

music

this week's essential reading

{ 'The Legend of Black Superman' by Rafe Bartholomew, *Deadspin*

A wild excerpt from a new book on the basketball-mad Philippines, featuring the exploits of an American who failed in the NBA but became a celebrity in Manila }

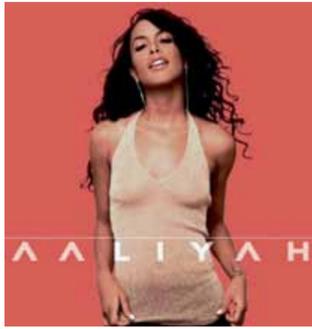
playlist

Mixing chrome-plated beats with soaring harmony, these albums set new standards for modern R&B

Aaliyah

Aaliyah
Background/Virgin/EMI (2001)

During her short life, the acclaimed producer Timbaland frequently referred to Aaliyah Haughton as a contemporary artist's muse; someone with whom he could push creative boundaries. The eternally futuristic rhythms of *We Need a Resolution* and *I Care 4 U* show this relationship at its best.



Brandy

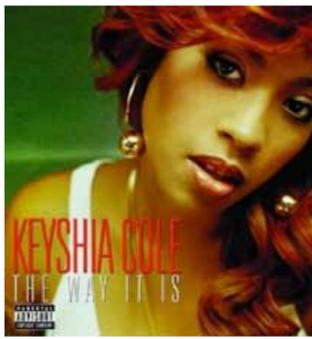
Full Moon
Atlantic (2002)

The third studio album by Brandy Norwood is almost criminally underrated. Boasting sparkling production by Rodney "Darkchild" Jerkins, tracks such as *What About Us* and *I Thought* offer an almost textbook definition of accessible yet challengingly avant-garde pop music.

Keyshia Cole

The Way It Is
Polydor (2005)

This 2005 debut album immediately established the Oakland, California-based singer Keyshia Cole as one of the strongest and most distinctive voices in contemporary R&B. Combining the grit of Mary J Blige with Mariah Carey's emotive range, it's a true gem.



The-Dream

Love Hate
Radio Killa / Def Jam (2007)

With credits ranging from Rihanna's *Umbrella* to work with Lionel Richie, Terius "The-Dream" Nash is one of the hottest songwriters and producers of the moment. However, *Love Hate* shows him as a credible and frequently dazzling artist in his own right.



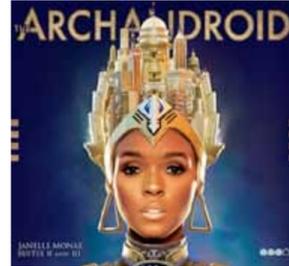
Too much, much too young

In its breathless rush of styles and concepts, Janelle Monáe's debut album exhausts just as much as it excites, writes Alex Macpherson

Critical consensus is a frustrating and often grimly inevitable phenomenon. As its plaudits coalesce, the awareness of agreement frequently ossifies the party line around the barest of surface signifiers. In terms of pop music – and, for that matter, most other things – this process tends to privilege the liminal over the generic. Self-professed outsiders are viewed as inherently superior to those whose work gives voice to ordinary emotions and concerns – especially when the genre in question, as per contemporary R&B, is viewed as something less than "high art".

Janelle Monáe was born to play the role of media darling. She wears the idea of eccentricity proudly. *The ArchAndroid* is her first full-length album, but it follows an EP last year – *Metropolis: The Chase Suite* – and comprises the second and third parts of a concept song cycle documenting the story of Cindy Mayweather, a cyborg from the year 2719 who is on the run from futuristic authorities for the crime of falling in love with a human. Originally a protégée of Antwan "Big Boi" Patton, one half of OutKast – the hip-hop act it's OK for rock fans to like – she is also the founder of the Wondaland Arts Society, an artistic community in Atlanta, Georgia that disdains such mundane descriptions, stating instead on its website: "We have created our own state, our own republic." In her live shows, Monáe paints canvases on stage she hurls them, wet paint and all, into the audience. Such details are critical catnip, screaming "I AM CREATIVE" with all the subtlety of a caps-locked Kanye West blog post, establishing Monáe's maverick credentials before a note is heard.

Signed to Sean "P.Diddy" Combs' Bad Boy label, the 24-year-old Monáe is being marketed as the next big R&B star. This plan has had the bonus of enabling critics to laud Monáe as a shining example of her prescribed genre by dint of her work not sounding a great



Janelle Monáe

The ArchAndroid: Suites II and III
Bad Boy

deal like it. Indeed, praise for *The ArchAndroid* has tended to focus on its stylistic range – the way it goes "beyond" R&B. However, its pan-generic nature has been overstated. Monáe bounces from acoustic folk balladry to rockabilly workouts to orchestral show tunes, but *The ArchAndroid* is not especially diverse when compared to, say, Jazmine Sullivan's *Fearless* (which took in everything from reggae to tango and Daft Punk samples), or even Beyoncé's *I Am...Sasha Fierce* (a record that contained AOR ballads, electronic club joints, Lil' Wayne imitations and even elements of drone-rock and country).

So, is Monáe really that far ahead of the field – or is her appeal merely the result of her rhetoric and image – the fact that she sings about sci-fi rather than relationships and dresses more like an alien than a stripper?

