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After He Cheats: Beyoncé and Jay-Z from **LEMONADE** to *Cowboy Carter*

by Katlynn Leon

On Friday, March 29th, Beyoncé released her 8th studio album, *Cowboy Carter*. This album consists of 27 cinematic records with a country essence and a run time of 1 hour and 18 minutes. This project is 2022 *Renaissance*'s sister, the second act of a musical trilogy. Thematically, both albums are reclamations of music pioneered by minority groups. *Renaissance* was inspired by house music as a celebration of queer people of color. *Cowboy Carter* was inspired by Beyoncé's Texan roots while spotlighting the overlooked contributions of black artists to the country genre.

While creating this album, Beyoncé screened a different film for each track. Each song is meant to be a short film. This coincides with the feature film length of her album. While every song has country roots, there is influence from genres as close as rock and as far as rap. This resulted in an LP with features that range from Dolly Parton to Miley Cyrus to Post Malone. Not only that, but the album includes KNTRY radio personas and spoken messages to introduce and set the tone for songs. All of this is to say that *Cowboy Carter* may be Beyoncé's

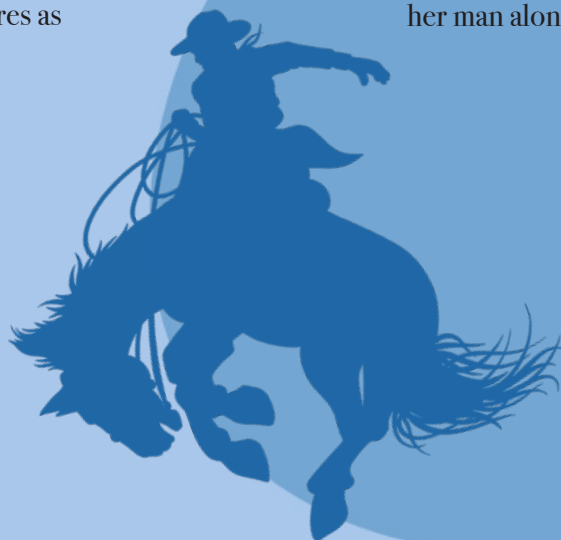
most ambitious album yet.

In my *many, many* listen-throughs, the tracks that stuck out to me the most were "DOLLY P" and "JOLENE." "DOLLY P" is a supposed voicemail left for Beyoncé by Dolly Parton, where she calls out the "hussy with the good hair." This is the first time since 2016's *Lemonade* that Beyoncé has referenced "Becky with the good hair" explicitly. It is also the first time since 2018 that Beyoncé has addressed Jay-Z's cheating with any vengeful or angry tone. Knowing this, the explicit female rage in Beyoncé's reinterpretation of "JOLENE" immediately struck me.

Cowboy Carter's "JOLENE" spins Dolly Parton's iconic country classic, by the same name, on its head. In Dolly's "Jolene," the singer laments about her lover's side piece. She is desperate for Jolene to leave

her man alone because he is the only one for her.

Dolly feels powerless and in every chorus *begs* Jolene to stop. In Beyoncé's "JOLENE," the chorus *warns* Jolene against taking her man. She calls her desperate and "a bird" while emphasizing the



while emphasizing the strength of her relationship. In line with songs like Paramore's "Misery Business" and Taylor Swift's "Better Than Revenge," "JOLENE" captures that same bitterness and female rage. Beyoncé re-interpreted an emotionally vulnerable song to be one full of grit, threats, and empowerment. With this, "JOLENE" marks a shift in Beyoncé's public opinion about Jay-Z's cheating.

In 2016, Beyoncé exclusively released *Lemonade* on Jay-Z's music streaming platform, Tidal (eventually, it would be widely released to the public and accessible on all major music streaming platforms.) *Lemonade* is a confessional album about Beyoncé discovering that Jay-Z was cheating and the emotional aftermath. This album also marks Beyoncé's first steps into the country music scene with "Daddy Lessons." The LP is incredibly vulnerable as it explores the many feelings related to infidelity and relationship difficulties. It jumps from sadness to anger to defensiveness and is an incredible piece of art. The most iconic song off this album is undoubtedly "Sorry," in which Beyoncé takes a bat to the windows of his car and ends the song with "He only wants me when I'm not there/He better call Becky with the good hair." It's vengeful, angsty, and it only gets turned up to a level twelve on the track "Don't Hurt Yourself." She nearly screams, "You don't love me deep enough/We not reaching peaks enough" and if that wasn't enough she ends the song with "You gon' lose your wife." Clearly, Beyoncé is pissed off. She's not even mad at Becky, she's mad at her man. She is feeling betrayed and unloved and created a phenomenal album with all of that hurt.

