

Janelle Monae – The ArchAndroid (2010)

Written by bluelover

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01. Suite II Overture
02. Dance Or Die (feat. Saul Williams)
03. Faster
04. Locked Inside
05. Sir Greendown
06. Cold War
07. Tightrope (feat. Big Boi)
08. Neon Gumbo
09. Oh, Maker
10. Come Alive (The War Of The Roses)
11. Mushrooms & Roses
12. Suite III Overture
13. Neon Valley Street
14. Make The Bus (feat. Of Montreal)
15. Wondaland
16. 57821 (feat. Deep Cotton)
17. Say You'll Go
18. BaBopBye Ya

Janelle Monáe's *The ArchAndroid* immediately dazzles you with its ambition. It's a 70-minute, 18-track epic comprising two suites, each beginning with an overture, telling a futuristic story starring a messianic android. It's not even the beginning of the saga-- the first sequence was her debut EP, *Metropolis: The Chase Suite*. The songs zip gleefully from genre to genre, mostly grounded in R&B and funk, but spinning out into rap, pastoral British folk, psychedelic rock, disco, cabaret, cinematic scores, and whatever else strikes her fancy. It's about as bold as mainstream music gets, marrying the world-building possibilities of the concept album to the big tent genre-mutating pop of Michael Jackson and Prince in their prime. Monáe describes *The ArchAndroid* as an "emotion picture," an album with a story arc intended to be experienced in

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one sitting, like a movie. It most certainly works in this way, but at first blush, it's almost too much to take in all at once. The first listen is mostly about being wowed by the very existence of this fabulously talented young singer and her over-the-top record; every subsequent spin reveals the depths of her achievement.

The most impressive thing about The ArchAndroid isn't that it bounces between genres, but that it does so without compromising quality or cohesion. Its most recent antecedent is André 3000's *The Love Below*, but Monáe and her songwriting partners skillfully avoid that album's overreach and missteps, showing a similar level of fearless creativity but with greater focus and discipline. Despite the style-hopping, the album is sequenced so that many of the songs flow together seamlessly, and the shifts in tone seem intuitive rather than jarring. Monáe's dramatic structure goes a long way toward keeping this from being an incoherent pile-up of affectations, providing a narrative through line that makes sense of the transitions, and implies momentum and resolution even if you're tuning out the lyrics.

The success of the album is also due to Monáe's raw talent as a vocalist. She inhabits each style with natural grace, nailing the subtleties of rapped verses and tight harmonies as well as she can belt out a climax or deliver a punky growl. Much like fellow sci-fi magpie David Bowie, Monáe sings with the confidence of a star, but is essentially a vocal chameleon who places the needs of her songs ahead of her ego. Her performances can be jaw-dropping-- check out the transition from gentle folk phrasing to showstopping vocal runs on "Oh, Maker" for one example-- but she never gets in the way of her songs, which rely as much on her star power as the remarkable versatility of her band.

The ArchAndroid is deliberately conceived as a world unto itself, but Monáe very carefully places herself in a broader cultural context, as much out of ambition as wide-eyed fandom. Her liner notes list off inspirations for each track, ranging from references to Star Wars and Stevie Wonder album art to Salvador Dali and "the atomic bombs in Muhammad Ali's fists." She comes off like an enthusiastic student of the arts, eager to create on the level of her top-shelf reference points. Her naked desire to become iconic is endearing-- mainly because she is actually effective in presenting a look and a sound that is unmistakably her own, even when her influences are front and center. Everything that goes into her music comes out skewed, and even the most familiar elements of classic R&B-- percussive horn stabs, scratchy rhythm guitar-- suddenly seem fresh and modern rather than nostalgic and reverent. Her choice of outside collaborators has a similar effect in creating a context for herself, establishing kinship and aesthetic continuity with the unapologetically bohemian poet Saul Williams, the forward-thinking hip-hop of Big Boi from OutKast, and Of Montreal's flamboyant psychedelic funk.

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Monáe's sci-fi mythology is an inspired addition to the rich canon of Afrofuturist art, but it's not necessary to buy into her elaborate high concepts to get the basic appeal of her music. Her imagination and iconography deepen the record as an experience and give her license to go far out, but it ultimately serves as a fun, flashy framework for pop songs with universal lyrical sentiments. The first of the two suites mainly deals with identity and self-realization; the second is essentially a set of love songs. As with all the musical genres blended into The ArchAndroid, Monáe uses the conventions of science fiction as a means of communication, tapping into mythic archetypes for their immediate resonance and power. And where many concept albums run a high risk of being pompous, cryptic, and self-important, Monáe keeps things playful, lively, and accessible. It's a delicate balancing act, but Monáe and her band pull it off, resulting in an eccentric breakthrough that transcends its novelty. ---Matthew Perpetua, pitchfork.com

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