

## **Harry Styles' First Debut As Solo Artist**

Sophie C. Knox

Department of Communication and Journalism, University of Maine

CMJ 100: Intro to Media Studies

Ulrich Regler

December 9, 2022

## Introduction

Harry Edward Styles released his first debut solo album on May 12 of 2017 (Coscarelli, 2017). As this was the first music he had released since his successful career in the band One Direction, no one knew what to expect from the young artist. Would it be Pop? Jazz? Rock? There was an immense amount of pressure on the young artist, coming from one of the most successful boy bands next to the Beatles, releasing a solo album would not be simple. The album, self-titled *Harry Styles*, is most commonly referred to as *HS1* by fans and the press. *HS1* consists of 10 songs and 1 single, “Sign of the Times”. The purpose of any music album is to present a group of songs to the fans of a particular artist. The underlying purpose of this album was arguably to get Styles back into the music scene again as an active artist. Additionally, Styles wanted to create an album that he could enjoy rather than what the producers wanted to sell. In an interview, he says “ I really wanted to make an album that I wanted to listen to. That was the only way I knew I wouldn't look back on it and regret it” (Coscarelli, 2017) The overarching theme of this album is to communicate Harry Styles’ complex emotions by portraying them along with his life experiences, ultimately creating an album that he enjoys himself rather than the music industry. He uses repetitive themes of romance in the form of heartbreak and love throughout this album to convey this to his fans as well as reveal his views on the world around him.

## Description

The self-titled album, *Harry Styles*, has many different themes and topics within all ten songs. There is heartbreak, love, usage of alcohol and drugs, and unhealthy coping mechanisms displayed. Unhealthy coping mechanisms as a result of heartbreak is one of the key themes that

is seen throughout the entire album, even if it is not the most prominent in each song. Even in the happiest of songs such as “Kiwi”, there are lyrics such as “It's getting crazy, I think I'm losing it,” that truly depict how lost Styles feels in his life. Despite this album having a wide scope, each song complements the other. There is a good balance of slower songs and more upbeat songs. Some take after the rock genre like “Kiwi”, “Women” and “Carolina”, whereas others are slow soft rock ballads like “Sign of the Times” and “From the Dining Table”. Harry Styles worked together with his guitarist and friend, Mitch Rowland, to write *HSI* along with various other producers and writers. Jeff Bhasker, Alex Salibian, Tyler Johnson, and Kid Harpoon are some of the other names who helped shape this album into the masterpiece it is today (Crowe, 2017). Between track placement and the complex songwriting of each song, *HSI* gives a good overview of the young artist's life and his values. Although Harry Styles wanted to create an album that was successful, he mainly wants to make an album that he was happy with and can enjoy while using his life experiences to give the listeners insight into his personal life. The one single that is presented on this album shows the artist's political side and presents his feelings about the world around him rather than his feelings towards his significant others, both good and bad. Because they are normally released before the album and frequently played on the radio, singles reach a greater audience. His first album is an indicator of how Harry Styles wants the public to view his music, along with trying to persuade more people into listening to *HSI* and essentially any future music he will release.

### **Analysis**

Aside from the themes of heartbreak, love, and substance abuse, there are other patterns engrossed in the album *Harry Styles*, such as different patterns of the rock genre. There is a

constant use of soft rock throughout *HSI*, as well as hints of classic rock, pop rock, and undertones of psychedelic rock. This push and pull within the rock genre embodies Styles breaking out of his past persona as an adolescent in a boy band. With inspirations stemming from iconic artists such as Pink Floyd, Beatles, The Rolling Stones, and Fleetwood Mac he created an album that honored his love for rock whilst also including pop undertones from his background in One Direction (Coscarelli, 2017). Heartbreak is the main motif that is found throughout this album. Starting with the first song “Meet Me In the Hallway”, a psychedelic rock ballad. In the first 10 seconds Styles writes “I just left your bedroom/Give me some morphine/Is there any more to do?” His unhealthy coping mechanisms are displayed within these few lines as he attempts to get over a heartbreak. He resorts to drugs in an attempt to “take the pain away” and numb the emotional distress caused by the absence of his lover. The fourth track on the album is a soft rock album called “Two Ghosts”. This song conveys the heartbreak caused by a relationship not working on either end because the lovers are no longer present in the relationship but rather “Ghosts”. Styles explains his longing for what used to be in the lines “Sounds like something that I used to feel/But I can't touch what I see/We're not who we used to be”. These lines describe the desire for the relationship to go back to the point where it was euphoric, whilst also displaying his understanding of how at this point in time it is lost. The next lines in this song embody how lost Styles feels due to knowing that this relationship has met its end by describing the relationship as “We're just two ghosts swimming in a glass half empty/Trying to remember how it feels to have a heartbeat”. The metaphor of this relationship as a “glass half empty” rather than a glass half full indicates how this relationship will probably not survive any longer and all hope is given up. Another song that presents the idea of heartbreak, and aspects of jealousy is “Woman”. This song is upbeat and fits the genre of psychedelic rock

