

'New Amerykah': Badu's Confusing Masterpiece

Contributed by DeEric M. Henry - Black College Wire
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Artist still keeping listeners on their heels

She's baack! Erykah Badu has always been known for being unpredictable -- and still is, 10 years after releasing her first solo album Baduizm. The release of her much-anticipated fourth studio album, New Amerykah Pt. 1: 4th World War, has been the topic of several conversations since the beginning of 2007.

Since the mid-90s Badu has challenged fans and critics to explore music outside of its usual realm. When introduced to the world, her tell-it-like-it-is lyrics accompanied a soulful-funky sound from the mid-70s. With all of that funk and power, it's no wonder her sultry voice serenades your ear like an old Chaka Khan record playing on an 8-track.

On New Amerykah she speaks on day-to-day struggles that so many traditional artists have stayed away from. She talks politics, drug addiction, death, activism and reflects on past relationships (notably Andre 3000 and Common).

Nonetheless, if you were expecting her to help you through your relationship ordeals, life decisions and womanhood, you're probably at the music store demanding your money back.

Instead, she keeps her promise from her last album, Worldwide Underground, when Badu utters "Freakquency is born, neo-Soul is dead... follow the leader." This time around she gives the fans something new. New Amerykah is so different, it can't be placed in a category. And I don't think Badu would have it any other way.

The high-action masterpiece starts off strong with the energizer "Amerykahn Promise," a disco-funk anthem. Next comes a song dedicated to the late hip-hop experimentalist J Dilla called "The Healer"--an instant hit if ever there was one--which brilliantly fuses chants and chimes that would be distracting if the song weren't so perfectly produced.

Even though New Amerykah is far different from Baduizm, the album that introduced her to the world, she still finds the common way to stay grounded, allowing listeners to take a small tour into her personal life.

For instance, "Me" is her most personal track. The often weird-spoken Badu talks about herself to the highest high. "This year I turn 36, damn it seems it came so quick, my a&s and legs have gotten thick, it's all me," she claims with confidence.

Though content with self, Badu still finds herself on "The Hump" of trying to overcome bad habits and holding a constant conversation with God. "Lord knows, Lord knows I'm trying...I just want to fly, far away," she says with passion and willingness to escape this thang she claims is dragging her lower.

On the album, she's often confusing and rambling. But when have you known her not to be? Some songs often jump off subject and she's created another alter ego named "Kolleen."

The last song is her first single, "Honey," which is the grooviest of all songs on the album. "Fly free baby fine with me, I'm in love with a bumblebee," she croons, displaying the different dimensions that her love can encompass.

"Honey" shows that, though she's staying away from the traditional pack of artists as a whole, she still has that connection with love and everyday relationship woes.

Though I don't want to be an album spoiler, New Amerykah is a thought-provoking album that challenges the mind to new things. If you recall her "Live" album, she says all she ever does is "give life to new things."

"New Amerykah" might not be as commercially successful or it might not sell millions of records -- like Badu really cares - but it will inspire lives to take different paths other than the ones they see before them.

After her five-year absence, she is doing things the way she wants to. She gives Amerykah the promise that her music will help uplift people for many years to come while continuing to show that she's still the Grambling alumna who wants everyone to remember: "Keep in mind I'm an artist and I'm sensitive about my s--t."

Grade: 4.5 out of 5

{moshaloscan badu_album} Reviews reflect the opinions of the individual writers and do not represent the views of Black College Wire. DeEric M. Henry is editor-in-chief of The Gramblinite, the Grambling State University student

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