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## TAKING THE CROWN: THE RETURN OF LILY ALLEN ++ INTERVIEW AND REVIEW OF SHEEZUS

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When Lily Allen answers her phone, she's on her way out of a meeting with her record label in London. It takes roughly three reschedules to get ahold of the British pop starlet for this interview, so I'm wholly unsurprised to find that when we finally do cross cellular paths it's during a jam-packed schedule, wedged right between an exec conference and a VIP stop to watch Beyonce perform at O2. After all, Allen is a busy girl these days: mother to two, doting wife, owner of a record label imprint, tabloid darling, Chanel muse, and, of course, one of the most infamous pop stars and pop culture commentators in the world.

In 2009, Allen announced an abrupt hiatus from her blossoming and brash pop career which, at the time, spanned two solid albums, including 2006's bratty ska-infused 'Alright, Still' and 2009's glistening electro-pop follow up 'It's Not Me, It's You'. For fans, the break came as a bit of a shock, but for the artist, putting the music on pause was the only way to regain a bit of her sanity in a world gone mad.

Now, five years later, the mouthy, no-holds-barred pop princess is back with a shiny new album and is ready to reclaim her crown. She's stepping back into the ring – and she won't be going down without a fight.

When did you decide you were ready to pop back into the studio?

Well, it's funny you should ask. It definitely wasn't like I woke up one morning and thought, 'I want to be a pop star again!' I got pregnant and had my first daughter – who is one of the most wonderful human beings to walk the earth, aside from my second daughter. But she was quite sick when she was first born and had to have a couple of operations. It was quite emotionally exhausting dealing with her illness and it took a long time. I think she was about 7 months old when she was finally started getting better. I was so exhausted by the whole thing that I just felt I needed to get out of the house for a little bit and do something else. I didn't really know anything other than writing songs. It wasn't like, 'I have to go make an album!' I just got back into the studio and wrote. Then I had my second baby, wrote some more songs, and then here we are! It made me wake up and realize how lucky I am. Every second of every day is so valuable.

Your new album is titled 'Sheezus.' What's the story behind that? Are you a fan of Kanye's work?

Well, you know, I think that in the record industry right now, it's all up in the air; we don't have any control over it anymore, and no one really knows what's going to happen. So I've approached this whole concept as trying to have fun and have a bit of a laugh. And I love Kanye West. I love his music but I also love him as a person and as a figure of modern pop culture. I love that he stands up for what he believes in. I really respect that. I loved that he called his album 'Yeezus' and I just thought it was funny.

How has the industry changed if at all now that you've returned since stepping out of it?

It has definitely changed. I think, you know, just like the world itself, the music industry is ever evolving and adjusting to the internet. There's definitely a lack of control in how people consume music. It's quite interesting how dramatically things have changed.

When you dropped "Hard Out Here," it became a somewhat polarizing modern pop feminist anthem. What really inspired the track for you?

Do you mind telling me the lines, and then working backwards? [Cackles.] You know, I read the comments on my Twitter and on Youtube, and it's funny how people attach visuals to songs so much that they let it consume the song. They think the song is all about the music industry, which it isn't. It's about being a woman in today's world, and the difficulties we face across all industries. It's just saying that it's hard, you know? We're not there yet, at all. I see that every day when I walk into my record company. There aren't many female executives. It's not equal yet, and I guess it's maybe because I am approaching thirty that it's usually this point in one's life that my friends, I hear, are moving up to the next levels in their jobs and careers. And I definitely see the men are progressing faster than the women. That's something I find disappointing and feel I want to vocalize in my music.

What do you think is the state of women in pop right now?

There are women doing things their own way and owning it that I really appreciate. Two of those people would be Beyonce and Miley Cyrus. I also love Rihanna and I love Adele. I think we like to put women into boxes. And if you're sexy, people want to call you a slut. That's not okay. Where I have a problem with sex in the music industry is when you see a person who has been pushed into it and is not entirely comfortable with it. Miley – I don't think we're under any other impression than that she's having fun and enjoying herself. She owns it! Beyonce is obviously very comfortable with the way she looks, and Rihanna... they're all sexy and beautiful women, but I don't think they use their sex to sell their music. And I think people find it difficult to stomach sometimes. It's like, we don't live in the 50's anymore!

Musically, what has inspired the sound of this album?