while including elements of pop. This song begins with a drum beat along with elements of electric guitar constant in the background of the song to emulate the genre of psychedellic rock. This song describes these feelings of heartbreak and jealousy when Styles sings “I hope you can see, the shape I've been in/While he's touching your skin” these lines describe his ex-lover with someone else and how it is tearing him apart by seeing them together. Next, he writes “He's right where I should, where I should be/But you're making me bleed” describing how he cannot grasp that he is not in his lover’s life anymore and seeing her with someone else is wounding him or “making [him] bleed”. The last song that explicitly represents heartbreak is “From the Dining Table”, the last song on the album which is a soft piano rock ballad. Much like the first song in this album, it deals with unhealthy coping mechanisms but in a different form and is arguably an even more vulnerable song. The first line of this song is “Fell back to sleep, I got drunk by noon” showing the use of alcohol to try and heal oneself. Next Styles is frantically attempting to move on but cannot as he is constantly reminded of his former lover. He describes running into a “friend” that his past lover knows and discovering that he is her new lover, as this man is wearing Styles’ “old T-shirt”. This realization is followed up with the crushing line “more of what was once mine”. This line embodies how the loss of this relationship is making him lose himself as a whole. Finding out that even his personal items are being lost because of his lover relays the trauma that is instilled in him from this relationship. Styles includes personification when stating that “even my phone misses your call,”. This portrays that his whole sense of self misses her, even his inanimate belongings, adding to the motif of heartbreak and love within this album. This song continues to portray Styles’ raw emotions as a final wrap of *HS1*. While still incorporating different combinations of rock for a more upbeat happy vibe in this album, this

song leaves the listeners with an underlying empty feeling that the artist is portraying throughout the album.

### **Interpretation**

The themes along with the different patterns of rock that emerge through this album reveal what the target audience cares about when learning about the artist's life. To put it simply *HSI* would not have made any money if the fans did not care for the artist himself because this album is so personal, while still keeping specifics about the artist's personal life private. In an article from The Independent on Harry Styles' album, this is said “ ‘Two Ghosts’ will surely have fans scrambling to uncover any and all references to his love life”, although this is just an example of one song, it goes as said that fans will now speculate and interpret the song to try and uncover a deeper understanding of the artist's personal life. In a different interview Harry Styles says “I very much feel like writing is the way you get to say what you want to say and be like, ‘That's all I have to say on it.’”(Coscarelli, 2017) The artist does not like to elaborate too much on his music which signifies his need for privacy. Especially in a world where famous people are constantly exploited in the media. Styles tends to dodge personal questions thrown at him in interviews because he wants to continue to have a private life while continuing to be vulnerable and convey his emotions in his music. This causes fans to indulge even further because they are given so little about his personal life, not that it is their right but simply their fascination in knowing about the artist's personal life. Next, the repetition of the rock genre in different forms allowed Styles to include more than just love and heartbreak in his songs. In the one single on this album “Sign of The Times”, he uses the metaphor of a mother giving birth to a child with complications to continue this motif of love and heartbreak in his album, however in a different form (Crowe, 2017). This metaphor masks his actual intentions with this song which is to discuss

his fundamental views, to hopefully influence the listeners and make a difference. Styles is recorded saying “Equal rights. For everyone, all races, sexes, everything... 'Sign of the Times' came from 'This isn't the first time we've been in a hard time, and it's not going to be the last time.’” (Crowe, 2017) By the artist using the patterns of soft rock and love throughout this album, this time from a mother to a child, he is able to convey his views on the world to not only his fans but to an even wider scope. This is due to the song being a single rather than just another track on the album. Lastly, the patterns of love allude to the artist's personal life, which was often publicized in the artist's young career while in One Direction. However, now the artist wants to separate his personal life from what is presented to the public eye. To do this he takes control in this first album by being vulnerable and writing about his past/current relationships and life experiences without giving extreme detail. This signifies that he wants to be the one in control of his life rather than everything being a group decision like in his past with One Direction. Overall these patterns convey not only the artist's personal life but his social and political views to the public and reveal the audience's want to be informed about his life outside of the media.

