

Episode 24: What Lil Nas X Wants

I've said before on this podcast that I'm terrible at music, and I'm big enough to admit that at least part of that is because I am getting older. Nothing sounds as good as it did when I was 16, which is a phenomenon so common that they've actually conducted studies to work out why that is. It's something to do with memory, experience and a thing called the reminiscence bump, but none of that really matters because all my friends are also roughly my age. So now, when we get together, we just play things from 2006 again say things like "are we getting older? I think we're getting older?" until one of us gets tired and has to go home.

Mostly what I'm concerned about with ageing and music is that someone will pull a Greta Van Fleet/ Led Zeppelin scenario but for like... My Chemical Romance or something. Where 30 years from now I'll wake up and there'll be some kids in eye shadow and goth marching band uniforms doing something that sounds suspiciously like The Black Parade but isn't. And then if I bring it up, a bunch of kids will call me old and out of touch on the internet. And I'm really only concerned about that because if it happens far enough into the future, I'll already be losing my marbles and it'll be the final dimming of the gaslights needed for me to go off the deep end and be wheeled away into a home.

I do try to pay a little bit of attention to what the kids are doing, and while I'm not convinced that anyone will ever top the 2006 emo wave for me sonically, there is one thing that transcends time and space, and that's some gay shit. Which is why I want to talk about Lil Nas X's album, *Montero*, which is both gay and a work of art.

I'm Alex. This is Pop Culture Boner, the podcast edition, and today, I'm thinking about Lil Nas X.

Montero Lamar Hill, better known by his stage name Lil Nas X, is a 22-year-old rapper from Georgia who hit it big in late 2019 with his viral hit *Old Town Road*, which featured Billy Ray Cyrus and spent a record-breaking 19 weeks at number one on the Billboard Hottest 100. Enough of an achievement for you to have at least heard him playing in the background somewhere but if you don't keep up with 20-something year old rappers, you might instead know Lil Nas X from the digital outrage mill. The outrage has come from a few different directions – first it was from genre purists who thought *Old Town Road* was too rap for the country charts; then it was from industry gatekeepers convinced he was too instantly successful to be a real artist; then it was from conservatives upset that he might be gay; then same again when it turned out he was gay; then same

again when it turned out he wasn't ashamed about exactly how gay he was; then it came from Christian lobby groups upset that he was twerking on the devil; then from Christian lobby groups and beyond who were upset he wasn't sorry about twerking on the devil; and then just a couple of days ago, he released a music video that pretty explicitly features some gay sex in a football locker room and while I haven't checked but I'm sure there's some outraged folk somewhere.

To his credit, Lil Nas X is extremely good at both courting outrage and responding to it. We've actually touched on his zippy ability with a one-liner before when talking about how he responds to allegations of being an industry plant (namely, by agreeing that he is indeed an industry plant). And while I may not be especially good at talking about music, I am great at enjoying a bit of outrage and being gay. Lil Nas X and I have that in common. So, on that qualification alone I thought we could dive into some gay music history to see where we're at culturally with regards to out musicians and genre, and where we're going; and then take a look at the album *Montero* itself. You get to hear me confidently say things like "genre-spanning", and "masterfully produced" as though I have any real conceptions of what those things mean, and am not just solely basing my opinion on the fact that I think it sounds good and also that some of the songs have fun electric guitar riffs. Let's get into it shall we?

I thought an interesting jump off point for talking about Lil Nas X might be the controversy that lit a small fire under his career to begin with – and that's the

booting of his debut track *Old Town Road* from the Billboard Hot Country charts back in 2019. Now, *Old Town Road* is built out of a sample of a Nine Inch Nails song, that gives it this weird haunting feel, and features lyrics like: "My life is a movie/ Bull riding and boobies/ Cowboy hat from Gucci/ Wrangler on my booty." At the time, Billboard told Rolling Stone that "When determining genres, a few factors are examined, but first and foremost is a musical composition. While "*Old Town Road*" incorporates references to country and cowboy imagery, it does not embrace enough elements of today's country music to chart in its current version." In response, Lil Nas X put Billy Ray Cyrus on the track, which was a smart little fuck you, and something that would add to its meme-ability, which was already seeing it burn through Tik Tok like a wildfire.

