

ARTS IN REVIEW

MUSIC REVIEW | MARK RICHARDSON

Shania Twain Chases the Pop Charts

On her first album since 2017, the superstar singer shows little of the ambition and verve that made her distinctive

Shania Twain’s astonishingly successful run in the late ’90s and early ’00s was impossible to miss while it was going on—she played the Super Bowl in 2003, and hits like 1998’s “You’re Still the One” and “From This Moment On” were ubiquitous on the radio—and the era had tremendous influence on both the pop and country worlds in the years since. In early 1993, when she released her self-titled debut album, Ms. Twain was a promising but obscure singer who grew up poor in Timmins, Ontario. Later that year, she connected with producer and future husband Robert “Mutt” Lange, who had polished just enough rough edges from hard-rock acts like AC/DC and Def Leppard to turn them into chart-toppers. Together, Ms. Twain and Mr. Lange crafted three releases that served as a roadmap for how country hits could be leveraged into pop superstardom. Future artists who loved the

The latest from the early-aughts phenom mostly offers generic, overproduced pop tunes.

storytelling and intimacy of the genre but had an eye for crossover success—most notably Taylor Swift, who has cited Ms. Twain as an inspiration—took note.

This world-conquering period turned out to be relatively short-lived—Ms. Twain battled Lyme disease and a related illness that affected her singing, and she and Mr. Lange split in 2008. Her 2002 album, “Up!”, released in three different mixes aimed at pop, country and global audiences, would be her last studio LP for 15 years, until 2017’s so-so “Now.” After another long hiatus, she returns with her sixth full-length record, “Queen of Me” (Republic), out now.

The new set has touches of country here and there—mostly the occasional presence of acoustic guitars—but Ms. Twain seems most interested in crafting tracks that can compete with upbeat contemporary pop. One innovation she managed with Mr. Lange was to embrace structures that blended mechanized rhythms with rooty



‘Queen of Me,’ the new record by Shania Twain, is out now.

wink. Here, it seems as if she’s stepped into a pre-existing track, with words that don’t connect to her persona as music legend (“So let’s start wakin’ up dreamin’ / And dress up crazy like superstars / There ain’t no shakin’ this feelin’ / Tonight, we’re makin’ our way to Mars”).

Other tracks that want to be breezy and reflective come across as awkward. And they’re packed with the kind of vague yet pushy self-help affirmations that mar so much recent chart fodder. The dull “Best Friend” is one of several numbers where Ms. Twain adopts the vowel-stretching phrasing popularized by Lorde. “Inhale/Exhale AIR” is a meditation on air itself—“Taste it, don’t waste it / Take it all in while you can / Sail it, fly it / Skydive it while you’ve got the chance”—while the lightly percolating “Number One” is so generic it sounds as if it were written using artificial intelligence. Far too often, the songs land on the most hackneyed choice. See the hook of the glummy and Lady Gaga-like “Pretty Liar”—yes, it includes the phrase “pants are on fire.”

There are a handful of exceptions, where elements snap together into something so forceful and catchy it can’t be denied. The title track, with an appealingly bawdy stomp to it that brings to mind the force and charisma of an early hit such as “Man! I Feel Like a Woman!,” is a prime example. And “Got It Good,” which smashes a countrified acoustic strum into a disco bassline, is hard to resist.

But these moments are few on “Queen of Me,” an album that tries too hard to be liked. Sonically and thematically, it makes only the most obvious moves, which means it runs counter to what made us notice Ms. Twain in the first place. So much about her career, from her unconventional voice to her ambition to her willingness to experiment, stood out because it was distinctive and hers alone. But this record sounds like it could have come from anyone, and it will be easy to lose in the shuffle.

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ing Up Dreaming,” is one of a few examples. In her best work, she delivered lyrics with a mischievous

songwriting. Here, the computerized sheen that characterized her music during her heyday is greatly amplified. We hear this right out of the gate with “Giddy Up!,” a punchy country-inflected number about feeling good and embracing life, whose arrangement manages to sound both minimal and overstuffed at the same time. Every string on the acoustic guitar is processed to within an inch of its

life and every note is loud and in your face—the overall effect is grating rather than exhilarating.