Two years after the release of *Lemonade*, Beyoncé and Jay Z released a joint album under the name The Carters called *EVERYTHING IS LOVE*. Undoubtedly, this was a stark transition in tone from *Lemonade*. On the final track of the album, "LOVEHAPPY," the couple sings/raps conversationally and sometimes over each other about their relationship. Now, let me break down what they shared about Jay-Z's infidelity.

B - "Yeah, you fucked up the first stone, we had to get remarried"

J - "Yo, chill man"

B - "We keepin it real with these people, right? / Lucky I ain't kill you when I met that b--"

J - "Nah, aight, aight. / Y'all know how I met her, we broke up and got back together. / To get her back I had to sweat her / Y'all could make up with a bag, I had to change the weather."

In this part of "LOVEHAPPY," Beyoncé's anger can be heard in her tone in that third line. Yet, Jay-Z must've been able to change the weather since the last line of the song is Beyoncé singing, "We came, and we conquered, now we're happy and in love." Since Bey is notoriously private about her relationship and personal life we can't know what happened in those two years, but clearly Bey and Jay were rebuilding an incredibly strong relationship.

After the release of *EVERYTHING IS LOVE*, Beyoncé seemed to have slowed down with music releases as she took on other proj-

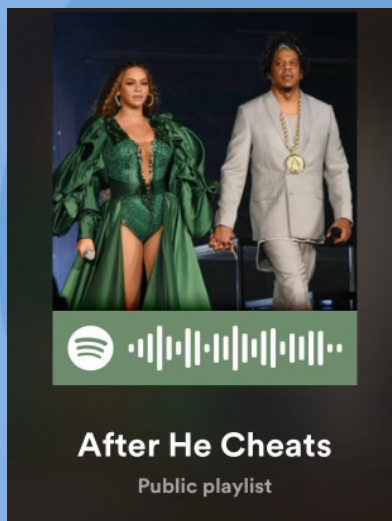
ects and perhaps continued to strengthen her relationship with Jay-Z. In 2022 (four years after *EVERYTHING IS LOVE*), Beyoncé took the world by storm with her release of *Renaissance* (Act I). The album is an incredibly seamless, high-energy, and upbeat listening experience as Bey explores a new genre of music. While there is no explicit mention of Jay-Z's infidelity, "PLASTIC OFF THE SOFA" is a beautifully intimate love song to him, Beyoncé's 'baby'. She sings softly, "Ah, we don't need the world's acceptance / They're too hard on me, they're too hard on you, boy". These lyrics reference the criticism Beyoncé has faced for deciding to stay with Jay-Z after everything that *Lemonade* revealed. Toward the end of the song, "I like it, baby" becomes "I love you, baby." In this album, it seems that all of *Lemonade* has been put behind them. Jay-Z and Beyoncé are happier and stronger than ever.

This takes us up to 2024's *Cowboy Carter*, tracks 9 ("DOLLY P") and 10 ("JOLENE"). While the tracks revert to a similar tone of anger and vengeance seen on *Lemonade*, it has now been placed on 'Jolene' / 'Becky' -- the woman Jay-Z had an affair with. It is explicitly said over and over in "JOLENE" that Beyoncé's relationship is stronger than 'Jolene' and will outlast her. It's a beautiful message that hits home with the line "Me and my man crossed those valleys, highs, and lows and everything in between." Six

years later, the anger on "Don't Hurt Yourself" has been resolved as she is being loved deep enough, high enough, and everything in between. On the surface, "JOLENE" may seem like the traditional narrative of a scorned woman. But on a closer look, the protagonist in "JOLENE" feels secure enough in her relationship to not feel threatened by Jolene, instead, she is simply annoyed.

Beyoncé has been in the spotlight since childhood and has learned how to keep her personal life private. It is truly the music that speaks for her and responds to the public. Over the past six years, her marriage with Jay-Z has been scrutinized because Bey made the difficult decision to release the confessional *Lemonade*. Through her music, she has allowed her audience to see how much her relationship has strengthened and with *Cowboy Carter* she has been able to re-examine that pain from a new lens. "DOLLY P" and "JOLENE" let the Beyhive into a new facet of their relationship and remind them that she will not be cheated on again.

Overall, *Cowboy Carter* is an extremely well-made and ambitious album. Beyoncé is reflecting, growing, and exploring. For me, it has the potential to be the same kind of cultural staple and cinematic experience as *Lemonade*. I look forward to seeing any potential projects/tours that stem from *Cowboy Carter* and I am patiently waiting for Act III.



Here is a spotify playlist with every song I mentioned in the article