Despite *The ArchAndroid's* eclecticism, every style it touches upon is subservient to its overriding aesthetic; that of a Broadway musical with funk pastiches and retro rock'n'roll at its core. Monáe is a one-woman variety show, intent on wowing her audience with an array of stylistic acrobatics, before landing, perfectly poised, with a wink and a cheesy grin. She possesses the kind of talent that



"Janelle Monáe was born to play the role of media darling." Brendan McDermid / Reuters

makes for pinpoint execution: her voice, for starters, is an instrument of tremendous technical potential. Monáe masters everything she turns her vocal cords to, whether quasi-rapping on *Dance Or Die* or the flamboyant archness of *Oh, Maker*, on which each note is arranged like a flower in a bouquet. She makes no secret of her smarts, either. *The ArchAndroid* is a rush of ideas, as though a dam has burst in Monáe's brain and splurged everything therein into recorded sound. *Cold War* finds her riding a fairground organ line like a rollercoaster; midway through *Come Alive (War Of The Roses)*, her vocals veer up into a sustained scream, which then metamorphoses into

a squealing guitar riff. It's all unimpeachably impressive stuff.

As a showcase for Monáe's talent, *The ArchAndroid* is frequently breathtaking, but its overflow of ideas makes it a less than satisfactory listening experience. A total of 18 tracks segue into one other without pause for breath, creating a blurry, zig-zagging effect, as if the album is perpetually rushing ahead of itself. This does not serve its songs well: on the jazz-inflected *Neon Valley Street*, Monáe affects a Billie Holiday-style dreaminess before abruptly switching to a jarringly mechanistic robot voice midway through. This sense of self-sabotage by self-consciousness recurs throughout the album.

Monáe, it seems, feels that creating pretty songs in which listeners can lose themselves is beneath her, an insufficient demonstration of her singularity. While her skills alone are enough to impress, her constant chopping and changing soon begins to grate. *The ArchAndroid* is ultimately a tiring listen: by the time Monáe breaks into hallelujah hymnals or puts on an array of different voices two-thirds of the way through, one feels too worn out to care. Furthermore, Monáe does not (yet) have the writing chops to match her tremendous technical abilities or her outré conceptual visions. Too many songs devolve into frantic aimlessness, creating an impression similar to that of an of-

fice manager maintaining a façade of harried activity to cover for the lack of real work they're doing.

Ironically, for an album whose point is ostensibly one giant game of dress-up, the emotional character of any given song is far less apparent than the overarching presence of the real-life figure behind the music. In her attempts to offer up a multiplicity of ideas, styles, sounds and personae, Monáe exposes herself more clearly than a straight-up love song ever could. But the focus on Monáe, the auteur working behind the curtain, is less compelling than just hearing the magic would have been. Consequently, *The ArchAndroid* feels effortful rather than intuitive.

This is possibly due to a degree of overthinking: on the *Metropolis* EP, Monáe conveyed not just the concept of its post-*Blade Runner* narrative, but the characters' emotion: the sadness of *Sincerely, Jane, Many Moons'* casting of self-discovery as an ecstatic rush. On *The ArchAndroid*, the relative lack of such moments means that the tale of Cindy Mayweather feels like a distraction both to the listener and the artist.

The ArchAndroid may exhaust, but it also excites. On its lead single, *Tightrope*, Monáe's penchant for the frenetic comes into its own: it feels like something is at stake here, an emotional necessity behind the mannerisms. Monáe bobs and weaves from reaction to reaction, both nery and playful, before arriving, breathless, at her destination – a pitch for her paramour's hand: "Some callin' me a sinner/Some callin' me a winner/I'm callin' you to dinner/And you know exactly what I mean!"

The album's finest sequence comes in its closing three tracks, though. As it winds down, so does Monáe; and as she relaxes, her songs begin to breathe. *57821* is a gorgeously abstract bank of harmonies that finds Monáe drifting in space; on the gently yearning *Say You'll Go*, she captures both the thrill and uncertainty of elopement with the line: "Let's find forever - and write our names in fire on each other's hearts." Then she signs off with *BaBop Bye Ya*, an eight-minute arrangement that could have come straight out of the Rodgers and Hammerstein songbook, its vocals light and subtle, but all the more affecting for their lack of ostentation.

In an era where more of a premium than ever is placed on instantaneous returns, it is important to remember that this is Monáe's debut: her songwriting may be patchy and her self-editing skills almost non-existent, but her gifts are impossible to deny. On the evidence of *The ArchAndroid*, it is hard to say where Monáe's talents may lead her – or, indeed, the setting in which they can be best framed. One suspects that she does not yet know either.

Alex Macpherson is a regular contributor to *The Review*. His work can be found in *The Guardian* and *New Statesman*.

playback



OutKast

Speakerboxxx/The Love Below
LaFace (2003)

Double trouble

In days long before Lil Wayne and Gucci Mane, hip-hop was largely a bicoastal phenomenon; twin-centred in New York and Los Angeles. However, with a run of releases, from 1994's gloriously titled *South-ernplayalisticadillacmuzik* to 2000's *Stankonia*, the Atlanta, Georgia duo of Andre "3000" Benjamin and Antwan "Big Boi" Patton established a reputation rare in circles of mainstream music criticism – that of respected hip-hop auteurs – and, perhaps most importantly, acted as ambassadors for a new wave of talent from below the Mason-Dixon Line.

In fact, if Southern rap has a definitive breakout moment, it has to be the release of the duo's Grammy-winning *Speakerboxxx/The Love Below* – a double album comprising one disc by Patton and another by Benjamin. Despite the gushing praise lavished upon it, it was, in reality, a somewhat flawed venture. Patton's *Speakerboxxx* is by far the stronger of the two records, grounded by his dual trademarks of understatedly innovative production and bluff, yet deceptively complex lyrical delivery. However, without the anchoring presence of his partner, the charismatically eccentric Benjamin's astro-soul oddness, *The Love Below*, is (flashes of pop brilliance such as *Hey Ya!* aside) disjointed, confounding, wilfully outré. Of course, many thought it was the future of hip-hop, but that's because it wasn't hip-hop at all.