Channeling Art Through Pain

Caroline Mahon

It all started with a blog post. Frank Ocean had gained fame after collaborating with artists like Justin Bieber, Beyonce, Kanye West, and John Legend, but his post kickstarted a whole new type of fame. After experiencing the atrocities of Hurricane Katrina at college in New Orleans, and moving on his own to L.A. at 18 in hopes of recording a few songs, the artist became an essential element to the hard-hitting rap group, Odd Future Wolf Gang Kill Them All; but the blog post had begun the process of making him a household name.

After pre-release listening events, journalist reviews of Ocean’s summer 2012 album, *Channel Orange*, suggested that the album’s lyrics indicate that Ocean might be either bisexual or gay. After the pre-listening events and before the album release, Ocean posted a file to his Tumblr that included a lengthy description of a male that had been Ocean’s first love. (“Four summer ago I met somebody. He was 19. I was too...It was my first love. It would change my life.”)

The post shocked the artist’s followers and the hip hop/R & B community. It provided a great precursor to *Channel Orange*, which came out six days later for an early release. Ocean made his footprint on the world of music by defying stereotypes of macho, homophobic hip hop artists. *Channel Orange* expressed the weight he felt as a result of his sexual orientation while also showcasing his genius-like musical ear. Ocean’s bravery and his musical brilliance combine to make for a great listen.

Complex messages regarding Ocean’s sexual frustration permeate *Channel Orange*, making the album much deeper than what comes across upon first listen. Listeners can play *Channel Orange* several times through and still pick up on new pieces of lyrical genius. Although Ocean doesn’t choose to be explicit about his sexuality on the album, he makes suggestions that prompt the listener’s endless interpretations. By choosing to be implicit, Ocean also argues that sexuality isn’t as important as good music. Who cares if he’s gay or straight? Either way, the music is good. The endless interpretations of *Channel Orange* prove Ocean’s brilliance in lyrical semantics.

For example, in one particular song, “Bad Religion,” the lyrics reveal heated frustration that suggests Ocean might be singing about a man, but also might be singing about god. Ocean narrates an impromptu therapy session with a taxi driver. “Taxi driver,” he says, “be my shrink for the hour.” He speaks to the driver about “an unrequited love,” in which his significant other can never love him back. They lyrics most obviously refer to homosexuality in the line, “I can never make him love me.” But the central message of the song hits home in the crescendo of a line, “If it brings me to my knees, it’s a bad religion.” The song could be interpreted in many different ways. It could mean that Ocean can never make a man love him because the man practices a religion that looks down upon homosexuality. Ocean could also mean that he could never make his god love him since he’s so bad at practicing religion. The lyrics might also suggest that Ocean’s religion is bad because it doesn’t accept his sexuality. The unrequited love could be between Ocean and his god, or between Ocean and a man. Whatever the case, religion clearly upsets Ocean. The interpretive song reaches a whole new level of musical honesty.

Ocean has several other pressing matters on his mind that add to his meaningful album. Class issues, a hip hop trademark, are one of his talking points. In “Sweet Life,” the upbeat melody contrasts with the lyrical disparity: “You’ve had a landscaper and a housekeeper since
you’ve been born. Sunshine always kept you warm.” Ocean seems to be talking to people that have privileges that he has never experienced. “Why see the world?,” he asks, “When you’ve got the beach.” People with money live a sheltered, unaware life. Ocean included another song, “Pilot Jones,” to address feelings he has towards drugs. He sings about a woman he was involved with that dealt drugs to him and acted as his “pilot” throughout his highs (“You knew what I was on. You were my Pilot Jones.”). Ocean used Channel Orange as an opportunity to express his feelings towards touchy issues like sexuality, religion, class, and drugs.

Ocean’s individual style provides one of the many elements that makes the album truly memorable. Ocean includes short buffer tracks such as “Start,” “Fertilizer,” and “Not Just Money,” that break up the songs and contribute to his signature touch. The short unconventional songs sound like commercials, which compliments the album’s name, Channel Orange. Ocean also showcases his unique style on tracks like the almost ten minute piece, “Pyramids.” The track sounds like several, individual songs, but somehow flows nicely together. The song has been greeted with open arms from listeners, reaching the Top 100 chart, along with his single, “Thinkin’ ‘Bout You.” Tracks like these set him apart from other artists, and make for an incredible listening experience.

Finally, Ocean’s ear for unique, beautiful music strengthens the album. His R & B/ hip hop genre alone sets the stage for originality. The genre usually wouldn’t reach the ears of mainstream listeners, but Ocean makes Channel Orange more accessible without losing his individuality. The album features an organ in the song “Forrest Gump,” a short recording of a friend’s mom in “Not Just Money,” and addictive rhythms throughout.

Frank Ocean has received an outpouring of support and applause since his album’s release. His single “Thinkin’ Bout You” has had lots of radio time, and he has performed on shows like Jimmy Fallon Live, Saturday Night Live, and the MTV Music Video Awards. He has received support and praise for his bravery via twitter and blog posts from people like Beyonce, Russell Simmons (co-founder of Def Jam Records), Elliot Wilson (a prominent member of the hip hop media community), and Tyler, the Creator (bandmate and friend from Odd Future). In his blog, Russell Simons wrote to Ocean saying "Your decision to go public about your sexual orientation gives hope and light to so many young people still living in fear. These types of secrets should not matter anymore, but we know they do, and because of that I decided to write this short statement of support for one of the greatest new artists we have." Ocean has deeply affected the world by being honest about his sexuality in such a moving way. The fusion of his honesty, his individualism, his brilliant lyricism, and his beautiful musical talent has landed him an unprecedented title in hip hop/R & B music.