



?Kala? Classic Album Review: A Global Masterpiece

Description

Released on August 8, 2007, under the XL Recordings and Interscope Records labels, M.I.A.'s sophomore album ?Kala? marked her definitive breakthrough into mainstream success. Following up her debut, ?Arular,? was no easy feat, but ?Kala? managed to surpass expectations, blending a myriad of genres and cultural sounds into a cohesive and electrifying package. Named after her mother, the album's title reflects M.I.A.'s personal journey and the broader themes of the record.

The album art features a collage of images that reflect M.I.A.'s global influences and artistic sensibilities. The cover, designed by M.I.A. herself, includes elements of traditional South Asian art, vibrant colors, and bold patterns. It's a visual representation of the album's fusion of cultures and sounds, capturing the chaotic and energetic essence of ?Kala.? The artwork serves as an introduction to the album's themes and sets the stage for the auditory experience that follows.

M.I.A., born Mathangi ?Maya? Arulpragasam, hails from London, with roots deeply entwined in Sri Lankan Tamil culture. Her early life was marked by the turbulence of the Sri Lankan Civil War, which forced her family into a life of exile and migration. This nomadic existence profoundly influenced her music, infusing it with themes of displacement, resistance, and resilience. Before her foray into music, M.I.A. was an accomplished visual artist, graduating from Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design. This artistic background is evident in her work, which combines visual art, politics, and music into a singular, compelling narrative.

A Genre-Blending Masterpiece

M.I.A.'s ability to fuse diverse musical styles and cultural influences into a unique sound makes her one of music's unique artists. The album draws heavily from South Asian music, featuring samples from Bollywood and Tamil movies, but it doesn't stop there. It weaves in elements of funk, African folk, dancehall, and electronic music, creating a vibrant and colorful work of art. Imagine walking through a bustling international market, each stall offering a different flavor, smell, and sound, yet all blending into a harmonious whole. This is the best way I can describe Kala. It takes you on a global sonic adventure that takes listeners on a journey through different cultures and experiences.

The album's production, handled by a roster of international collaborators including Switch, Diplo, and Timbaland, ensures a polished yet eclectic sound. The beats are infectious, the rhythms are complex, and the samples are ingeniously integrated. It's like a musical collage, each piece meticulously placed to create a vivid, dynamic picture.

Of course, some may remember M.I.A. primarily for her hit single "Paper Planes." This track, with its futuristic beat, clever sampling of The Clash's "Straight to Hell," and biting commentary on immigration and capitalism, catapulted M.I.A. into mainstream success. It was a track that resonated with listeners worldwide, earning her critical acclaim and commercial success. "Paper Planes" became an anthem, its catchy chorus and gunshot sound effects making it unforgettable. The song's inclusion in films like "Slumdog Millionaire" and "Pineapple Express" only cemented its place in pop culture history.

Key Tracks and Highlights

Three tracks on "Kala" stand out as exemplars of M.I.A.'s innovative style and thematic depth: "Bamboo Banga," "20 Dollar," and "The Turn."

- **Bamboo Banga:** The album opens with the stomping, Bollywood-sampling "Bamboo Banga," setting the tone for the rest of the album. M.I.A. boasts, "I'm coming back with power/ Power," and indeed she does. The track is a powerful declaration of intent, blending a driving beat with vibrant samples reminiscent of hip hop group Public Enemy. It's as if you're at the edge of a musical revolution, feeling the energy and conviction in every note. The track's infectious rhythm and bold lyrics make it an instant standout, drawing listeners into M.I.A.'s world.
- **20 Dollar:** This track juxtaposes the stark reality of global inequality with a hauntingly familiar melody. While the predecessor, "10 Dollar" in her debut album tackles the harrowing issue of teen prostitution, highlighting the exploitation and resilience of young girls who use their circumstances to escape poverty, with the chorus taken from The Pixies' "Where Is My Mind?" and, also sampling New Order's "Blue Monday," "20 Dollar" explores the disparity between the value of money in different contexts. M.I.A. mentions the cost of an AK-47, highlighting how inexpensive and accessible these weapons are in certain parts of the world. The lines: Like do you know the cost of AK's up in Africa? 20 dollars ain't s**t to you? But that's how much they are, underscores the harsh reality that in some places, the price of a life can be as little as \$20, the cost of a weapon. In Africa, \$20 can buy an AK-47, fueling conflict and violence, while in the West, it's a trivial amount. M.I.A.'s delivery is both urgent and poignant, highlighting the devastating impact of economic inequality. The track's layered production and thought-provoking lyrics make it a highlight of the album.