### **Evaluation**

Despite *HSI* following Harry Styles' wishes in creating this album that he enjoys and can be vulnerable in, successfully launching his solo career, there are still criticisms of this album. One major criticism of this album is that Styles' songs were influenced a bit too heavily by his favorite artists. Although Styles wanted to honor his favorite artists and influencers there are some songs that can even be mistaken for his influencers. One example of this is the third song on this album “Carolina”, where the instrumentation embodies Stealers Wheel's “Stuck In The Middle With You” a little too much. In one article it is said that Stealers Wheel's even had to

check that it was not a sample to make sure there was no plagiarism (O'Connor, 2017). There is a fine line between being influenced by artists and copying artists, even though Harry Styles does a great job incorporating the different aspects of his music taste within this first album, there are certain aspects where he came a bit too close. Within the same article other songs were mentioned where this occurred once again, "Styles had already been confronted with some fairly petty accusations of "ripping off" tracks by Bowie ("Sign of the Times") and The Beatles ("Sweet Creature")" (O'Connor, 2017). This criticism of plagiarism can be a dealbreaker for some artists and could even end their careers. Thankfully Styles incorporated all of his own ideas within this album and includes aspects of his own style of songwriting and music that sets him apart from his favorite artists.

### **Engagement**

When combatting the biases of this album one would take into account the criticisms mentioned in the evaluation. The bias that Harry Styles is trying to be something he's not or is trying to live in an era of music that is not a part of his time tells the audience of this album that it is not truly "Harry Styles" or truly unique. However, when evaluating this media object one can find that these artists are merely inspiring the young artist and influencing him to put his own spin on the rock genre. The artist spent most of his childhood surrounded by this older genre of music because of his parents, which is to be expected as he is a child of the 90s and very early 2000s (Crowe, 2017). Because of this inspiration and his resources, he is able to create an album with a unique scope of music, especially for the time as rock and soft rock were not genres pop artists tended to incorporate into their music. Other biases of this album could include the fanbase of the artist. Many of his fans are younger girls which unfortunately causes many adults



to not take the artist seriously or even be open-minded to listening to their music. This goes for most popular artists not just Harry Styles. Styles mentions combatting this bias himself, as he calls out an interviewer who asks if he's worried people won't take him seriously because of his fanbase. The young artist says,

“Who's to say that young girls who like pop music [...] have worse musical taste than a 30-year-old hipster guy? [...] Young girls like the Beatles. You're gonna tell me they're not serious? How can you say young girls don't get it? They're our future. Our future doctors, lawyers, mothers, presidents, they kind of keep the world going. Teenage-girl fans — they don't lie. If they like you, they're there. They don't act 'too cool.' They like you, and they tell you. Which is sick.” (Crowe, 2017)

Although this bias is not of the album itself, it tells us a lot about Harry Styles and what kind of person he is. He uses the example that these young girls are our future, which brings recognition to his fanbase and what type of music he is putting out to the world. This also compliments his fundamental views that are presented in this album, specifically in the single “Sign Of The Times”. Overall this album may seem like a mass-produced album in today's society because of the artist's past and the amount of fame he has. However, when dissected, *HSI* incorporates an original take on the themes of heartbreak, love, and substance abuse, and the genre rock, which is influenced by many great artists of our past, catering to an audience greater than the artist's fanbase.

### **Conclusion**

When dissecting the album self-titled *Harry Styles*, the emotions portrayed provide fans, as well as the public, insight into the young artist's personal life while still providing the artist

privacy. In short, despite its criticisms, Harry Styles creates a notable first impression when releasing his first solo debut album. By using the repetitive themes of romance and love, depicted by his emotions and life experiences, Harry Styles was able to create a raw and original album that conveyed his personal life to not only his fans but the public.

## References

Harry Styles. *Harry Styles*. Columbia Records and Erskine, 2017. *Vinyl*.

Coscarelli, J. (2017, May 17). Harry Styles Interview: 'it's exciting to kind of share a piece of me that I don't feel like I've really put out there before'. *London: Independent Digital News & Media*.

O'Connor, R. (2017). Harry Styles Album Review: Eclectic Debut Sees Former One Direction Star Wear His Influences On His Sleeve. *London: Independent Digital News & Media*.

Caramanica, J. (2017, May 18). Now He Moves In Another Direction: In His First Solo Album, Harry Styles Makes A Turn Away From His Boy Band Fame. *New York Times (1923-)*

Crowe, C. (2017, April 18). Harry Styles' New Direction. (Cover story). *Rolling Stone*, 1286, 20–80.

Lawson, R. (2017, May 12) Harry Styles Grows Up, Sorta, With His Heartbreak-Drenched Debut Album. *Vanity Fair*