

Grace Jones. (1985). *Slave to the Rhythm*. Island Records.

Among the canon of Black Divas, perhaps none are quite as feared, reviled, and worshipped as Grace Jones. The supermodel, actress, and musician notoriously slapped Russell Harty on his talk show, burnt Dolph Lundgren's clothes, and regularly exposed herself to everyone from paparazzi to prime ministers. And through the apparent erraticism of her performance, a yearning futurism pervades her work. *Slave to the Rhythm*, Jones' seventh album, took the already surreal and transgressive aesthetics mapped out in *Warm Leatherette* and *Nightclubbing* and elaborated a hypnagogic futurism—a yearning for another *here and now*.

Slave to the Rhythm was released in 1985, the year after Jones featured as Zula in the epic fantasy *Conan the Destroyer*. The album's eight songs were written by and credited to Bruce Woolley, Simon Darlow, Stephen Lipson, and Trevor Horn. Much of the art direction and design was done by Jean-Paul Goude, Jones' then-husband, who directed the music video for "Slave to the Rhythm" and devised the album cover. *Slave to the Rhythm* was released on Island Records, becoming Jones' most popular album.

Slave to the Rhythm is built as a concept album; each of the eight songs is a chaotic interpretation of the eponymous title track. The style of the individual songs range from R&B, funk, and go-go, to dub, ambient, and circuit-breaking electronics. All of the songs are interspersed with interviews with Jones herself, as well as recordings of others discussing or introducing the artist; for this reason, the album's liner notes carry the subtitle, *a biography*.

Jones visual aesthetics manipulate imagery of robotics, aliens, machinery, and other futurist tropes. The sonic quality, too, works to imagine a distinct future; the first track, "Jones the Rhythm," sets the album's tone with a destructive and imposing vocal cascade which quickly transforms into a rumbling explosion. After sound has been transformed, destroyed, and quieted, Jones inaugurates her own sonic space with an industrial disco beat. The album formulates a kind of post-apocalyptic and dystopian soundscape in which Jones rules supreme: in tracks such as "The Crossing (Ooh the Action...)," Jones explicitly discusses her desire to be worshipped. The listener is, simply, a "slave to the rhythm." This positioning as a post-apocalyptic warlord evokes Tina Turner's performance as Auntie Entity in *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome*. In each of these instances, Black women performers reimagine and reinvent the world in radical ways, creating a kind of epistemic rupture; that is to say, the gleeful rejection of the world (as imagined by white supremacy and capitalism) brings about its own kind of dystopia.

Jones differs, in this regard, from other Afrofuturists. If Afrofuturism is, as Mark Dery initially argued, an appropriation of imagery from a "prosthetically-enhanced" future, then Jones' work is perhaps not Afrofuturistic. Her album is visible through a kind of sonic and aesthetic dystopia. In the music video, a robotic, metal head of Grace Jones rises above a sand dune. She reflects the android, the alien, the warlord, in a world destroyed. The future envisioned is hers and hers alone. We, the listeners, would do well to let her rule.

Comparing Jones' sonic/aesthetic wasteland in *Slave to the Rhythm* and its music video with, say, *Wakanda*, an immediate difference emerges between the stakes of each respective 'future.' In *Black Panther*, the people of Wakanda innovate, train, and fight to protect their world and their position in a shared world. Jones, on the other hand, rids herself of it. In this way, she also queers the ethical constraints of a reproductive future; the heterosexual, white, and patriarchal world are put to an end. The aesthetic constraints of logic, time, consistency, gender, and sense also go out the window.

It is perhaps this refusal and abandonment of a political future—a gleeful destruction of the oppressive *here* and *now*—that explains why Jones is seldom placed at the forefront of Black aesthetic or political production. In spite of her white collaborators like Goude (who is notoriously fetishistic of Black women’s bodies, as explained in his tellingly named book, *Jungle Fever*), Jones represents a world that is distinctly queer and Black. There is no room for Goude in the world that *she* creates. Her world is fully unwilling to engage in the redemption of the American, white, capitalist, and cisheterosexual political project. By means of a dissonant chorus, a rumbling swell, and the screamed word ‘slave’, we can see it burn. “Ladies and gentlemen: Miss Grace Jones.”

References:

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