The Turn

: A slower, more introspective track, "The Turn" delves into themes of identity and self-discovery. The minimalistic beat and ethereal production create a reflective atmosphere, allowing M.I.A.'s lyrics to take center stage. She explores the tension between her different cultural identities, reflecting on her journey and the choices that have shaped her. It's a contemplative moment in an otherwise high-energy album, providing a necessary balance and depth.

The album maintains a remarkable consistency throughout its 12 tracks, seamlessly blending various musical styles and themes. Each song flows naturally into the next, creating a cohesive listening experience. The album's production ensures a unified sound that balances experimentation with accessibility. The only track that feels somewhat out of place is "Come Around," featuring Timbaland. While it's a solid song on its own, it doesn't quite fit with the rest of the album's global, eclectic vibe.

Lyrical Themes: A Voice for the Voiceless

M.I.A.'s lyrics on "Kala" are a blend of personal experiences and political commentary. She tackles issues of illegal immigration, poverty, capitalism, and the struggles of the Third World with unflinching honesty. Her background as a refugee and her observations of global injustices infuse her lyrics with authenticity and urgency.

"Kala" is rife with political themes, reflecting M.I.A.'s commitment to highlighting global issues. Tracks like "20 Dollar" and "Paper Planes" critique the disparities between the Global North and South, addressing the impact of capitalism and colonialism. M.I.A. doesn't shy away from controversial topics, using her music as a platform for social change. Lines like

"Little boys are acting up
And baby mothers are going crazy
And the leaders all around cracking up?"

- MIA on \$20 Dollar

are relevant in today's world especially those who've grown up in Zimbabwe and in most African countries where the leaders don't care about the people of their countries. They just care about money and themselves.

Many tracks on "Kala" explore themes of empowerment and self-identity. M.I.A. often portrays herself as a warrior, fighting against oppression and asserting her independence. This is evident in songs like "BirdFlu" and "Boyz," where she tackles issues of race, class, and gender with unapologetic confidence.

Throughout the album, M.I.A. blends her cultural heritage with contemporary sounds, creating a unique musical experience. Tracks like "Jimmy?", "Mango Pickle Down the river" and "Hussel" incorporate elements of South Asian music, reflecting her Sri Lankan roots. This fusion of cultures not only adds to the album's sonic diversity but also reinforces its themes of identity and belonging.

"You think its tough now? Come to Africa!"

You think its tough now? Come to Africa!
You think its tough now? Come to Africa!?

- Afrikan Boy on Hussel

One of the most remarkable aspects of ?Kala? is its consistency. Despite its diverse range of influences and styles, the album never feels disjointed. Each track flows seamlessly into the next, creating a cohesive listening experience. The production is polished and dynamic, ensuring that the eclectic sounds complement rather than clash with each other. This cohesion is a testament to M.I.A.'s artistic vision and the skill of her collaborators.

The samples on ?Kala? are particularly noteworthy. They are not merely decorative elements but integral parts of the songs, enhancing their themes and adding depth to the music. For example, the use of Bollywood samples in ?Bamboo Banga? and ?Jimmy? adds a distinct cultural flavor, while the incorporation of Pixies and New Order in ?20 Dollar? creates a striking juxtaposition that underscores the song's message.

?Kala? Stands the Test of Time

While the singles on ?Kala? undeniably set the stage for its impact, it's the deep cuts that truly make you sit up and think about the world we're currently living in. Tracks like ?20 Dollar,?Paper Planes?, ?Hussel,? and ?The Turn? delve into themes that are both timeless and strikingly relevant. These songs address issues such as cultural identity, economic disparity, and the impact of globalization – problems that are as pressing today as they were in 2007, if not more so.

Of course the album does have its radio friendly cuts. Tracks like ?Bamboo Banga?, ?Boyz,? ?XR2,? and ?World Town? are dance-friendly bangers that you could easily play at a house party. ?Boyz? pulsates with energy, its dance hall rhythms and vibrant beats demanding movement. ?XR2? takes a nostalgic trip back to the rave culture of the early '90s, with its rapid-fire beats and references to London's underground scene. ?World Town,? with its aggressive beats and politically charged lyrics, serves as a call to action, urging listeners to question the world around them.

M.I.A.'s fearless approach to music and her ability to address complex issues through catchy, danceable tunes make ?Kala? a timeless classic. It challenges listeners to think critically about the world around them while providing an irresistible soundtrack to dance to. Kala? is an album that feels ahead of its time, a testament to M.I.A.'s visionary artistry. While it may not be as immediately accessible as ?Arular,? its complexity and depth offer rich rewards for those willing to dive in.

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Author

simba
