Mitski “Be The Cowboy” Bio

Mitski Miyawaki has always been wary of being turned a symbol, knowing we’re quick to put women on pedestals and even quicker to knock them down. Nonetheless, after the breakout success of 2016’s *Puberty 2,* she was hailed as the new vanguard of indie rock, the one who would save the genre from the white dudes who’ve historically dominated it. Her carefully crafted songs have often been portrayed as emotionally raw, overflowing confessionals from a fevered chosen girl, but in her fifth album, *Be The Cowboy,* Mitski introduces a persona who has been teased but never so fully present until now—a woman in control. “It’s not like it just pours out,” she says about her songwriting, “it’s not like I’m a vessel. For this new record, I experimented in narrative and fiction.” Though she hesitates to go so far as to say she created full-on characters, she reveals she had in mind “a very controlled icy repressed woman who is starting to unravel. Because women have so little power and showing emotion is seen as weakness, this ‘character’ clings to any amount of control she can get. Still, there is something very primordial in her that is trying to find a way to get out.”

Since *Puberty 2* was released to widespread acclaim, ultimately being named one of the best albums of 2016 by *Rolling Stone, TIME, Pitchfork, The Guardian, Entertainment Weekly*, *New York Times, NPR*, and *SPIN*, Mitski has been touring nonstop. She’s circled the globe as the headliner, as well as opening for The Pixies, and most recently, Lorde. The less glamorous, often overlooked aspect of being a rising star is the sheer amount of work that goes into it. “I had been on the road for a long time, which is so isolating, and had to run my own business at the same time,” Mitski explains, “a lot of this record was me not having any feelings, being completely spent but then trying to rally myself and wake up and get back to Mitski. I was feeling really nihilistic and trying to make pop songs.”

We want our artists to be strong but we also expect them to be vulnerable. Rather than avoiding this dilemma, Mitski addresses directly the power that comes from appearing impenetrable and loneliness that follows. In *Be The Cowboy,* Mitski delves into the loneliness of being a symbol and the loneliness of being someone, and how it can feel so much like being no one. The opening song, “Geyser,” introduces us to a woman who can no longer hold it in. She’s about to burst, unleashing a torrent of desire and passion that has been building up inside.

While recording the album with her long-time producer Patrick Hyland - “little by little in multiple studios between tours” - the pair kept returning to “the image of someone alone on a stage, singing solo with a single spotlight trained on them in an otherwise dark room. For most of the tracks, we didn’t layer the vocals with doubles or harmonies, to achieve that campy ‘person singing alone on stage’ atmosphere. We also made the music swell louder than the main vocals and left in vocal errors like when my voice breaks in “Nobody,” right when the band goes quiet, all for a similar effect.” Not a departure so much as an evolution forward from previous albums, Mitski was careful this time to not include much distorted guitar because “that became something people recognized me for, and I wanted to make sure I didn’t repeat myself or unintentionally create a signature sound.”

The title of the album “is a kind of joke,” Mitski says. “There was this artist I really loved who used to have such a cowboy swagger. They were so electric live. With a lot of the romantic infatuations I’ve had, when I look back, I wonder, *Did I want them or did I want to be them? Did I love them or did I want to absorb whatever power they had?* I decided I could just be my own cowboy.” There is plenty of buoyant swagger to the album, but just as much interrogation into self-mythology. The music swerves from the cheerful to the plaintive. Mournful piano ballads lead into deceptively up-tempo songs like “Nobody” where our cowboy admits, “I know no one will save me/ I just need someone to kiss”.

The self-abasement of desire is strewn across these 14 songs as our heroine seeks out old lovers for secret trysts that end in disappointment, and cannot help but indulge in the masochistic pleasure of blowing up the stability of long-term partnership. In “A Pearl” Mitski sings of how intoxicating it is to hold onto pain. “I wrote so many songs about being in love and being hurt by love. You think your life is horrible when you’re heartbroken, but when you no longer have love or heartbreak in your life, you think, *wasn’t it nice when things still hurt?* There’s a nostalgia for blind love, a wonderful heady kind of love.”

Infused with a pink glow and mysterious blue light, the performer in *Be The Cowboy* makes a pact with her audience that the show must go on, but as we draw nearer to the end, a charming ditty recedes into ghostly, faded melancholia, as an angelic voice breaks through to make direct communication. “Two Slow Dancers” closes out the album in a school gymnasium, though we’re no longer in the territory of adolescence. Instead, we’re projected into the future where a pair of old lovers reunite. “They used have something together that is no longer there and they’re trying to relive it in a dance, knowing that they’ll have to go home and go back to their lives.” It’s funny how only the very old and the very young are permitted to indulge openly in dreams, encouraged to reflect and dwell in poetry. In making an record that is about growing old while Mitski herself is still young, a soft truth emerges: sometimes we feel oldest when we are still young and sometimes who we were when we were young never goes away, leaving behind a glowing pearl that we roll around endlessly in the dark.