

Charli XCX's *Brat*: Superficial posturing instead of genuine opposition

Nick Barrickman
13 August 2024

Charli XCX's lime green-covered album *Brat* (released June 7 on Atlantic Records) has gone viral throughout the social media universe and more broadly. The album has been highly successful in both the United Kingdom and North America, the top-selling album of the UK-based singer's career. Its ubiquity has sparked the term "brat summer," while online aggregator Metacritic has declared it the 16th-highest-rated album of all time, based on reviews.

In July, to cash in on the hype the album has generated, the election campaign of Vice President Kamala Harris, the Democratic Party presidential candidate, adopted the album's recognizable, green-colored tint on its social media accounts (more on this below).

The hyper-produced pop singer postures, unconvincingly, as an "anti-mainstream" superstar, seething with resentment at a music industry establishment dominated by lifeless and manufactured trash. It is for this reason that her latest offering has taken off, with its slickly marketed appearance aimed at the more disaffected layers of the population without saying anything truly insightful.

In fact, much of Charli XCX/Charlotte Aitchison's angst is directed at better-off peers and petty squabbling within her upper-class social milieu.

For instance, Charli XCX laments on "I might say something stupid," that "I'm famous but not quite/ But I'm perfect for the background/ On? foot in a normal life." The singer is, in fact, a headlining act on Atlantic Records, a subsidiary of Warner Music Group, with a yearly revenue of \$680 million, and has herself a reported net worth of \$10 million, placing herself well within the top 1 percent of most wealthy.

Likewise, "Sympathy is a knife" is apparently a reference to her rivalry with the pop superstar and entertainment celebrity Taylor Swift:

...I couldn't even be her if I tried/

I'm opposite, I'm on the other side/
I feel all these feelings I can't control/
Oh no, don't know why/
All this sympathy is just a knife/
Why I can't even grit my teeth and lie?/

Here and elsewhere on the album, a stomach-churning petty bourgeois envy and cringing before the ultra-wealthy is on display.

These and other lyrics are underlain by powerful sonic blasts of synthesizer and bass, hoping to lend an emotional urgency to her words. The results are thoroughly false: Why should anyone be moved by a multimillionaire pop celebrity awed at the presence of a richer celebrity? This is a level of self-pitying drama most could do without.

In other places, Charli XCX is as arrogant and selfish as multimillionaire and billionaire celebrities like Beyoncé or Taylor Swift. On "360," the album's opener and single, Charli XCX boasts that she is "666 with a princess streak/ I'm everywhere, I'm so Julia," the latter a reference to tabloid celebrity Julia Fox, who also appears in the song's music video.

Similarly, on "Von Dutch," one of the album's other singles and also a reference to a high-end fashion designer, Charli XCX again displays her immodesty: "It's okay to just admit that you're jealous of me/ You're obsessing, just confess it 'cause it's obvious/ I'm your number one," she repeats.

The musical backing that accompanies Charli XCX is often engaging: brightly-colored synthesizer melodies that manage to build in intensity. Likewise, Charli XCX-Aitchison is skillful at strategically arranging her words and vocals. The use of pitched vocal effects like autotune accentuate and add emphasis, while use of repetition on songs like "B2b," "Everything is romantic" and "365" manages to implant their lyrics in one's memory without becoming monotonous.

“Everything is romantic,” which begins with a live orchestral backdrop before developing into an energetic dance beat, has Charli XCX admiring beauty in “Winding roads, doing manual drive/Bad tattoos on leather-tanned skin: Jesus Christ on a plastic sign, mm/ Early nights in white sheets with lace curtains.” The lyrics tend to blend in with the undulating layers of synth, creating a dreamlike atmosphere.

However, these musings, of a generally banal character, find the singer on far more dangerous terrain as she tries to address more complex and overtly “political” subject matter.

Charli XCX dedicates her song, “Mean Girls,” a song about girls who “break your boyfriend’s heart,” to Dasha Nekrasova, a far-right provocateur and podcast host. The singer admiringly calls the latter “New York City’s darling” and “real intelligent ... she already knows that you’re obsessed.” For her part, Nekrasova has hosted Charli XCX on her podcast.

Nekrasova has recently posted disgusting images of herself doing target practice on a mannequin dressed in a Palestinian keffiyeh scarf in apparent response to protests against the Israeli genocide in Gaza. Her podcast has featured guest commentary from the likes of fascists Stephen Bannon and Alex Jones in recent years.

The singer told *Rolling Stone* recently that, while not “deeply invested in edgelord culture”—an online trend which focuses on statements meant to shock viewers with their offensiveness—she considers the latter to be associated with “deep thought,” which is necessary to make “memorable albums.”

While it is unlikely that Charli XCX-Aitchison holds the same views as Nekrasova, the attempt to boost the latter’s profile as something as superficial as a “mean girl” is deeply misguided.

This approach, favoring shock value over insight and intelligence, is exactly the opposite of what it takes to make “memorable albums.” Likewise, under conditions in which the far right has become increasingly normalized by the capitalist class, this glib approach is deeply irresponsible.

In this context, Charli XCX’s endorsement of the election campaign of Kamala Harris can be fully appreciated. After the latter’s social media account adopted *Brat*’s “green” album cover theme and produced a number of videos featuring Charli XCX’s music, the singer returned the favor, tweeting out that “kamala IS brat.”

In previous decades, music, film and other forms of

popular art were powerfully influenced by struggles against war and inequality, most importantly within the working class; they contributed, for example to the spirit of famous pop songs such as John Lennon’s “Imagine” (from 1971’s *Imagine*) and dealt with concepts such as universal peace and understanding, and a “brotherhood of man.”

David Bowie, from whom Charli XCX would also claim influence, frequently delved into counterculture, the criticism of fame worship (notably in “Fame,” the song of the same name) and other trappings of modern society.

Putting aside the limitations of figures such as Lennon and Bowie, why is there such an artistic, and, one should say, moral gulf between them and Charli XCX? The answer lies in the massive political, cultural and social counterrevolution waged against the working class beginning in the late 1970s and early 1980s, under the leadership of right-wing figures such as Ronald Reagan in the US and Margaret Thatcher in the UK, to smash the social gains of previous decades. This was accelerated by the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s and the capitalist triumphalism of unvarnished worship of “wealth” and “personal success” that followed.

In this generally hostile environment, many artists have focused inward. While this approach may provide useful insights, under today’s conditions it comes with a lack of any deep historical, social and political analysis that might shed light on individual pains and crises that artists—and people in general—are passing through. Under these conditions, the “inward gaze” has tended to become a means of avoiding these difficult social questions. Charli XCX’s generally banal and petty concerns are one of the outcomes of this process.

Charli XCX is very much the product of the last 45 years. Her posturing, use of sexual innuendo, glorification of drug use, curse words and obsessive references to personal crises do not lend her music credibility or insight. It fits comfortably within the lineup of fake personalities manufactured within the music industry.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact