CULT ACT to POP SENSATION

Author: Jon Carmanica
Photographer: CZR-E for The Come Up Show
The Weeknd: The Rise of...
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The old Weeknd was comfortably, even enthusiastically, numb — the poet laureate of ruinous nights ending in bleary sunrises. His approach to songwriting, both in subject matter and production choices, was characterized by obscurity and darkness. But he began to wonder if there was another way. “I felt I had to change who I was,” he says. His new album, “Beauty Behind the Madness,” is the end result of a year’s worth of molting old habits, a creative upheaval that has begun to teleport him from the margins right to pop’s center.

By taking his old, gloomy gestures and repackaging them in ecstatic, radio-friendly arrangements, he has made one of the most sonically ambitious pop albums of the year, full of swaggeringly confident music indebted to the arena-size ambition of the 1980s, from Guns N’ Roses to Phil Collins to Michael Jackson.

Above all, it is Jackson in Tesfaye’s cross hairs. “These kids, you know, they don’t have a Michael Jackson,” he says. “They don’t have a Prince. They don’t have a Whitney. Who else is there? Who else can really do it at this point?”

In his dressing room before concerts, Tesfaye plays Jackson’s “Off the Wall” for energy. Musically, though, Tesfaye’s fixation with Jackson has often been obscured by foggy production and his reluctance to conform to conventional song structure.

The scene backstage last November at the American Music Awards, that annual gathering of pop perennials and idiosyncratic arrivistes, was carnivalesque: Niall and Liam of One Direction toddled about trying to snap a picture with a selfie stick, while Zayn, their bandmate at the time, smoked coolly out of frame; Ne-Yo was there in a leopard-print blazer two sizes too small; Lil Wayne was wandering around, alone, wearing absurd shoes. In the middle of it all, Abel Tesfaye, better known as the Weeknd, remained calm, slow motion to everyone else’s warp speed.

Scarborough was stifling, and he constantly plotted ways to leave. He dropped out of high school when he was 17 and persuaded his best friend, La Mar Taylor, to join him. They met the first day of high school — Tesfaye noticed Taylor’s pink polo shirt — and the two quickly became partners in creative endeavors and, eventually, self-destruction. One day they pulled up in a van at Tesfaye’s home. Tesfaye went to his room, grabbed his mattress, dragged it out of the house and threw it in. His mother watched him grimly. “The worst look anyone could ever have,” he recalls. “She looked at me like she had failed.”

Tesfaye and Taylor and their friend Hyghly Alleyne moved into a one-bedroom apartment in an old Victorian in Parkdale, an about-to-be-gentrified neighborhood that was populated at the time, Taylor says, by “students and crackheads.” They paid the $850 monthly rent with money from welfare checks. They were still teenagers, and they lived like it. During the days, they would shoplift food at a nearby supermarket. Some nights they would walk to the Social, a neighborhood bar. Occasionally, they would get into fights. Most nights, they would get high on whatever was around — MDMA, Xanax, cocaine, mushrooms, ketamine. “Kids,” without the AIDS,” Tesfaye said. “No rules.”

At the end of that year, Oliver El-Khatib, now the rapper Drake’s co-manager, posted that first batch of Weeknd songs on the blog of Drake’s label, October’s Very Own, and Tesfaye instantly became the subject of international fascination. Soon after, he retreated to the studio to finish “House of Balloons,” the first of three planned mixtapes, which he released free online the following March. Meanwhile, Drake recruited Tesfaye to work on his 2011 album, “Take Care,” which included versions of three songs Tesfaye says he had initially written for “House of Balloons.” Over the next nine months, Tesfaye released the second and third free Weeknd mixtapes, “Thursday” and “Echoes of Silence.” The combined result was something like “American Psycho” with a soundtrack by Prince, sonically gauzy and verbally blunt, with Tesfaye cast as both villain and victim.

As the first R&B artist to claim the top three spots on the music charts, The Weeknd’s transformation from underground unknown to Pop sensation is complete.
His parents emigrated from Ethiopia in the 1980s, when the country was reeling from civil war and drought, and came to Toronto. They never married, and after they split up, Tesfaye’s mother moved with him to this dull expanse northeast of the city center. His father wasn’t in the picture, and after they split up, Tesfaye’s mother moved with him to this dull expanse northeast of the city center. His father wasn’t in the picture, and after they split up, Tesfaye’s mother moved.

