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On the Borderline of Rap Pop

BY RICK LOPEZ

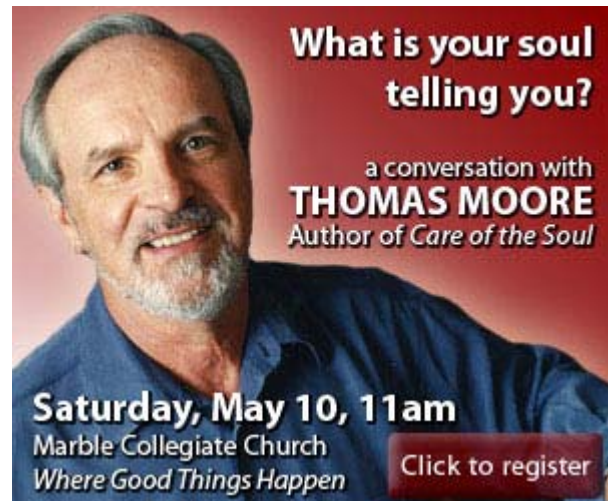
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The Material Girl is turning 50 years old, and she's rapping. Again. For her new album, "Hard Candy," Madonna collaborated with respected hip-hop artists Timbaland, Pharrell Williams, and Kanye West. But it's a precarious choice. Of all the twists and turns in Madonna's career, rapping was her second-most-flagrant failure, acting being her first. Is this the moment when she abandons her sense of age and becomes like her "Vogue" muse Mae West: a caricature of herself wobbling onstage in inappropriate costumes? And to whom is she appealing by dabbling in this genre?

According to Syracuse University's David Rezak, who teaches marketing and other aspects of the recording industry, going hip-hop is "a natural step for an

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artist who has successfully experimented with pop, dance, and rock. The rock hall can't re-induct the pioneers," he said.

"Hard Candy" will be Madonna's 11th album and her last with Warner Bros. It includes the recently released single, "4 Minutes," a hyperactive duet with dance phenomenon Justin Timberlake, who inducted into her into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame last month. The single resembles a Southern-style booty anthem — with rhymes such as "waitin' with 'hesitatin'." In the video, Madonna grinds against Mr. Timberlake, who's more than 20 years younger and who dated Britney Spears in the late 1990s. Notably, that was about when Madonna made her first foray into rap; the album "American Life" included raps about soy lattes, Pilates, employing assistants, and even grieving for her mother as a girl.

But this time around, Madonna has left most of the rapping to the professionals, according to those who have heard the album. "Hard Candy" includes Madonna's trademark odes to indulgence. "Give It 2 Me," one of the five songs she wrote with Mr. Timberlake, is expected to be a hit with clubs, though "4 Minutes" has just begun to hit it big. Industry insiders say there is reason to expect success.

"You are not going to be able to escape '4 Minutes' all summer long. All the DJs will play it," the editor in chief of Next magazine, a weekly devoted Manhattan's gay nightlife, Brian Moylan, said. "She always picks the right collaborators at the right time. That's her secret to staying relevant."

Mr. Rezak calls the pairing with Mr. Timberlake "brilliant." "The video doesn't seem like it's skewed for a younger audience. Madonna might be too old for tweens, but the hip-hop demo has grown up, and the selection of her current producers does say 'hip-hop sophisticate.'"

A student of Mr. Rezak's, Michael McNeill-Martinez, 18, said hip-hop fans on campus may give Madonna a try. "Some of Timbaland's, Kanye's, and Pharrell's fans have never given Madonna a chance before," he said. "In turn, some Madonna fans might 'discover' the producers she is now

working with."

While Madonna's latest persona is inevitably a gamble, she has "the luxury of fans that perceive her musical adventurousness as defying norms, and they like her attitude," Mr. Rezak said. "They love her unapologetic experimentation. It's one of the things that keeps her selling concert tickets."

Still, even the most loyal fan could be forgiven for a bit of skepticism. Madonna's previous foray into rap coincided with a less-than-successful period. In the late 1990s, she called herself Mrs. Guy Ritchie, began speaking in an Oxford accent, and had just written a children's book called "The English Roses," a tale about her daughter, Lourdes, navigating the social echelons of private school. The album was her poorest-selling one. That year, a duet she released with Ms. Spears, "Me Against the Music," was described by critics as a plea for acceptance from the younger generation that did not buy "Like a Virgin" on cassette.

After dropping on and off the radar, she re-emerged in 2006 as a disco diva in a satin leotard and a

Farah Fawcett blowout with an excellent album, "Confessions on a Dance Floor." The work appeased both critics and fans. It sampled club staples, such as ABBA and the Pet Shop Boys. It led to a sold-out tour, plus a Grammy (her sixth) for Best Electronic/Dance Album.

That renewed appeal could keep her popularity up even if "Hard Candy" bombs. She already has a \$120 million contract with Live Nation, and, with the immediate success of "4 Minutes," she surpassed Elvis Presley's record with her 37th top-10 hit in America.

After all, Madonna's longevity and staying power are now part and parcel of her image. "Stars are over quicker than they used to be," a professor of media and women's studies at SUNY-Buffalo, Elayne Rapping, said. "There's gonna be a lot of one-hit wonders, but in terms of Madonna — or Annie Lennox, for that matter, who made some amazing, well-done videos — that's over now."

Whether the album is a hit with the hip-hop audience or dance-club-goers, or none of the above, Mr. Moylan has a bold prediction: The only club-goers who won't like Madonna's new sound "are the gay hipsters who would rather listen to Björk, the Scissor Sisters, or Junior Senior."

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