**Self Esteem**

**Prioritise Pleasure**

In the chorus of ‘Rollout’, the second single from Self Esteem’s 2019 album debut, Rebecca Taylor asks herself: “*What I might have achieved/ if I wasn’t trying to please*.” It’s a question many of us will be familiar with – dampening ourselves to get by at school or work, shrinking our femininity to be taken more seriously, staying quiet because it will cause fewer problems than speaking up.

Having achieved quite a lot in the past few years, Taylor is leaning further into the power of using her full voice. Introduced to the world as one half of indie-folk duo Slow Club, her talented lyricism and commitment to performance was always there, but shrouded in the very nature of compromise that comes with being part of a larger machine. When she went solo as Self Esteem in 2017, it was an opportunity for out-and-out autonomy, shedding past skins and striving towards glossy, behemoth pop.

“I just had such a desire to do what I wanted, and ‘Hot Pop Star’ was a digestible, succinct way to describe it,” she explains. “I have been an indie girl since I was about 13; I was exhausted at having to communicate that supposed authenticity. And so the first thing you saw of Self Esteem was me realising that nobody was telling me no anymore. I could make things as fun and as funny and creative as possible. With videos, shows, photoshoots...every time you've got an opportunity to do something, why wouldn't you do the most amazing thing you could cook up?”

As a means of re-introduction, *Compliments Please* made fortifying use of Taylor’s signature ingredients. Blending big melodies and hefty, vibrant percussion, it was pop with an alternative edge, winning praise from the likes of The Guardian and Loud & Quiet, filling a packed-out set in the BBC Introducing Tent at 2019’s Glastonbury and giving her reason to fulfil her long-coveted dream of being on Breakfast TV.

Fans were convinced that the record was a shoo-in for the Mercury Music Prize – when it missed out on the longlist, a brave-faced Taylor laughed it off, but deep down, the feeling stung. “I get tweets every week saying, 'more people should know about Self Esteem'- I make a joke out of it and it’s fine. But to be constantly told that something that I’ve found so freeing and exciting hasn’t landed yet because I haven’t had a great big smash hit…it’s rough.”

A global pandemic doesn’t do much to help this kind of second-guessing. Isolating at her parents’ house in Sheffield and further downhearted by the UK government’s advice for entertainers to ‘retrain’, Taylor’s niggling fears around her chosen career path suddenly grew teeth, taunting her for all that she was not. “I’m 34, trying to launch a pop career 10 years too late if we're being honest, dancing and dressing up in these little outfits doing all this daft shit,” she says. “I'm worried about it, you know? I’ve fought tooth and nail for it all, but there is still a bit of me that's like, would I just be happy if I'd done the things you're 'supposed' to do?”

Killing time by watching Peter Gabriel and Kate Bush interviews with her dad, this at-home crisis slowly evolved into an artistic recalibration. Self Esteem had always been intended as an umbrella title for all of Taylor’s creative endeavours – writing, painting, art-directing, even organising the all-female Instagram festival Pussy Pandemic to raise money for charity– but somewhere in all of it, she’d forgotten to give credit to the uniqueness of both her voice and career. Recognising that she could ‘go pop’ on her own terms, Taylor’s perspective on her situation grew brighter, inspired by the “serious artists” that had gone before her.

“All those people that went down every conceivable route, did whatever they wanted, had a hit and then not another for twenty years – that’s goals to me now,” she says. “It's been a game-changer for me to decide to have a discography, not a breakthrough. And that goes for doing authentic promo as well – ‘let's do this TikTok move to a song about sexual abuse’ doesn’t really work, does it? You've got to call a spade a spade at some point, I think.”

Holding onto this new sense of clarity, Taylor set about making a second record that didn’t throw her debut-album baby out with the ‘must-do-better’ bathwater. Honest disclosure has always been her forte, and so each track on *Prioritise Pleasure* handles difficult themes with nuanced perspective, comforted and counter-balanced with an array of rhythmic flourishes that speak to the eclectism of her experience and influence. The funk-pop shimmy of ‘Moody’ feels anthemic in its analysis of self-sabotaging habits (‘*Sexting you at the mental health talk seems counterproductive’*), while opener ‘I’m Fine’ builds a stomp-and-clap wall of solidarity,staking out defiant new ground. Making use of Taylor’s penchant for voice notes, the striking outro draws on snippets of conversation taken from work she did in 2019 with The National Youth Theatre, devising a short play with a group of young female-identifying creatives on the topic of consent.

