

Music Review

Billie Eilish, *Happier Than Ever*

Darkroom / Interscope Records, US 2021

“Everybody dies and when will I?”,¹ asks Billie Eilish in her song “Everybody Dies”. The inevitability of one’s own death is one of the existential questions that the young artist explores in her new album *Happier Than Ever*. Eilish (full name Billie Eilish Pirate Baird O’Connell, born in 2001) is a US-American singer-songwriter who has taken the music world by storm in the last six years. She started her musical career with the digital mini-album *Don’t Smile at Me*, which was released in 2017, when she was just 15 years old. The EP featured songs she wrote and recorded with her older brother, Finneas O’Connell. Mostly for fun, the duo released them on Soundcloud, quickly gaining them a fan base. Her second album, *WHEN WE ALL FALL ASLEEP, WHERE DO WE GO?*,² was released two years later and became a great success, reaching No. 1 on the Billboard charts. *Happier Than Ever* is her latest album, released in 2021. It includes 16 songs totaling 56 minutes and 17 seconds and mixes musical elements of jazz, techno, and pop with either synthesizer beats or calm acoustic melodies.

On the album, Eilish reflects on a variety of topics including growing up, the inevitability of death, and past relationships and heartbreak, as well as sexism in the music industry. She states that she wanted listeners to be able to identify with her music and its themes and to feel addressed emotionally. She describes how the production process involved reflecting on her inner state and own experiences: “There was so much self-reflection in the making of this album that I think really comes through in the songs.”³ In light of

1 See lyrics at <https://is.gd/Xz3fzp> [accessed 23 May 2022].

2 The album title is all capitalized; see the music video at <https://is.gd/hprAGL> [accessed 23 May 2022].

3 “Official Vevo Interview”, <https://is.gd/Niyo7i> [accessed 12 May 2022].

Eilish's earlier albums, one cannot expect the new songs to be overly joyful or optimistic, but the album covers a range of moods and musical styles. As is typical for her music, the album touches on numerous problems of human life and does not omit darker topics such as suicide or depression.

Religious references, such as to the Devil or God, appear repeatedly in her songs. For example, the 13th track, titled "NDA" (short for non-disclosure agreement), deals with Eilish's music career and the associated downsides, including not being able to lead a self-determined life or always feeling lonely. In the lyrics, she compares her situation to entering into a contract with "Satan", and she uses this metaphor of dependence on an evil power to express her feelings of being imprisoned and under great pressure. Her vocals are accompanied by an electronic pulse that draws attention to the lyrics and allows listeners to empathize with her stress as they seem to listen to her heartbeat.

The theme of emotional and physical dependence also becomes evident in the track "Your Power". In this soft, romantic song, accompanied only by an acoustic guitar, she accuses her ex-partner of being the Devil and illustrates how she suffered from his/her/their "toxic behavior", which presumably references an abuse of trust and emotional dependence.⁴ Her emotions further become apparent in the corresponding music video, where Eilish is slowly being strangled by a snake. In contrast, the song the album is named after, "Happier Than Ever", shows Eilish's emancipation from these oppressing powers. The process of self-liberation is visualized in the music video as she ends up dancing on the roof of a flooded house, a moment that represents a kind of emotional reboot. Musically, this idea becomes evident when the quiet acoustic guitar turns into a loud electric guitar and the initially soft song becomes a rock ballad.

The 5th track of the album, "Oxytocin", addresses a subject very different from "Happier Than Ever", "Your Power", or "NDA"; it is a song about sexual desire, a topic that is still taboo. The lyrics refer to religious practices such as prayer or going to church, to create a contrast between unconventional sexual practices and a "religious" lifestyle, and they also show that even God – who is depicted as a woman – cannot resist feelings of lust and desire:

If you only pray on sunday,
could you come my way on monday?

4 See lyrics at <https://is.gd/7fxAx0> [accessed 23 May 2022].

Cause I like to do things God doesn't approve of
if she saw us
she couldn't look away,
she'd wanna get involved.⁵

But the religious references Eilish uses are not limited to Christianity. In an innovative song, “Goldwing”, she quotes in a high, soft singing voice the classical composer Gustav Holst, who in 1907 published translations of various hymns from the Rigveda, one of the oldest scriptures in the Hindu tradition. The excerpt from the hymn describes the appearance of a female goddess who seems to take care of a male person and leads him to heaven:

He hath come to the bosom of his beloved
Smiling on him
She beareth him to highest heav'n
With yearning heart
On thee we gaze
O gold-wing'd messenger of mighty gods.⁶

Eilish's voice is calm and accompanied only by background vocals reminiscent of church choirs. There is no background music, which sets this part apart from the rest of the song. Following this quiet section is a dark, pop-style episode in which she sings about a “gold-winged angel” that is “sacred” and needs to hide and keep its head down for “them” not to tear it apart. She combines the image of a “holy” or “sacred” female figure with the state of vulnerability, which addresses the topic of being exploited, possibly in another reference to the difficulties of young women in the music industry.

