

MADONNA - 'AMERICAN LIFE' – ALBUM REVIEW

BY ALAN BENNETT ILAGAN

The most surprising thing about *American Life*, Madonna's new album, is that it isn't the incendiary piece of anti-war sentiment we have been led to believe through over-hyped media reports, but rather a remarkably tender musical rendering of one woman's ongoing journey. In fact, for perhaps the first time in her career, it is the music that is the shocker ~ Madonna has gone folk, though she tempers most of the cuts with an electro-sensibility that merges acoustic guitar with cutting-edge techno sounds, courtesy of co-producer Mirwais.

This techno-folk melding can be jarring at times, but Madonna manages to pull it all together, even including a Gospel choir for one of the cuts. Amalgamation has always been her strong point, and successfully combining such disparate forces completes the musical trajectory she launched with 2000's *Music* album.

American Life is Madonna's electronic pastoral, with its ruminations on the American dream, Hollywood hollowness, and the redemptive power of love ~ all grounded with a heavy foundation of guitars. It is also her most religiously evocative piece, on a par with *Ray of Light* and *Like A Prayer*, with its spiritual references and search for meaning.

"I'm not a Christian and I'm not a Jew," she spews on the title track, while she calls out to Jesus Christ on *X-Static Process* and *Mother and Father*. In the slow-building *Nothing Fails* she sings, "I'm not religious, but I feel so moved/Makes me wanna pray/Pray you'll always be here/I'm not religious, but I feel such love, makes me wanna pray." An interesting echo of the redemptive love she explored on *Like a Prayer*, *Nothing Fails* also features a choir, and the music is ultimately soaring, indicative of the transcending power of love as a spiritual force, a religious experience of its own.

Surprisingly, the album falters on the cuts that Madonna should have done best. Leaf-off shock-single and title track *American Life* is unusually disjointed, and it's a double shame, since the song contains three killer hooks that end up being wasted. *Nobody Knows Me* is, at its heart, an 80's style dance track, featuring extra thrusts, thumping booms, and excessive vocoder-use to disguise its humble origins, none of which is very effective.

The best parts of *American Life* are when Madonna descends from self-righteous social critiques and speaks plainly ~ both lyrically and musically. At such moments she comes across as genuine and earnest. The guitar pose she adopted for her *Music* album turns out to be more than just a pose; guitars form the basis for the majority of songs and anchor the album more effectively than the thread of electronic beeps and blips. This is especially effective on the Cat Stevens-like *X-Static Process*, a tender love song which finds Madonna singing quietly over an acoustic guitar. "I'm not myself when you go quiet/ I'm not myself all alone at night," she croons in a plaintive voice, giving herself over to love but holding onto her own sense of self. It is a thrilling moment in its sheer simplicity, and a melodic jewel that grounds the entire album.

Guitars also propel the classic pop cut *Hollywood*, which manages to be both vintage and current, while the road-ballad *Intervention* is a harmonic masterpiece, with Madonna once again intoning her faith in love.

The real zenith of *American Life* may be *Mother and Father*. Superficially it seems just a hook-laden piece of pop genius, but the lyrics and delivery rank with her most blunt and revealing. Beginning in a child-like techno-coo, it sounds like standard Madonna – a pleasant throwback to her *Like A Virgin* days. Listen carefully however and you will hear the hurt and abandonment she felt over her mother's death, and the way in which it sent her on a lifelong journey to find such unconditional love. "I got to give it up, find someone to love me/ I got to let it go, find someone that I can care for," she pleads as dance-fueling disco beats surround her in the pop-music catharsis she has been going through for twenty years.

American Life is a challenging listen, not as accessible or mainstream as some of her fans (and critics) might like, but Madonna has never pandered to anyone but herself and her own artistic ideals. And while it may not be an *Easy Ride*, at its best it is a fascinating and breathtaking one.