“It turned into the most amazing month, sitting in a circle and having all these teenage chats,” Taylor says. “But every now and again, there would be some particular insight that would just put goosebumps all over my body.” One such moment was a story shared by a woman in her early twenties, whose fear of walking at night can be heard on the track. “*It sounds so stupid, but me and my friends…if we are approached by a group of men, we will bark like dogs…there is nothing that terrifies a man more than a woman who appears completely deranged*.”

“It sets the precedent for the whole record; like really, is that what we have to do to feel safe?” says Taylor. “I am so angry that I can't go on holiday alone. I'm so angry I can't walk home without someone freaking me out, or worse. And the idea that the only defence we have is to be terrifying is so wrong, but it’s as normalised in society as the idea of feeling heartbroken by a guy that doesn't text you back enough.”

Breaking this personal cycle of trauma-suppression, Taylor says, starts with laying out these instances of her personal experience – self-doubt, heartbreak, sexual assault, the urge to compare – and realising that one stands out as something that truly can’t be justified as part and parcel of life.

“What's the one thing that none of us deserve to have happened to us, but almost all women have had? But in order to fucking live and survive and not spend every day wanting to slay every man I see in the street, I've had to normalise it.” She pauses, finding a moment of clarity. “I guess this album, the reason it's so full of love for myself, is that I’m finally seeing that none of those things are my fault.”

Having allowed itself grace, *Prioritise Pleasure* is also a record of great joy. Working again with trusted producer Johan Karlberg [of afro-fusion trio The Very Best], it was stitched together throughout the pandemic in chunked sessions, the time between each batch encouraging Taylor to fully flesh out her ideas. Her ease and affection for world-building shines throughout - ‘How Can I Help You’ is a stalking, no-nonsense fuck you to those earlier-mentioned limitations of success, borrowing heavily from Kanye West’s ‘Black Skinhead’. It makes good on her long-term admiration of his work; “A lot of musicians won't admit it, but we're all just trying to rip off what we love.”

Similar can be said for ‘I Do This All The Time’, the records’ centrepiece inspired by Baz Lurhmann cult classic, Sunscreen. A spoken-word ode to all the frustrations and societal norms that cloud expectations of ‘correct’ womanhood, it gives the record both its name and it’s impressive scale, a tightly-held mantra for our comparison age: “*don’t be intimidated by all the babies they have/don’t be embarrassed that all you’ve had is fun/prioritise pleasure*.” If Self Esteem ever had a calling card, this would be it.

“Even in Slow Club, I wanted to do a Sunscreen 2020 - Sunscreen for millennials!’ Taylor laughs. “And I finally got to do it. I think that song is the best thing I’ve ever made; I stopped trying to do anything in particular and made exactly what was just happening and coming out. I know I’m not reinventing a whole bunch of wheels, but my quest will always be to make music that is as widescreen and as cinematic as possible. There's just no point in making music unless it's fucking beautiful, or saying something that makes you feel better and heard.”

So what has Rebecca Taylor achieved by not trying to please? A record that reminds us all of the importance of being our unapologetic selves, putting your insecurities out there in the hope that it can be the first step towards healing them. With *Prioritise Pleasure*, she comes one step closer to reminding listeners – and herself – that true success begins and ends with self-acceptance, telling your story in the way that only you can. If not everybody gets it, who really cares?

“No matter how progressive we get, no matter how many girlboss mugs I’ve bought, I still sometimes think, ‘Oh, I wish I could meet somebody’, or ‘I hope I still have children,’” she says. “I'm a bisexual pop star who has rallied against the system, and I still feel like that. I want this album to be a battle cry for people that spend every weekend desperately trying on apps and letting themselves be treated like shit by someone who's not that bothered, because they think it feels better than being alone.”

“I suppose this record is just me going, what if this isn't failure? What if this is actually pretty good?”

Pretty good feels like a modest estimation – in recognizing herself and others, Rebecca Taylor is about to make a whole host of people feel esteemed.

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