Despite vehement denials of racism by Billboard, the removal of the song sparked a public conversation about race and country music that unfurled into extended deep dives into the unacknowledged contributions of African Americans the Western tradition, which now largely exists as white in our cultural consciousness. Did you know, for example, one in four cowboys was black, according to the Smithsonian? That makes Mel Brooks' *Blazing Saddles* more historically accurate than *The Searchers* based on casting choice alone. Just a fun fact I thought I'd throw in there. Anyway, the reason I bring up this particular controversy is that it really sets the stage for Lil Nas X to become a flash point for people who absolutely cannot deal with either intersecting identities, or intersecting musical genres. The latter is a site of contention that is

probably more fraught than we care to admit, highlighting issues of race, class and sexual orientation, sometimes inadvertently. So, the use of blended genres in his music became inextricably tied to his identity.

Then in mid-2019, following the release of his EP *7*, Lil Nas X came out, pointing to the lyrics of the song *Montero* and the rainbow on the EP's cover, saying that he thought was being obvious. When asked why he chose that moment to come out on HBO's *The Shop: Uninterrupted* he said, "If for me, the 'cool dude with the song on top of everything,' to say this at any other time, I'm doing this for attention in my eyes. But if you're doing this while you're at the top, you know it's for real. It's showing it doesn't really matter, I guess." Except that it does – in being open about the fact that it was difficult to come out as a hip-hop artist and that he'd tried to cover it with straight lyrics, or in revealing, as he did later, that he had intended to take the secret of his sexuality to the grave, Lil Nas X added another public facet to his identity that further cemented him as somehow being controversial. His position as a creator within a particular genre is once again tied in with his identity.

Homosexuality is something of a bone of contention in hip hop. Well, to be fair, it's a bone of contention everywhere, but I don't know if any other music genre has had such an extended scrutiny of the presence of homophobic sentiment in its musicians. No one's out here making a feature length documentary on homophobia in heavy metal, even though Judas Priest is right there and Rob Halford is an ageing leather daddy who's spoken

at length about the difficulty being a closeted dude in a metal band. I'll give you three guesses why hip hop might be under the magnifying glass (it's racism). But over-scrutinization of the genre itself aside, if you look up "homophobia in hip hop" you're presented with an A to Z of creative slur usage dating back to the Sugar Hill Gang. Eminem spent much of his early career calling anyone who would listen a faggot. Busta Rhymes once walked out of an interview when asked if the world could ever have a gay rapper. Migos all responded to the coming out of ILOVEMAKONNEN, calling it "whack". Most recently, DaBaby got swept up in waves of controversy after saying some wildly off base things about HIV/AIDS, and then doubling down on it when called out. The visibility of your friendly neighbourhood homosexual is usually highly contingent on whether or not the environment is welcoming, and this is no different for famous musicians.

Even with all the progress we're making (you'll note the actual public backlash for DaBaby's comments) we've still got hugely successful artists like Tyler the Creator releasing an entire album featuring some of the most heartbreaking odes to loving a boy who doesn't love you back ever recorded, only to pointedly never publicly address the album's content. Somewhat interestingly when thinking about my earlier point about genre, the more open he's become lyrically, the further he's pushed his not-insignificant production skills to blend pop, neo-soul and funk influences in his sounds. In fact, despite his album *Igor* winning Best Rap Album at the Grammys, Tyler himself said it should have been classified as a pop album. No such luck.

He's a rapper, so says the Recording Academy. I'm saying this, not because I want a sudden explosion from the closet, or for Tyler to come and explain line by line which boy was involved in which love triangle, exactly how that made his heart feel, and why that pushed him to revisit funk music, but rather because setting him side-by-side with Lil Nas X is a kind of neat illustration of where we're at now. It's safer to be out, but it's not safe. Even with a much more established career and fan base, and a myriad of other business avenues to fall back into, he's done some maths and a rumour-filled gap is better than the alternative.

The alternative, or one of them at least, is that you become a lightning rod. Lil Nas X has taken the almost the complete opposite approach to his identity and his music – there is nothing veiled here. While the album *Montero* only came out on the 17th of September, pieces have been slowly trickling out since May. The first release was the title track, subtitled *Call Me By Your Name* – I've tried really hard to describe this in a way that doesn't make me sound 100 years old, but last time I made an explicit sex joke on this podcast I had to explain what fisting was to my mum, and I'm trying to avoid doing that again. So instead you get: lyrically, it's pretty explicitly about a gay hook up, and features some delightfully graphic lyricism which I won't quote. The chorus line "If Eve ain't in your garden you know that you can call me when you want, call me when you need" uses biblical imagery to point back to the closet he's joyously stepped out of. And then, rather than releasing an abstract video with some titillating concepts, Lil Nas X just leant into it and made a video in which he gets sent

to hell to grind up on the devil in thigh high PVC boots, before killing him to take his crown. And this was the thing that sent everyone from his contemporaries, to pastors to the literal governor of South Dakota into meltdown. Words like "fight for the soul of the nation" and "agenda pushing" were flung around with such desperation you'd think he'd launched an army of twinks to take the Whitehouse.