I think I've been listening to a lot of hip hop and R&B. It's not like I'm rapping, but that's the music I like to listen to. There are also little bits of country in there. But it's perfectly me in the sense that it's a variety of styles with running social commentaries.

Are going to be touring?

God, I hope so! Or else I won't be making any money! [Laughs.] I definitely hope a tour comes into it somewhere. Festivals over the summer, maybe Australia, maybe Japan...

Since this piece is for our Love issue, what or who are you really loving right now?

My little girls. I'm working so hard at the moment that I'm not doing quite as much with them as I'd like to. I just find myself staring into my iPhone looking at pictures and videos of them. I'm in awe of how amazing and beautiful they are, and how lucky I am to have them in my life. So yeah, my kids!

What advice would you give to them if they wanted to go into music?

I'd say, 'Pick up a guitar and stand outside of the train station and sing!' Because it's the easiest way to make money – and a lot less hard!



Lily Allen

SHEEZUS

DIVIDE ET IMPERA

## *Sheezus Review*

It's been quite awhile since Lily Allen has delivered a solid, single potential album for audiences to devour. Since 2009 we haven't heard much from the British pop star turned happy mother of two. Turns out she's been busier than we thought. And it only takes one listen to *Sheezus* to remind us how much we've missed her.

After a 5-year hiatus Lily Allen returns with a new album reminiscent of her debut. The single heavy *Sheezus* gives us Allen at her best: catchy songs with thick feminist lyrics that make any girl with half a brain want to sing along as loud as she can, possibly when she's out with all friends, spending all her money on over-priced drinks, as the mellow, "Our Time," details.

The long-awaited *Sheezus* gives fans a pleasant blend of her original ska sound with plenty of poppy electronica undertones. Songs like the fun loving drug experience themed "Airballon," will call to mind Allen's debut, *Alright, Still*, while others such as the sassy you're-not-gonna-shame-me-so-don't-even-try "Silver Soon," is more in line with the sounds of her second album, *It's Not Me, It's You*.

Allen still shines in the bad-girl-with-a-taste-for-expensive-things persona she's cultivated over the years. The title track of *Sheezus* embodies Lily's signature playful attitude stating, "I'm ready for all the comparisons/I think it's dumb and it's embarrassing/I'm switching off, no longer listening/I've had enough of persecution and conditioning." She continues to explain, "It makes me angry, I'm serious/But then again, I'm just about to get my period." The song's chorus includes a plethora of today's popular female artists call-outs ending with the proclamation "Give me that crown, bitch, I wanna be Sheezus." As always, Allen is able to show the difference between taking what you're saying seriously, not taking yourself too seriously.

Per usual, Allen songs carry a deeper message beneath their pop-tastic surface. While Allen's target demographic still seems to be the (mostly) young, single (by choice or not) ladies, don't count her, or the album, as light-hearted. *Sheezus'* first single, "Hard Out Here," throws the misogyny of today right in your face: "If you're not a size six and you're not good looking/Well you better be rich or be real good at cooking/You should probably lose some weight 'cause we can't see your bones/You should probably fix your face or you'll end up on your own." The song's closing verse further clarifies, in case anyone you missed the meaning so far: "Inequality promises that it's here to stay/Always trust the injustice 'cause it's not going away."

Overall Allen's lyrics certainly resound with feminist themes more often than not, but songs like "L8 CMMR" and "Close Your Eyes" remind us she doesn't hate men, she hates the status quo, making her all the more relatable to most modern-day feminists.

The interesting thing about Allen is she's able to say pack her songs full of heavy hitting lines, but still create a likable pop song. "Hard Out Here" and "Take My Place" are prime example of this on *Sheezus*. Her intelligence and humor is what carries the songs through the heavier lyrics. The clever hooks and catchy choruses don't hurt either.

It's clear the time and tender, loving care Allen's put into her third studio album has paid off, but will it be enough to make her a household name in the U.S.? While Allen has proven her worth in both album sales and critical acclaim with her former efforts, she hasn't yet managed the crossover success to of other British songstresses such as the late great Amy Winehouse, or the one and only Adele. But, there is no time like the present and with an album littered with potential singles, Allen's got a stronger fighting chance than ever before to make her mark across the pond.

Allen will be promoting *Sheezus* later this year with an international tour, including U.S. dates in the Fall. This tour marks a return to the U.S. and (fingers crossed) a successful crossover story.