

KERRY IS... OUTSPOKEN

“When Beyoncé speaks, the world listens”

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She's behind some of the biggest female anthems in pop music's recent history, but Beyoncé's feminist credentials have been called into question more than once. Her particular brand of feminism, which becomes more central to her material with each album she records, has been described variously as fake, tokenistic, watered-down, or just plain smug. According to the naysayers, Beyoncé embraces feminism merely as a convenient marketing tool, all the while pandering to the male gaze with her obvious beauty, provocative dance routines and flesh baring outfits.

Funny that, because after watching *Lemonade*, I was left with the distinct impression that a man's opinion was just about the last thing on her mind when she made it. Unless, of course, the man in question goes by the name of Jay-Z, and I strongly suspect her apparently errant husband was not consulted on the lyrical content of tracks like 'Pray You Catch Me' ("you can taste the dishonesty, it's all over your breath"), 'Hold Up' ("what a wicked way to treat the girl that loves you"), 'Don't Hurt Yourself' ("I am the dragon breathing fire"), or 'Sorry' (spoiler: she really isn't).

This deeply personal 'visual album' feels like an extended therapy session, with Beyoncé, cast as the wronged wife, taking the viewer/listener with her on an emotional rollercoaster that loops through denial, disbelief, white-hot fury and grief before ultimately arriving at forgiveness, love and hope.

It answered some questions (that 'hot sauce' in her bag is a baseball bat, guys), and left us with countless more. And it isn't just her die-hard fans – the brilliantly named Beyhive – obsessing over *Lemonade* and exactly what it means. Of course, it was instantly seized on by the gossip websites and celebrity magazines that are still desperately trying to figure out who 'Becky with the good hair' is. But *Lemonade* has also been analysed at length by the *Guardian* and the *Wall Street Journal*. Even the BBC felt compelled to publish a BuzzFeed-esque listicle online; 'Five Key Talking Points in Beyoncé's *Lemonade*'.

There's no denying it: when Beyoncé speaks, the world listens. She's the most influential woman in music (*Forbes* made that official in 2015, in case it were in doubt), and while at its core the album is inspired by the struggles within her own rumour-plagued marriage, the star has also, once again, used the unique platform she's built to shine a spotlight on issues faced by black women, and to promote the work of other black female artists. Like the young Somali-British poet Warsan Shire, whose visceral prose Beyoncé recites during breaks between the tracks.

Still, it's not enough for the likes of rapper Azealia Banks, who accused the star of perpetuating a "heartbroken black female narrative" with an album that is "the antithesis of feminism". And according to Banks, Beyoncé isn't celebrating the work of her fellow female artists, she's stealing it. She

tweeted: "What does any of this have to do with the fact that she poaches art from other black women and pretends it's hers?"

I'm well aware that what I think has no place in discussions around the merit of Beyoncé's representation of the black woman's experience, but I do regard myself as a feminist. And I will say that comments like Banks' leave a sour taste in my mouth. If the whole point of feminism is the common goal of equal rights for women, then to waste time criticising the method one individual chooses to get us there is surely to miss it by a mile.

Yes, the conclusion we draw from *Lemonade* is that Beyoncé appears to have chosen to forgive her cheating husband and stay in her marriage (the final scenes are interspersed with personal footage from their wedding video and their daughter's birthday party). And yes, needless to say, she looks incredible throughout. But nobody watching this could be left in any doubt that Beyoncé is a woman in complete control: of her art, her message, and her life.

Of course, her circumstances are wildly different to those of 99% of other women on the planet, but Beyoncé's work has the power to provoke a global conversation. And with *Lemonade*, a rallying cry to women everywhere, she's chosen to make female empowerment front page news. I'll drink to that.



Kerry McDermott is the editor of Stylist Arabia



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