Ordinarily, backlash like that – and the threat that you might lose those sweet, sweet middle-American Walmart bucks – is enough to send an artist back to making more subtle work. Instead, Lil Nas X first tweeted, "Y'all keep saying we're going to hell and then get mad when I do", and then geared up to release his next video. The video in question, *Industry Baby*, was set in a prison, complete with a nude shower dance sequence and the line "Tell a rap[er] I don't see ya, I'm pop like Bieber, I don't fuck bitches, I'm queer" – a line which both flips the script on the types of boastfulness you find in more conventional hip hop songs, and once again insists that his genre-breaking sensibilities are important to what he's doing. When explaining the line to Genius he said, "I feel like this was super important because I know like following *Call Me By Your Name* a lot of people expected me to like 'Okay, he's learned his lesson, he's going to calm down, he wouldn't do it in a song like this'.... And it's like nah, I'm going to keep saying shit like this. These lines are my life." And what's fascinating is that refusing to learn his lesson (or even acknowledge that there is a lesson to be learned) is working for him – putting all these pieces of his identity on display in a way that's simultaneously vulnerable

and tongue-in-cheek propelled the song up the charts.

Which brings me to the eventual album release. One maternity shoot, and a 2-minute video giving birth to the album later, Montero finally dropped with a list of features that included Elton John, Megan Thee Stallion, Doja Cat and Miley Cyrus. The only new full-length video so far is for *That's What I Want*, which features Lil Nas locked in a passionate tryst in a football locker room (with some very direct product placement from Durex, bless their opportunistic, safe-sex condoning hearts), only to discover, *Brokeback Mountain*-style, that his love is married with a baby. It ends with the Billy Porter presenting a wedding dress-clad Lil Nas with a guitar. The song itself has a perfect, catchy chorus and soaring vocals and I predict it'll do about as well as other singles he's released. As for the rest of the album, I'm going to go right ahead and use some of those words I mentioned in the opening – it's genre spanning, pulling in pop and rock influences next to very slick trap and hip-hop stylings. *Lost in the Citadel* has a delightful pop-punk hook and the emo lyricism to match with the chorus "I need some time to get up and get off the floor". *Life After Salem* is one of my favourites, with a disjointed, industrial sound. At one point the album even tickles something a little country/ folk-y with *Am I Dreaming?* Well, it sounds like that to me, a person who knows nothing about music. Lyrically, Montero is front-weighted with the types of songs that will climb a chart no problem, including *Industry Baby* and *Call Me By Your Name*, but after a fun little existential crisis mid-album, it starts to deal with more

emotionally heavy material about the nature of fame and lost love. And it's good! The reviews are overwhelmingly positive, if a little surprised at his range. Even after he broke every possible rule about what he was doing and who he was supposed to be, it's still resulted in critical acclaim.

I think the beautiful thing about all the controversy surrounding Lil Nas X is that he's not treating his identity as controversial at all. Before people assigned a big neon sign to him that said "Someone call Fox News, this gay kid's on the country charts" he was just a guy in his bedroom making music and figuring himself out. He worked hard to get *Old Town Road* noticed, and the spotlight drawn by now and future outrages, only served to attract a wider audience who were actually interested in his art, whether those are people who think you should be able to smash country music and trap together, or queer kids looking for multi-dimensional art that doesn't treat their identity like it's a tragedy. He wasn't necessarily responsible for the initial tethering of allegedly outrageous queerness to his musical output, but he's taken it and run with it like an absolute champion. While he takes time and care in his lyrics to acknowledge the pressure of becoming who he is in the spotlight, he's also clear about what he wants. Lil Nas X wants to be both successful and himself, and he truly believes, as he should, that both things are possible.

A little bit of a shorter episode today – not because I don't love Lil Nas X but because I have the attention span of a gnat and accidentally got side tracked watching Lil Nas X videos. It's not my fault he's



got exceptional taste. If you've listened to Montero and you've got a favourite track, you should talk to me about it next time you see me at the pub! Peace!

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Episode written by Alex Johnson and produced by Wes Fahey.

Theme tune by Wes Fahey. ([Soundcloud: lee snipes](#))

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