

Missy, Timbaland at top of rap game with third album

With 'This is Not a Test!' Elliott proves the dance floor doesn't have to be devoid of intelligent beat-making

By Steven Neuman
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Courtesy

In the last three years, Missy Elliott, hip-hop's girl with the golden touch, has released three albums. It seems rational that at such a breakneck pace, the musical creativity of the records would have to deteriorate to compensate for the increased delivery rate. However, Elliott seems to have broken this sound barrier.

Her third album, "This is Not a Test!," proves once again that Elliott has the goods to back up those cocksure rhymes.

Like her last two ventures, this album is the audio equivalent of eye

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candy. Once again, Elliott pairs with longtime producer Timbaland, and the two mesh beautifully. The sound that results is thumping club beats tinged with exotic creativity.

The record's introduction, "Baby Girl Interlude," personifies this sound. It features the singing of Mary J. Blige as Elliott flows over trumped-up beats. In the background, a young girl sings nonsensical sounds. This track — a fusion of melody, bass and ethereal elements — floats in and out with a simplicity that hides the truly masterful production job.

Similarly, "This is Our Last Time" whips up a frothy slow-jam style with some synthesized funk reminiscent of the late '80s or early '90s. This track shines, not because it holds any particular originality, but rather because it's so fun to listen to. This formula holds true for many of the other tracks.

The whole album is also chock full of guests, and some of their efforts work better than others. Besides Blige, Elliott enlists the help of Jay-Z, Elephant Man, Fabolous, R. Kelly, Monica, Beenie Man, Nelly and the Clark Sisters.

Some collaborations, like "Don't Be Cruel" (which features both Monica and Beenie Man) and "Wake Up" (with Jay-Z), work spectacularly, with the artists slipping seamlessly into the songs.

Others seem forced, such as "Dat's What I'm Talking About," which features R. Kelly. This song is basically a lot of oversexualized moaning. Later, Nelly manages to louse up "Pump It Up" with his same old shuck, rhymes and rhythm.

While this album completely pushes the limits of hip-hop, in some aspects it seems to be holding back. It doesn't hold a candle to some of the risks that Outkast's "Speakerboxxx/The Love Below" takes, although "This is Not a Test!" is perhaps destined to be more popular.

The crown jewel of the whole disc is "Toyz," which may become the world's first feminist bump'n'grind club anthem. Seductively funky wah-wah guitar work (think "Shaft") underlies proclamations like, "You don't get the job done when I need a little lovin'/ So I gotta do it myself if I wanna feel somethin'." Here, it is impossible hard not to admire Elliott for writing in quite a personal manner about such subjects.

In the same vein, "Let Me Fix My Weave" explores the politics of using sex for material gain. These two tracks seem bouncy and fun but scratch the surface to find some serious material.

Overall, the one thing that comes across loud and clear is that Elliott is no lightweight.

Steven Neuman is a freelance reporter for the Emerald.

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