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Instead, over the last six months, the Weeknd has become one of the most reliable hitmakers in pop. “Earned It,” a soothing ballad he wrote for the “50 Shades of Grey” soundtrack with, among others, Stephan Moccio, a songwriter who has worked with Celine Dion, went to No.3 on the Billboard Hot 100. By mid-July, Tesfaye had three songs in the Top 20 — “Earned It,” as well as the first two singles from the new album, “The Hills” and “Can’t Feel My Face.” Radio, so long hostile to his voice, had fully embraced him, yanking Tesfaye from the dark into the light.
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Allergic to these sorts of scrums, he found his way to his trailer to hang with his friends, five or so fellow Canadians, all of them art-goth chic, wearing expensive sneakers and draped in luxurious, flowing black. Tesfaye, 25, was dressed down by comparison, in a black corduroy jacket and paint-splattered jeans (Versace, but still). He stands 5-foot-7, plus a few more inches with his hair, an elaborate tangle of dreadlocks that he has been growing out for years, more or less letting it go where it wants. It spills out at the sides of his head and shoots up over it, like a cresting wave. Casually, Tesfaye did some vocal warm-ups and sat indifferently as his underutilized makeup artist dabbed foundation under his eyes and balm on his lips.

He’d just had his first flash of true pop success: “Love Me Harder,” his duet with Ariana Grande, the childlike pop star with the grown-up voice, cracked the Top 10 of the Billboard Hot 100. He was scheduled to make a surprise cameo here at the end of a Grande medley. Until that song and, in a sense, that moment, Tesfaye had been a no-hit wonder: a cult act with millions of devotees and almost no mainstream profile.

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The Weeknd is the first R&B artist to hold the top three spots on the chart concurrently, making his transformation from underground unknown to Pop sensation is complete.
Even though he had just performed for an audience of millions, Tesfaye was still, to many of them, a total stranger. When he began releasing music in 2010 — murky Dalí-esque R.&B., sung in an astrally sweet voice, vivid with details of life at the sexual and pharmacological extremes — Tesfaye chose to be a cipher. The only photos of him in circulation were deliberately obscured; he didn't do interviews. His reticence was an asset — fans devoured the music without being distracted by a personality. Their loyalty was to the songs and, in a way, to the idea of the Weeknd. He was happy to stay out of the way.

Tesfaye slowly began revealing himself in 2011 with a handful of live performances. By last year, he was a fringe superstar, selling out shows at huge venues like the Barclays Center, the Hollywood Bowl and the O2 Arena in London. Still, he began to feel that he had hit a ceiling — a high one, and maybe even a sustainable one, but a ceiling nonetheless. The old Weeknd was comfortably, even enthusiastically, numb — the poet laureate of ruinous nights ending in bleary sunrises. His approach to songwriting, both in subject matter and production choices, was characterized by obscurity and darkness. But he began to wonder if there was another way. “I felt I had to change who I was,” he says. His new album, “Beauty Behind the Madness,” is the end result of a year’s worth of molting old habits, a creative upheaval that has begun to teleport him from the margins right to pop’s center.

When Tesfaye wasn’t high, he wasn’t happy, so he did his best to avoid coming down. And when he began writing songs, he found inspiration in that haze, penning lyrics about the dystopian, bacchanalian nights that he and his crew were having. The combined result was something like “American Psycho” with a soundtrack by Prince, sonically gauzy and verbally blunt, with Tesfaye cast as both villain and victim.

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Tesfaye was slumped in the back of his Mercedes S.U.V. one evening last December while being driven through Scarborough, a dreary suburban district of Toronto just a short ride from his luxury apartment downtown. The vehicle pulled into a parking lot behind a low-slung apartment complex, and he pointed at an upstairs window, to the flat he used to share with his mother and grandmother. “It’s a small apartment,” he said, “about the size of this car.”

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Not unlike Canadian superstars Drake and Justin Bieber before him, The Weeknd is taking the United States and the international music scene by storm.

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Taylor uploaded Tesfaye's first three songs — "The Morning," "What You Need" and "Loft Music" — to YouTube in the fall of 2010, posting the links to their friends' Facebook walls and hoping for the best. The clips were audio only, accompanied by black-and-white photographs of not-quite-dressed women. Tesfaye's likeness was nowhere to be found; you had to dig to find his name. He had wanted to call himself the Weekend, but there was already a rock band in Ontario called that, so he dropped a letter. His anonymity was so complete, he says, that his co-workers at American Apparel would listen to his music while he was working without realizing it was his.

At the end of that year, Oliver El-Khatib, now the rapper Drake's co-manager, posted that first batch of Weeknd songs on the blog of Drake's label, October's Very Own, and Tesfaye instantly became the subject of international fascination. Soon after, he retreated to the studio to finish "House of Balloons," the first of three planned mixtapes, which he released free online the following March. Meanwhile, Drake recruited Tesfaye to work on his 2011 album, "Take Care," which included versions of three songs Tesfaye says he had initially written for "House of Balloons."

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