

MUS 2008 Critical Perspectives on Contemporary Music

Instructor: Peter Johnston

Album Review Assignment

Length: 800-1000 words (2-3 pages)

Format: double-spaced, no extra line between paragraphs, size 12 font, 1" margins

Submission: online through Blackboard, PDF or MS Word files only

Late penalty: 10% per day late, counted from 11:59 pm each day

Assignment Details: The purpose of this assignment is to comparatively examine the criteria used by two different music reviewers to judge the merits of an album. It is expected that you will use terms and concepts from the course content to frame your analysis. Please refer to the example reviews on Blackboard. This short essay must include the following:

- (1) References to two **contrasting** reviews of an album of your choice, meaning one that reviews the album positively and another that offers a negative reading of the album's merits. The album can be from any popular music genre, but must have been made in the **last ten years**. These reviews should come from published **music critics** (from newspapers, magazines, industry websites like pitchfork.com, allmusic.com or billboard.com, etc.) but **not** fans' websites, blogs, amazon.com comments, or the like.
- (2) An examination and comparison of the aesthetic criteria used in each review, meaning the terms, concepts, and assumptions that the authors employ to establish why they think the album is good or bad. (Note: often critics do not explicitly state the criteria they use and so you will most likely need to "read between the lines").

As an example of aesthetic criteria, one reviewer may praise the lyrical content of an album, while another may argue that the lyrics are weak. The underlying assumption here is that both reviewers believe lyrics are important, and thus pay attention to them — they just happen to disagree about the quality of the lyrics in question.

Another example of aesthetic criteria might be the sound or production qualities of an album: one reviewer may write at length about the recording quality of the album, and the other may not mention it at all. In this case, sound quality is important to one reviewer, while the other is more interested in the other elements of the recording (lyrics, song-craft, rhythms, orchestration, grooves, for example).

As a final example, one reviewer might critique the album for not sounding enough like the artists' older material, while the other might praise the album for being innovative. In this case, the reviewers have differing views on the idea of artistic growth and development.

- (3) A paragraph or two on your own opinions about the aesthetic merit of your chosen album, and how they relate to the two reviews.
- (4) Citations (in APA format) of all your sources in the body of the essay itself for any fact that does not originate from yourself
- (5) A separate reference list in APA format at the end of your paper listing all sources you have referred to in your text. The reviews should be under the heading "Works Cited", and the album information under "Discography". Full discographic information for most recordings can be found at <http://www.allmusic.com>.

You can also use the site citethisforme.com to generate the proper citations.

- (6) In the **discography** list only the names of the full recordings you have referred to, not individual songs.

Example of discographic entries:

Minaj, N. (2014). *The Pinkprint*. New Orleans: Young Money, Cash Money, and Republic Records

Foo Fighters. (2014). *Sonic Highways*. New York: RCA Records

- (7) A total of 2-4 pages in length (between 800 and 1000 words in 12pt font and 1" margins), double spaced, no extra between paragraphs, written in your own words using clear and grammatically correct English. Incorrect spelling and grammar will be heavily penalized.
- (8) Title page and running header are unnecessary - simply put the following information on the top left-hand corner of the paper:

Duke Aylward
Student number: 200606707
Course: MUS 519
Date: 30 February 2012

- (9) For hard-copy assignments: **staple your work in the top left-hand corner**
- (10) Please refer to the Student Writing Guides on Blackboard and the example assignment attached below for how to properly format an academic paper, especially the document "Writing Assignment Sample". Deviation from this basic template will be penalized.

CHECKLIST

| | |
|--|---|
| | Have you titled your work? |
| | Are there page numbers (bottom, centre)? |
| | Is your assignment well organized, i.e., does it have an introduction, a thesis statement, a supporting argument organized in logical paragraphs, and a conclusion? |
| | Have you spell-checked your assignment? |
| | Have you proofread your assignment, both before and after printing it? |
| | Have you used formal (scholarly, as opposed to informal or colloquial) language in your assignment? i.e.) Avoid contracted words like “haven’t” “it’s”, etc. |
| | Is your assignment stapled (if a hard copy is requested)? |
| | Have you included citations in parenthetical-reference format (according to APA guidelines*) for all quotations and information you have provided that is not common knowledge? (Not doing so constitutes plagiarism.) |
| | Have you provided a reference list in APA format? |
| | Have you provided a discography (of all recordings mentioned) in APA format? |
| | Have you put song and article titles in quotation marks in your text (e.g., Adele’s “Rolling in the Deep”)? |
| | Have you put album and book titles in italics in your text (e.g., Arcade Fire’s <i>Reflektor</i>)? |

* Please note that APA style applies not just to bibliographies, but to formatting, citation, etc., **within the body of a paper** as well.

