'm sorry, I'm not afraid to say/ I wish I could take it back but I can't." For the woman who made 'I'm not sorry' her mantra for so many years, this is a startling, and moving, admission. Owning up to her mistakes finds her in an uncharacteristic state of vulnerability, and as the drums carry her away amid a sea of "we could've"s, you realize that despite the glamorous benefits that likely come from being Madonna, she's still just a middle-aged woman grappling with the end of a decade-long marriage. That she failed at something that once gave her such happiness and fulfillment puts her on the dangerous axis of self-love versus self-hatred, as exemplified by 'Beautiful Killer'. It finds her straddling obsession and self-annihilation, and a character who would give up her life for an object of beauty. Nobody ever said Madonna wasn't dramatic, and the whole thing plays out richly over a taut run of strings and a killer disco beat.

An argument could be made that she should have switched out some filler on the standard album and substituted a couple of stellar deluxe tracks noted above to make an indomitable collection of immaculate perfection, but the entire song cycle is a ride well-worth taking. As Madonna herself once said, "You can't get to one place without going through another." *MDNA* reasserts her rightful place in the pop world, proving once again that music forms the most basic make-up of her being.