

## MADONNA – ‘CONFESSIONS ON A DANCE FLOOR’ - ALBUM REVIEW

BY ALAN BENNETT ILAGAN

All we ever wanted was for her to dance and sing, get up and do her thing. After years of skirting the issue with forays into Kabbalah, movies, politics, motherhood, and a world tour. Madonna finally gets down and boogies, going back to where it all began ~ the dance floor. What could have been a sad attempt at recapturing past dance splendor is instead a glorious return to fine form. This is what Madonna does best, perhaps better than anyone else. *Confessions on a Dance Floor*, out next week, proves that she's still got the beat.

Opening track and lead-off single *Hung Up* heralds a vintage Madonna, whose main concern is having fun. While there's nothing particularly groundbreaking about it, *Hung Up* jump-starts the party with a thumping bass-line and irresistible Abba sample. Madonna makes the most of those precious (and reportedly pricey) flute arpeggios, featuring them in a way that the original only hinted-at. A glittery and decidedly gay track if ever there was one, it sets the sound for the entire album. In fact, *Confessions* is a love letter to the gay guys who have adored her throughout her enduring career, and is easily her gayest record since 1992's *Erotica*. If it gets the hearing it deserves, Madonna will have succeeded once again in bringing our music to the masses. If it doesn't, she'll still be the queen of club-land. She officially regains that throne on the third track, *Sorry*.

The album's centerpiece (and Madonna's finest single in almost a decade) *Sorry* is what most of us have been waiting for since *Vogue* hit the streets fifteen years ago. An incendiary modern-day *I Will Survive*, it will undoubtedly serve as an anthem for scorned lovers the world over, or anyone who loves to dance for that matter. Amid a killer chorus and thundering bass line, Madonna belts out a defiant, powerful dismissal of one who has done her wrong. She stops short of the nastiness that turned many off of *Erotica* with the sweet and earnest *Future Lovers*, showing off a sincere side to our previous lady of pain.

*I Love New York* may be her effort at making amends for the misperceived anti-American stance of *American Life*, but it falls quite short of redemption, and embarrassingly produces the album's most mortifying lyrics. "I don't like cities but I like New York/ Other places make me feel like a dork" is unforgivable, as is "If you can't stand the heat, then get off my street." Dance lyrics needn't be profound or particularly meaningful, but Madonna usually manages to rise above such mindless mediocrity. Her words stumble in other bits as well,

particularly when she resorts to tired clichés. It's cheap for Madonna to tell us that, "Talk is cheap" or warn, "You'll wake up one day but it'll be too late."

The lyrical majesty that earned *Ray of Light* her best critical notices to date is, for the most part, absent from these proceedings, though that hardly matters. With music that sounds this good, Madonna proves that it's always been the beat that matters most, and she's crafted some vicious ones here.

For *Confessions*, her partner in the aural assault is Stuart Price, a.k.a. Les Rythmes Digitales. Madonna recently claimed that she sometimes enjoys the remixes of her songs more than the original versions. Here she has gone straight to the source and employed the aid and considerable DJ skills of a remix extraordinaire. She pushes Mr. Price beyond his lackluster Thin White Duck rut and into a whole new realm. He creates a seamless, non-stop club record, anchored by strong bass lines and layered with a multitude of nuances not usually found in most dance music.

Madonna's brilliance has always been in finding cutting-edge partners and making their music her own. In the 80's she enlisted Nile Rodgers for the breakthrough *Like A Virgin* album, then Patrick Leonard and Stephen Bray for *True Blue* and *Like A Prayer*. By the 90's she had moved on to Shep Pettibone for the iconic *Vogue* single and unfairly-maligned *Erotica* album. At the end of that decade Madonna made a comeback of sorts with the aid of William Orbit for her best album to date – *Ray of Light*. A new millennium brought a new collaborator in the form of Mirwais, who was integral in shaping the electronic folk music of *Music* and *American Life*.

It is often assumed that her producers are the ones responsible for her musical legacy, but in twenty-plus years of musical success those producers have come and gone, while the one constant has been the lady herself. At this point, no one can deny her own production prowess, but she seems to produce the best results when inspired by a partner who pushes her to new heights. Their joint effort comes to fruition on *Isaac*, an already-controversial track whose supposed sacrilege has riled a number of Rabbis who haven't even heard it yet.

In a Moby-like melding of disparate world music styles, *Isaac* shatters the notion of whatever you thought this track would sound like. An exotic plucking of strings opens the song, a bit of a Yemenite chant is sung by a man, then the beat kicks in. It breaks down into a brief, dramatic tension-held moment of sparse instrumentation before pummeling back with hands-in-the-air abandon. It's the album's most unique and challenging moment, and when she asks, "Will you ever be the same?" it's a genuinely affecting moment.

Before things get too deep, she deftly brings the focus back with a frothy piece of pop confection in *Push*. It can be read as an ode to her Guy, her Rabbi, her kids, her manager – any number of inspirations. It's pop art at its best. What does it mean? That's the trademark beauty of a classic Madonna song – it's whatever you want it to mean.

As with all her work, there are moments of lofty intent, and for the most part they work. Like most dance floors, this one is decidedly dark. Though the beat is up, Madonna's musings are indeed confessional. Nothing approaches the dour mood of her last album, but many of her lyrics are questioning and ambiguous. She gets away with it by backing the message with an irresistible hook and catchy chorus – a hat trick that has kept her career going where others have faltered, and something that is missing from most of her flops.

Lighter fare abounds on *Confessions*, and is the key to its overriding success. *Get Together* is a gleeful, lighthearted romp that echoes her earliest work, while *Forbidden Love* shimmers with romantic yearning. Message and music come together in *Jump*. "There's only so much you can learn in one place," she flatly states, and that may well be the running theme for a woman who has never looked back. *Jump* is filled with funky hand-claps and other guilty moments of musical ear-candy, all the while flaunting the drive and ambition of Madonna's youth – ever-present and not showing any sign of letting up.

It also reiterates another theme in much of her earlier music – a hopeful wistfulness that goes back to a more innocent time, a carefree time – a time before we all grew up. Juxtaposed with the mature, thoughtful nature of a track like *Isaac*, both songs prove how far she has come, and how much further she wants to go.

After all this time she is still searching. The hunger of that twenty-something woman who landed in New York lo those many years ago with just a song and a dance is still in evidence today. Nodding to the past but gazing determinedly at the future has been one of Madonna's enduring knacks. It has served her well, and this album is another highpoint on her journey.

She's allowed us to dance with her for the past two decades, and though it's had its ups and downs, it's never been less than thrilling. *Confessions on a Dance Floor* reminds us of why we fell in love with her in the first place. Welcome back, bitch.