You Can(’t) See Me

Narrative and Formula in the Music of Frank Ocean

“You may not like everything but you’re going to get something out of it," said producer and rapper Madlib, in an interview about his catalogue of music. This same sentiment can be summed up by Frank Ocean’s song at the end of his album *Blond/Blonde*, “Futura Free” when he sings, repeatedly, “Rocks on the beach/on the beach/on the beach.” The waves keep pouring in.

That’s where “Chanel” comes in. In this song, Ocean is trying to reach you— he may not want to know you— his music may not be about you— but he would like you to listen to him. On “Chanel” Ocean puts the listener in a place of acceptance, and disarmament, in order to get you to see him, see others, “My guy pretty like a girl and he got fight stories to tell," see others around you, to see “others” (arguably, LBGTQ members), to see himself (the bisexual), and to see yourself. To see, as he says, “He see’s both sides like Chanel.” Ocean is not trying to give you a bunch of fluff in a song, he is trying to give himself, he’s trying to give you everything, a good portion of himself, what you need, and get out. This is done by how he chooses to give his narrative. No one interested in seeng this need not press play.

Frank Ocean’s albums and singles are not for people—and they are. But now, listeners have to be present, wanting to listen, wanting an authentic experience. His music now is about inhabiting different spaces at the same time. And what does one do with that. Because his music is tough to swallow like a piece of steak on a toothpick offered to a vegan. It’s not an easy listen like songs were on his first album, *Channel Orange.* There are no leading themes, linear, sometimes one dimensional narratives telling you what do, how to feel, or narratives waiting to be finished. Many thought that’s what he was doing on *Blond/Blonde.* But really, he’s creating a portrait of himself through bits and pieces, parts and chains like papier-mâché—giving you the portrait of the man. What makes up the man? “I know you’re in there somewhere, can’t wait some/Something you, Somewhere out there…Trying to love the/Trying to run the,” he sings on “In There Somewhere” from *Endless.*“I wanted that Accu-rite in Colorado that Night/I brought trees to blow through/It’s just me and no you, staid up to my phone died” he sings on “Solo” from *Blond/Blonde.* These are what make up Ocean, not just the literal things that happen but the ideas, and what he is trying to get the listener to think about these things and hear how he thinks and feels about them. “Round your city, round the clock/everybody needs you/though you can’t make everybody equal," he sings on “Nights," also from *Blond/Blonde.* “He came up in Dallas/had no hazel in his eyes, had them sailors on his thighs, when his ladies show em/kept it faded on the side/he was seeing someone/he was dating on the side/he was seeing double” he says, on “Comme de Garson” from *Endless.* “Got one/straight acting/turned up like some plastic, ride," from “Chanel”. “I thought that I was dreaming when you said you loved me/I had no chance to prepare I couldn't see you coming/the start of nothing, new" he sings on “Ivy” on *Blond/Blonde*. Ocean, sheds light on his own values and personal philosophy, which create a way for the listener into his own thoughts, questions, stories, and memories about people in his life, stories of himself, and himself to give you narrative. Couple this with how he sings his lyrics—Ocean relays—he creates insights without needing to have anyone follow him, with declarations, rumination, telling, bragging, and at times simply saying his truth as a way to exist, that reveals what makes up the Ocean the public has had time to get re-acquainted with, and now know. He is not so strange or foreign—he is existing as himself in plane site.

Ocean sings about things that are what they are, things as they are, things that are what they are to others, what things are not, and by doing this is able to give you capsules of himself—he gives you the man, the myth, the unexplained, the narrative.

Ocean attempts to bring you into a world where white girls sniff horse, black and brown girls party all night, along with those white girls, black boys go back and forth between knowing and not knowing what they want, boys freeing others from the closet, and boys finding what they need in themselves. And you getting there would be hard to do had Ocean not lead you there. And Ocean does so by relaying to you. Many argued that his songs were not finished on his album *Endless*, but the entire work is a work leading up to an end. An end that released him from his contract with Def Jam and helped him to go independent. To be totally free of structure, of a label, of definition. The reason why the titles of his projects are called, *Endless.* *Blond(e).* *Chanel.* Forever crossing and not crossing.