Below is a sample album review assignment that you can use as a model for formatting and content, and a rubric detailing the criteria and expectations that will be deployed in evaluating your work.

Album Review Assignment Grading Rubric

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|---|---|---|--|--|---|
| Name | Writing Assignment Rubric | | | | |
| Description | | | | | |
| Rubric Detail | | | | | |
| | Levels of Achievement | | | | |
| Criteria | Highly Proficient | Proficient | Limited Proficient | Needs Work | Unacceptable |
| Content and Organization | 4 Points Content is accurate, focused, and consistent; presented in a coherent way with a clear argument and narrative. | 3 Points Content is somewhat accurate and fairly clear; offers solid but less accurate reasoning; minor problems in narrative structure | 2 Points Content is somewhat vague or only loosely related to the writing task, with limited support for argument; narrative difficult to follow | 1 Points Content unclear; lapses in coherence or no relation to writing task; offers simplistic, undeveloped support for ideas | 0 Points Fails to meet the minimum standards for a course at this level |
| Creative Thinking and Use of Course Terminology and Concepts | 4 Points Skillful use of relevant terminology, demonstrates clear understanding of course concepts and makes insightful connections | 3 Points Adequately demonstrates reasonable relationships among ideas, demonstrates basic understanding of core concepts | 2 Points Simplistic analysis of complex issue, demonstrates awareness of terms but lacks comprehension of their meanings | 1 Points Insufficient reasoning and lacks complexity of thought; Inadequate use of terminology learned in class | 0 Points Fails to meet the minimum standards for a course at this level |
| Language Use And Writing Style | 4 Points Essentially error free, clear and coherent | 3 Points Minor issues with sentence structure, punctuation, and word use | 2 Points Pattern of flaws, needed careful proofreading | 1 Points Mechanical errors so severe that writer's ideas are hidden | 0 Points Fails to meet the minimum standards for a course at this level |
| Use of Sources | 4 Points Citations and Works Cited section in proper APA format | 3 Points Minor errors in in-text citations and Works Cited section | 2 Points Substantive errors in in-text citations and Works Cited section | 1 Points Does not follow APA format | 0 Points Fails to meet the minimum standards for a course at this level |
| Document Formatting | 4 Points Document looks professional, follows | 3 Points Essay violates one or two formatting guidelines | 2 Points Essay violates multiple formatting guidelines | 1 Points Essay looks untidy and unprofessional | 0 Points Fails to meet the minimum standards for a course at this level |

Album Review Sample Assignment

Student Name
Student Number
Course
Date

A Comparative Analysis of Album Reviews of Miguel's *Wildheart*

In this essay I will compare and contrast two reviews of Miguel's third studio album, *Wildheart*.

Both reviews focused on the musicality of the album as a whole and on the underlining messages and themes in the lyrics. Miguel Pimentel is a Los Angeles native R&B artist whose breakthrough to mainstream pop culture came in 2012 with his Grammy win for the single "Adorn" off his sophomore album *Kaleidoscope Dream* (Miguel, n.d.). Since his debut in 2010, Miguel has evolved from a standard R.&B loverboy into a creative, genre-remodelling artist. He is commonly compared to Prince, and seen as an innovator in his genre. Many claim that he, along with Frank Ocean, have the potential to push R&B into a new era, where the lyrics focus on sexual partnership and sharing rather than on the common themes in R&B, which revolve around overt eroticism and male pleasure (Mistry, 2015). Pitchfork's Anupa Mistry (2015) praised Miguel for his lyrical creativity and courage on *Wildheart*. She states that the album is "sex positive instead of sex-obsessed," unlike the majority of current R&B singers - she cites Trey Songz and Jeremih as counter-examples. Mistry explains that Miguel has mastered the skill of crafting lyrics that are explicit without being misogynistic. Billboard's Carl Wilson (2015) offers a less favourable opinion of Miguel's lyrics, claiming that Miguel lacks originality and is "far from unique" for focusing his lyrics on themes that have been sung about time and again by soul and R&B artists like Prince.

