

When one of the most recognizable stars in their genre, nay, the entire music industry releases a new album, people notice. Superstar Beyoncé Knowles worked hard as both a solo venture and part of a group, used music as a way of exploring her own personality flaws, and crafted one of the best videos of all time (of all time!) with the simplistic “Single Ladies” concept. Her contributions to music conjure images of Aretha Franklin in the way she’s used her gifts to both entertain and inspire.⁴ Her appropriately named fourth studio album, is a whittling down of a reported 72 recorded tracks, and serves as both a continuation of her impressive resume as well as a re-imagining of the direction her career is headed in.

What really stands out on 4 is just how insanely anomalous it is. It’s an eclectic mix of dance hits, club jams, and introspective ballads, spun together with a poppy giddiness that pays tribute to the best of the 80s without coming off as parodic. “I Miss You” and bonus track “Schoolin’ Life” both showcase opposite sides of that magnificent decade’s musical spectrum. The former is a stripped down track carried mostly by a hollow beat and dismal synthesizers, allowing Knowles and her morosely beautiful voice center stage. Written in collaboration with Odd Future artist Frank Ocean, the lyrics are a mixture of hopeful longing and loneliness, and Knowles delivers a believable performance effortlessly. The latter picks up the pace, peppered liberally with old-school horns and crashes. Knowles details her experiences growing up, but parallels can be drawn to the maturation she’s going through on this very album. More than any song, “Schoolin’ Life” literally oozes confidence, providing an endearing edge to an already catchy track.

Fortunately, 4 fails to pigeonhole Knowles on numerous occasions. Inspiration was drawn from a wide variety of areas, and her range of influences is exhibited in spectacular fashion. From the uplifting piano interludes found on “Best Thing I Never Had” to the tribal intensity of “Run the World (Girls),” Knowles expands the boundaries of traditional pop music while still keeping everything easily digestible and exciting. Her positive personality is infused into each and every track, and the lyrics convey the perfect image of a strong, independent woman, full of impassioned emotion with no sign of exaggeration.

While 4 contains a fair amount of fun, bouncy pieces, Knowles really shines when the tempo is slowed and she’s allowed to go all out without fear of overpowering the instrumentation. Album opener “1+1” is beautiful in its simplicity as Knowles’ inner monologue lays itself bare over a foundation of soft guitar strings and powerful piano chords. The next track “I Care” begins much the same way, slowly building to a commanding chorus. Knowles and the backing production ebb and flow as the track continues, teasing with various melodies until the finale. A short guitar solo closes the song, accompanying Knowles as she channels her inner Mariah Carey and ultimately puts the older star to shame.

4’s strongest track makes its appearance closer to the end of the album, sandwiched between the promising horns of “End of Time” and the aforementioned “Run the World (Girls).” Written by the award-winning songwriter Diane Warren, “I Was Here” is Knowles’ monument to the ages. The song climbs higher and higher, chorus by chorus, until Knowles reaches her apex, delivering some of her best vocals on the album. The lyrics are a bit uninspired, overly triumphant but somewhat humble as the singer contemplates her mark on history. Although she’s garnered massive amounts of acclaim through her storied career, Knowles is far from satisfied. “I Was Here” probably won’t receive the attention it deserves when placed next to 4’s more pop-oriented cuts, but it provides an amazing pillar for last half of the album to balance on.

It's hard to imagine Beyonce has much more maturation to endure after more than a decade, but 4 proves to be the singer's next step in terms of musical development. Her fourth outing is much more subtle than earlier efforts, instead providing a diverse mix of tracks that flaunt just how much Knowles has learned over the years. The variety causes the overall flow of the album to suffer a bit, but each track is so strong in terms of production and lyrical delivery that it's almost a moot point. Don't worry about your legacy Beyonce;4 has solidified your already stable position as pop's queen, and I don't think anyone will forget your name for quite some time.