If you’re a person who’d like to keep some stuff to yourself, have had fist fights with people, maybe mistrust people, find people to trust, maybe you mistrust other people outside of that, have had some things happen to you, maybe people have fucked you over, you’ve fucked some people over, and maybe you've gotten famous, maybe you have come out as bisexual, maybe you had that one love reject you, come back and you both reconcile, maybe you've h ad the whole world hate you, maybe you had a lot of people not understand you, and are made up of a lot of stuff, how else would you go about saying what you had to say? Bits and Pieces? Shards and parts? How else would Ocean do this? Ocean breaks down the expectation of narrative. He breaks down the relationship between the artist and listener, and shows that there is no freedom amongst the two, and that they are both slaves to radio, and narrative, perception, and what the listener is supposed to think. So come in and tell you about things and his life then he let’s people come in, and see, and make judgments on whatever they will, and then leave—to see, and possibly rave over what you found. In other words, he uses his voice as an instrument giving him the ability to connect and bond with people. Keeping them out while maintaining distance, while keeping a part of his story. He allows the listener a certain level of freedom; and the ability to walk away, even if they may not want it. To leave it there. What this does is create a more friendlier and communal type of performance and musical experience. He’s going to give you everything, portions of himself, but he’ll keep some for himself. But it’s all honest—at least some of it.

Do you want to do what you want to do, or what Ocean wants you to do? In Ocean's case, whatever is fine. On *Endless* and *Blond/Blonde* he is doing this. He’s creating ways for you to come in. He’s leaving things behind so people could pick them up, see, and follow if they want to. His videos, you can watch them if you want to. His radio show, you can listen to that if you want to. It’s exactly how he premiered “Chanel”—listen if you want to. Ocean wants you to get him, but doesn’t want to be categorized. He wants to be understood on his own terms, on his own level, on his own platform. He wasn’t the type to want pity or tenderness when he came out or when he took four years to record his albums and singles, and when he in a way, cemented his identity in the mainstream with the song, “Chanel”—he just wants you to get that this is who I am, leave it at that, and let’s move on.

What Ocean does is break down the expectation of the song, gives the listener him, and lets the listener do what they will with it. He makes you more responsible—makes you pay attention, when in other times, we will put it on the artist—by listening in an expectant, and leisure way— for saying whats going on. He breaks down the barrier and expectation between listener/consumer and artist, so that the dialogue between the two is only between the two. He does this so that you have your own experience with it. He does this to eliminate any record label ideology that comes in the presentation of music.

Giving has become Oceans new mission. If that is his intention, then, even if the person is simply listening, that person can’t get away from either Ocean’s baritone voice or his interesting insights, whether you want them or not. In every song and collaboration since “Chanel”(where this formula, was realized) he does this. It’s direct, inviting, honest, without ideas, and clear. Straight up. If any thing, the way Ocean sings and raps now feels and sounds more free. I’m thinking of the vocals on Calvin Harris’s hit single “Slide” that feel like the lyrics literally slide onto the beat, or A$AP Rocky’s “RAF," where the lyrics are communal in feeling, and the narrative is easy to digest and get along with, or on Ocean’s latest single, Provider, that furthers pull you into his world, without letting you leave yours. It is similar to the types of performances some of the greats like George Harrison, early, secular Aretha Franklin, Joni Mitchell, or James Taylor, have given—people considered singer songwriters, often still considered more serious artists and humanist artists—and whom we categorize as great and legendary, and accessible in a different way, which Ocean fits directly into through how he sings, his lyrics, and how he chooses to give his narrative. What you get now instead of before is Ocean, he himself. You’re not supposed to be getting all of Ocean, and you are.

Ocean wants to give you insight into his life and himself, and that’s it. He has no reason to do anything else.