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Review: Demi Lovato: split musical personality in "Unbroken"

 **REUTERS** By Chris Willman | Reuters – Tue, Sep 20, 2011

By Chris Willman

LOS ANGELES (TheWrap.com) - When Demi Lovato spent several months at a therapeutic center recently, she wasn't being treated for a split personality. Yet that's the diagnosis you'd have to apply to her deeply divided third album, "Unbroken."

For the first few songs, Lovato indulges in outrightly silly R&B/dance-pop that renders her distinctive vocal personality virtually unrecognizable. She may be only 19, but a song like the embarrassingly Bieber-esque "You're My Only Shorty" sounds like it was written for an even younger singer.

Then, midway through, she transitions to the determinedly mature, confessional balladry that dominates the album's far superior second half -- climaxing with "For the Love of a Daughter," a moving, vulnerable, angry screed taking aim at the dad from whom she's been long estranged.

These two sides hardly seem like the same artist. Did Lovato grow up halfway through making the album? Or did she lay down the serious stuff first, then get nervous and cut the record's ridiculous opening confections as a commercial insurance policy?

What's more confusing is that neither direction is consistent with her previous style. On her first two albums, Lovato made her mark as a belty-voiced teen rocker-chick, but on this musical makeover, electronic textures prevail, and there's barely any trace left of the rock leanings she was capably mining a whole two years ago. (So much for the one Disney starlet who bragged about her love of obscure metal bands.)

"Unbroken" eventually redeems itself with the more mature stuff. Just be sure to skip the first four tracks -- including "All Night Long," a wan collaboration with Missy Elliott and fast-faltering producer Timbaland; "Who's That Boy," the latest (and possibly lamest) product to come off Ryan Tedder's bubblegum assembly line; and that "Shorty" song she's destined to spend her twenties living down.

Once Lovato has gotten those would-be teen club bangers out of her system, things markedly pick up. "Lightweight" is the first song on the album that's not actually featherweight, giving her ample pipes sufficient room to stretch in the service of vulnerability. "Unbroken" brings the dance beat and throbbing electronics back, but it doesn't sacrifice the pleasing catch in Lovato's voice or her emotional openness in the process.

The metaphors in the tender, fatalistic "Fix a Heart" should raise eyebrows, given Lovato's pre-treatment history of cutting: "Baby, I just ran out of Band-Aids... It's like you're pouring salt on my cuts... You can bandage the damage, but you never really can fix a heart."

Two of the best tracks, "In Real Life" and "My Love Is Like a Star," appear sequentially late in the track list and show what a remarkable knack Lovato has for pulling off soul-rock balladry. These songs' respective producers, Bleu and Toby Gad, are the only helmers particularly inclined toward pairing the singer with actual bands, and the singer shines enough under their care that you can't help wishing these two guys had also been given the slots assigned to sausage makers like Timbaland and Tedder.

"For the Love of a Daughter" is sure to prompt the most buzz, especially among fans who wondered what was up when Lovato's long-distant father speculated about her issues to the press after she went in for treatment last fall. "Your selfish hands, always expecting more," she wails, flashing back to a childhood that apparently wasn't too Disney princess-like. "Lie to your flesh and blood/Put your hands on the ones that you swore you loved.../So young when the pain had begun/Now forever afraid of being loved."

Sounds like she made some headway in all those months of intensive therapy. Although non-fans may find its high dramaturgy maudlin, "Daughter" is the most striking portrait of parental neglect since "Idol" alumnus Kellie Pickler laid bare her feelings about her abandoning mom in the tearjerking "I Wonder."

With a closing remix of the teaser single, "Skyscraper," an album that began with rhythmic-pop pandering ends with an impressive further show of bravado. Lovato remains the most naturally gifted singer to come out of the Disney machine, so, after the collection's unpromising start, it's a relief to finally hear her rising like a skyscraper out of her own album.

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