Unfortunately, “Giddy Up!” hints at the blandness to come on the rest of the LP. Though Ms. Twain had a hand in writing all these songs, most sound like they were pulled off the rack, and could, with a modification or two, be sung by any number of current pop singers. The third cut, “Wak-

TELEVISION REVIEW | JOHN ANDERSON

A Long Con on College Students

There aren’t a lot of questions left about the past—or future—of Lawrence Ray: On Jan. 20, the 63-year-old was sentenced to 60 years in prison for extortion, racketeering, sex trafficking and other offenses. The U.S. attorney termed him a “monster.” After watching Hulu’s “Stolen Youth: Inside the Cult at Sarah Lawrence,” a viewer might think the prosecutor was being generous.

But there is a puzzle addressed by director Zach Heinzerling’s three-part docu-series, and it is the same one that has hovered over the case ever since it became news—how did it all happen? How did a then-50-year-old con man move into his daughter’s communal apartment at the prestigious Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville, N.Y., brainwash her roommates and create a cult-like situation that would persist for almost 10 years? How did the victims allow it to happen?

This is where “Stolen Youth” gets tricky—and absorbing and salutary—and becomes something other than the regurgitation of the sordid, sensational and expansively scandalous. At a time when playing the victim is au courant, what distinguishes the interviews with Ray’s targets is their chagrin, shame and

wonderment, even now, that they could have been taken in by a manipulative sociopath, one who had a nose for weakness and a perverse appetite for power.

They admit they were in a cult, though one of the more valuable points made by Mr. Heinzerling’s series is that when you are in a cult you don’t necessarily know it.

The group of roommates, who had become close during their freshman year in 2009, decided to live together, lucking into residential housing in a complex called Slonim Woods, which lay on the periphery of the campus and was thus relatively private and free from the hassle of noise complaints or intrusions by school security. (Sarah Lawrence



Lawrence Ray, above, and Isabella, one of the victims, below

says it never received complaints about Ray’s almost constant presence, hence its lack of action.)

Ray’s daughter, Talia, brought her father into the house with the plea that he’d just been released from prison and the young people interviewed—who do not include Talia—admit to being seduced by Ray’s stories, his fictitious résumé and a philosophy of life he called “Quest for Potential.” A few of the roommates were appalled from the outset—a friend named Raven says she knew Ray was malignant from the get-go and broke away from the group. (Their full names are a matter of public record—roommate Daniel Barban Levin has written a memoir about the case titled “Slonim Woods 9”—but

Mr. Heinzerling uses first names only throughout.) Others were more susceptible, it’s clear, and surrendered their good sense and self-confidence even as Ray’s tactics became more cruel and exploitative.

How bad was it? Much of what went on in the case would be hard to believe if not for the cascade of footage that “Stolen Youth” has at its disposal—Ray apparently recorded everything he could, in order to defend himself later; the effect is quite the opposite. At the same time, Mr. Heinzerling exercises an unexpected delicacy regarding the abuses his subjects suffered: What came out at trial sounds considerably worse than what comes out in the film, the director perhaps unwilling to retraumatize his subjects. What we get from the narrative is tough enough without embellishment, or belaboring. But by taking such care not to sensationalize what he has, Mr. Heinzerling presents a sometimes dryly formal account of what happened, the accompanying danger being that many of Ray’s crimes could be seen as adults simply making bad choices or

exercising bad judgment.

Step back, however, and the story is rife with coercion, violence and lunacy. Ray’s conspiracy theories involving Bernard Kerik, the disgraced former New York police commissioner, are framed as just one example of his manipulative paranoia. (Mr. Kerik appears in the series, acknowledges that the two men were once close friends, but says that in light of Ray’s subsequent crimes he clearly really knew nothing about him.) Ray convinced several of the students who were still in school to live with him in an Upper East Side

apartment that wasn’t his, kept a running tab of the “damage” they inflicted on his belongings and billed them accordingly; one young woman became an escort so she could pay him back, we’re told.

That Ray’s “followers,” if you can call them that, were in a state of madness is something they concede; two are interviewed after his arrest and appear still to be in thrall to him. What were Ray’s motives? Unclear. “That’s what drove me crazy,” says Raven. “I couldn’t see what he was getting out of it.” Others were too blinded to ask. “He gave me no reason to question his good intentions,” says Santos, who brought his two sisters into Ray’s sphere of influence, saw his entire family nearly destroyed and spends much of his time being interviewed with his head hanging down toward the floor.

Stolen Youth: Inside the Cult at Sarah Lawrence
Thursday, Hulu

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LOUIE BAWIS

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