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Lea Michele's 'Louder' is a Tentative Debut: Review

By Kindra Cooper
March 19, 2014



Creative control is a hard-won privilege. Only after record label dues are paid – cracking ‘Top 40’, landing a ‘Rolling Stone’ cover – does a singer typically have a shot at becoming a musician. Lea Michele’s debut album, *Louder*, probably would have been synthetic and faceless anyway, given the army of hitmakers (the Benny Blancos and Chantal Kreviazuks of pop) behind it, but the album’s statement doesn’t mesh well.

Michele is torn between ballads mourning late boyfriend and *Glee* co-star Cory Monteith (who died in July from a heroin overdose), proclaiming “I will fly” in lead single “Cannonball,” and effusing forbidden love in the up-tempo “On My Way” with Katy Perry-like cheek (“My heart’s too drunk to drive/I should stay away from you tonight”). While certain tracks like “You’re Mine” place Monteith on a pedestal, others insinuate a toxic relationship.

“We’re not healthy, barely breathing/But this pain keeps my heart beating” she sings in the top-notch piano ballad “Burn With You,” her refusal to “go to heaven if you’re going to hell” likely a covert reference to Monteith’s drug use. There’s a difference between nuance and indecision, which Michele does not seem to grasp, giving the album as a whole a strange soulless quality despite some decent tracks.

The showtune-like “Cannonball” opens with a chorus of “Breakdown” and heavy-handed piano keys. It’s an uplifting, anthemic number of an ilk with Beyonce’s “Pretty Hurts” (also co-written by Sia

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Furler) in which Michele vulnerably narrates her grieving journey from “going under” to “getting out into the world again.” The verses speak of loneliness, the hooks of hope and the chorus of self-empowerment – an exposition in line with a stage narrative that somewhat confuses the artist’s transition from *Glee*’s Broadway-aspiring Rachel Berry to Lea Michele the recording artist, especially when she belts, pre-chorus, “Light the fuse, light it now, light it now, light it now!”

Michele’s studied vocals bespeak her Broadway pedigree: crystal-clear enunciation and the ability to jump an octave from verse to hook, but little personal styling. Even pop tunes “Don’t Let Go,” “Cue The Rain” and “On My Way” are tackled with a technicality that leaves them sleeker than polished marble but wanting for a little more “fun” (think big-voiced vocalists like Christina Aguilera or Filipino singer Charice Pempengco).

The notion that something’s missing intensifies when you hear penultimate track “If You Say So,” which the “Glee” star co-wrote with Sia about the week following Monteith’s death. Voice tinged with pain, Michele’s vocals have a richness and vested emotion – hurt, bitterness, even anger when she demands “How could you leave me this way?” – not heard elsewhere on ‘Louder’. “I thought we would grow old/Mirrors in the smoke left me here to choke,” she growls, and her weariness palpably grows as the song progresses. “Battlefield” is somewhat murky, the repetitive piano riff throughout the verses and chorus like an overwound music box.

‘Louder’ is quite the crowd-pleasing medley, a 50/50 hit-and-miss that settles for middle ground, as many debuts do. Christina Perri-written “Empty Handed” sounds like a veritable Coldplay rip-off, while the Middle Eastern-leaning “You’re Mine” could’ve been the soundtrack for ‘The Lion King’, the tribal percussive and echoing, theatrical vocals conjuring images of vast canyons.

The perfunctorily-written, Demi Lovato-flavored title track “Louder,” in which Michele enjoins, like countless other artists before her, “Why don’t you scream a little louder?” makes the pop songs sound like mere concessions to her Top 40-following “Glee” fanbase.

She hasn’t discovered how to play to her strengths just yet, but Michele’s debut album is just satisfactory enough to pique hope for what may come.

Rating: 3/5

Image credit: Lea Michele via Facebook.com

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About the author



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US citizen living in Indonesia and a freelance writer for a national newspaper. I just want to write for the rest of my life, make good friends and see the world. Very excited to be a part of Toonari Post and about the abounding opportunities in citizen journalism. Reporting from Jakarta, Indonesia.

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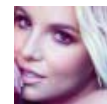
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