Wildheart delves into the Los Angeles lifestyle and culture that Miguel claims has influenced his musical and personal choices. Mistry praises Miguel's ability to transition from overt eroticism to raw emotional vulnerability, exemplified in the song "What's Normal Anyway". On this track Miguel recounts some experiences that have rendered him alone in both life and love. On the other hand, Wilson claims that "What's Normal Anyway" would be a better fit for Miguel's previous album, *Kaleidoscope Dream*, where he focuses on social themes that stemmed from existential questions, such as on his earlier song "Candles in the Sun". Mistry and Wilson do agree that *Wildheart's* opening song "A Beautiful Exit" is motivational, and sheds light on the importance of not falling for societal pressures.

Mistry and Wilson further differ in opinion regarding Miguel's musical arrangements and compositions on the record. Mistry explains that Miguel maintains a funk sound throughout, rather than just experimenting with the psychedelic influences that informed his previous studio albums, Miguel accomplishes this with ragged synths, syncopated beats, stretched out guitar strumming and smooth, sky-high vocals. Wilson however claims that the album "never stays groovy for long". He states that the album has tracks that are spaced out to liven things up, but too many have repetitive riffs that "plague" many of the songs (Wilson, 2015). Both critics agree on Miguel's vocal range and his ability to express emotion. For example, on the song "Waves", Mistry applauds Miguel's intricate harmonies by calling them "stunning" and potentially the album's "most dazzling moment". Wilson concurs that the album is buoyed by "inventive vocal arrangements" along with "interweaving vocal lines", highlighting a rare point of agreement between the two writers.

Overall, Wilson does not try to discourage audiences from listening to *Wildheart*, but rather he believes that the album did not reach its full potential. He suggests that Miguel still needs to focus on a clear direction, but supports him as an artist, claiming that he is a promising

creative force in R&B. Mistry hopes that *Wildheart* will spark a shift in modern R&B soul, leading to a new era of popular funk and soul music where women are treated as equal sexual partners rather than simply objects of male desire.

I think that *Wildheart* allowed Miguel to show off his dirtier, more edgy, rock and funk influences. Miguel's previous record *Kaleidoscope Dream* has a far smoother, cleaner sound free of distorted heavy synths. This new record features not only pleasing harmonies and effortless falsetto, but also a more vulnerable Miguel. As both reviews mention, his lyrics are far raunchier and more sexual than his previous works, but they are also raw and honest. On "The Valley", Miguel relates his sexual fantasies, and demonstrates the courage to state what he wants from his partner. Yet in doing so his focus is not only on his pleasure, but his partner's as well, which is unconventional for an R&B singer. Musically, the album has a grittier sound, which in juxtaposition with his smooth vocals provides the audience with a new experience. It is evident on this album that Miguel draws on influences such as Prince, Freddie Mercury and James Brown (Mistry, 2015). The falsetto in "gfg" resembles Prince's falsetto on his 1986 hit "Kiss". Miguel adds guitar riffs throughout and even features Lenny Kravitz on "Face The Sun", which speaks to the rock influence on this record. Miguel further channels the funk with the use of cowbell and syncopated beats. In my opinion, *Wildheart*, is a pivotal album in Miguel's career because it demonstrates how he has evolved as an artist. Based on his raw, sexualized lyrics, impressively smooth falsetto range, and intricate musical compositions, Miguel is on his way to becoming an R&B icon.

Works Cited

Miguel. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.biography.com/people/miguel-21249827>

Mistry, A. (2015). Miguel: Wildheart. [Album Review] Retrieved from <http://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/20728-wildheart/>

Wilson, C. (2015). Miguel Chooses His Path (Sort Of) on 'Wildheart': Album Review. Retrieved from <http://www.billboard.com/articles/review/6605666/miguel-wildheart-album-review>

Discography

Pimentel, M. (2015). *Wildheart*. New York: RCA Records

Pimentel, M. (2012). *Kaleidoscope Dream*. New York: RCA Records

Pimentel, M. (2010). *All I Want Is You*. New York: JIVE Records

Prince (1986). *Parade*. Warner Bros.