“My Future”, the 4th song on *Happier Than Ever*, adds a more optimistic note. It deals with growing up and imagining one's future life. The animated music video illustrates this theme visually: an animated Billie Eilish walks through a magically appearing forest during a rainy night, accompanied by a slow and calm melody. She looks up to the moon, which is reflected in her eyes (fig. 1). As the music becomes more lively, plants and flowers grow out of her footprints, and she slowly seems to merge with them. In the end, a tendril of plants lifts her up to the sky towards the sun (fig. 2).

5 See lyrics at <https://is.gd/C04LME> [accessed 16 May 2022].

6 See lyrics at <https://is.gd/tBjBG2> [accessed 16 May 2022].

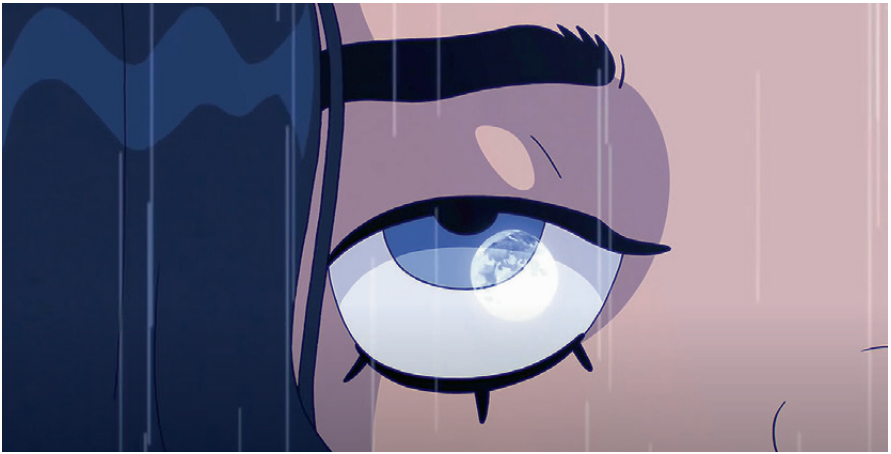


Fig. 1: Music video still, MY FUTURE (Andrew Onorato, AU 2020), 00:01:18.



Fig. 2: Music video still, MY FUTURE (Andrew Onorato, AU 2020), 00:03:49.

The video evokes the idea of paradise and a magical view of the world. At first gloomy and rainy, the night transforms into a sparkling, colorful day. In the video, Eilish creates this transformation by herself, exemplifying the creative power of her mind. This is underpinned by the lyrics of the song, which describe learning to be happy all by oneself:

Know I'm supposed to be unhappy
Without someone (Someone)

But aren't I someone?

[...]

But I (I), I'm in love (Love, love, love, love)

With my future.⁷

Nature is like a romantic version of her life, in which she grows and blossoms. Looking towards the sun, her future seems to transform from a dark and unknown part of her life into a paradise full of surprises that she is ready to receive.

While the album focuses on a wide range of topics, they all reflect Eilish's previous experiences as a young woman who tries to orient herself in life. The songs deal with questions that individuals face, such as loneliness or separation, and issues of social relevance, for example the patriarchal oppression of women or their sexualization. By referring to religious figures such as angels or the Devil, which are already associated with values such as morality or sin, Eilish creates a visual image of her feelings and inner life. The listeners immediately get an idea of how her diabolic ex-partner must have treated her and how she must have felt in that situation. Through this reference, then, the song draws on knowledge and discourses about religion that are embedded in society. The album also plays with stereotypical ideas associated with religion. "Oxytocin" not only challenges the traditional image of God the Father by using female pronouns for God, but also reflects how conservative religious ideas of sexual morality still fit into today's society. Therefore, for religious studies it is interesting to examine how religious narratives and symbols are used and transformed in Eilish's music, for example, to figuratively represent certain personality features or to create contrasting ideas, such as that of a secular, liberal modernity and conservative religion.

The combination of world-weariness, self-discovery, and attempting to find one's way in a world full of norms that dictate how to live one's life does not appeal only to young adolescents. The album deals with various problems of human nature with which almost everyone can identify. Eilish fascinates the recipients with an artful examination of the dark sides of our existence. By offering varied entertainment both in terms of music and content, she remains true to her own style. At her young age, she has already rightfully earned her place in the music world of our time.

7 See lyrics at <https://is.gd/w11pcx> [accessed 16 May 2022].

Filmography (Music Videos)

HAPPIER THAN EVER (Billie Eilish, US 2021), <https://is.gd/L3tvis> [accessed 23 May 2022].

MY FUTURE (Andrew Onorato, AU 2020), <https://is.gd/YsyQs2> [accessed 23 May 2022].

YOUR POWER (Billie Eilish, US 2021), <https://is.gd/hoYmPU> [accessed 23 May 2022].

Discography

WHEN WE ALL FALL ASLEEP, WHERE DO WE GO? (Billie Eilish, US 2019, Darkroom / Interscope Records).

Don't Smile at Me (Billie Eilish, US 2017, Darkroom / Interscope Records).