Mac Miller's *"Balloonerism":* A Posthumous Magnum Opus

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Introduction to Mac Miller and "*Balloonerism":*

Malcom McCormick, better known as Mac Miller was a Pittsburgh native rapper which made multiple transformations over the course of his short career. From his "Frat Rap" early days with the albums *"K.I.D.S"* and *"Blue Slide Park"* to his Jazz/R&B inspired hits *"Swimming"* and the posthumous *"Circles"*; Mac was no stranger to the reinvention of his own sound. He knew all the way back in 2013 that his sound would have to evolve to keep his music interesting and successful and released both an album and mixtape which took his music further from his years having just graduated high school.

His career was cut short by way of drug overdose on a mixture of multiple narcotics. He passed September 7th, 2018 at the age of 26. Almost all of his albums contain themes of his struggle with drug addiction and the meaning of his own life. I remember listening to him with my father all the way back during his frat rap days, and the news of his passing was the first time I really felt what it meant for an artist I enjoyed to die.

Those who have followed might disagree with the title of this review, as "Balloonerism" is not the typical posthumous album we have come to know. Rather than a simple selection of unreleased songs or scraps from other albums this project was nearly complete all the way back in 2014, however, due to the thematic nature was scrapped for the

more appealing *"GO:OD AM."* I view this as a good choice from Mac and the label as *"Balloonerism"* is not for the faint of heart. All of this considered, *"Balloonerism"* did not see an official release until January 17th of this year; two days before what would have been Mac's 33rd birthday. This is the same release date of *"Circles"* (Mac's other major posthumous release) five years later which shows the extreme care these albums are being given by Mac's estate.

What is Balloonerism? The word does not exist, but evokes a sense of wonder and curiosity. To find out what Mac was trying to show us all of those years ago I will be breaking the album down track-by-track and exploring the thematic elements of each song individually.



(Above: the album art for *"Balloonerism"*. Sourced from WikiPedia).

"Balloonerism" Track-List Breakdown:

I. Tambourine Dream

The album begins with "Tambourine Dream", a 33 second long intro featuring Mac alone playing the tambourine. It is a striking opening which gives the listener very little as to what we should be expecting from the listening experience to follow. What have we gotten ourselves into? It is no doubt a bold move for the then 22 year old Mac to begin what was supposed to be his large studio debut with an assuming tambourine solo.



(Above: Mac Miller in his home studio "The Sanctuary". Sourced from r/MacMiller on Reddit)

II. DJ's Chord Organ (feat. SZA)

"DJ's Chord Organ" features an instrument created by the late Daniel Johnston and was acquired by Mac when he donated a hefty sum to the production of the documentary, "Hi, How Are You Daniel Johnston?" Daniel was a pioneer in the now hugely popular lo-if genre, and no doubt was a source of inspiration for Mac at this time. The track begins with

the simple stating and subsequent playing of chords on the organ before launching into the true beginning of the song.

"Watch the world go round and round and round and round."

The instrumental slowly builds as this line is repeated for the first half of the song. The meaning of life and it's inevitable futility is a prominent theme throughout the course of the album. The world will spin as it always does whether or not we are there to see it happen. What do we really mean in the grand scheme of life? This is the primary question asked by Mac within *"Balloonerism".*

The only verse on the song is given to SZA who at the time would have just signed to Top Dawg Entertainment. Her verse paints a picture of a "postman" driving across the country and struggling with substance abuse (much like Mac himself). Thus, we have set the stage for the album to follow. We are on a journey with Mac, and the song which follows will tell us the exact journey we are on.

III. Do You Have A Destination?

In "Do You Have A Destination" Mac grips with his new reality as a famous musician. He begins by explaining the situation he has found himself. The incredible wealth and extravagance which his music has brought him. He compares giving his life to the music industry as already having killed himself. Mac seems to be speaking to himself with the title and statement echoed throughout the chorus and outro "Do you have a

destination?" He grips with his new mainstream fame multiple times over the course of the album.

In the second verse he further points to his struggle with drug addiction "Need to let the drugs go. Try to find heaven; I get high but never come close." The sadness and burden of his lifestyle has caused him to look to drugs as an escape from his reality, however, as most drug addicts would tell you, this will never lead you to true happiness or "heaven. The outro is a menacing repetition of the songs title. Perhaps he is shifting the question from himself to us. Asking us to take a look at our own lives and analyze where we are going.

IV. 5 Dollar Pony Rides

"5 Dollar Pony Rides" was the lead single for *"Balloonerism"* and it is clear to see why. Although the themes are still a touch sad at their core, the presentation is groovy and feels more loving and happy than it does depressed. Here Mac is a questioning whether or not he has the ability to give his partner what she wants and needs out of the relationship. He grapples with the uncertainty of their situation with the statement, "Then you tell me: We could be okay; don't know for sure". Neither Mac nor his partner know what the future holds for them and their relationship, however, they maintain the hope of remaining together.

The last minute and a half of the song is a Trip-Hop breakdown with Mac repeating the lines, "Can I give you what you want? And can I give you what you need?" In an improvisatory style. In comparison to the chorus line which as the partner to "let" him give her what she wants and needs Mac is now asking if he truly has the capability to do so.

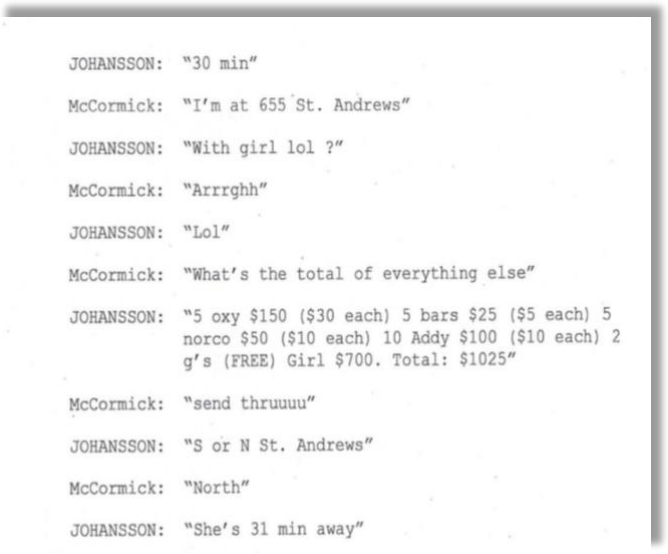
V. Friendly Hallucinations

In, "Friendly Hallucinations" Mac paints the picture of a troubled girl in love with fantasy living a world of her own. Because of her affinity for fiction and her family and the doctors which she seeks for help view her as an outsider that requires medication. He says, "There's help inside that medicine cabinet. Came in for the answers, but she left with a habit." So often people are prescribed medication with the assumption that there is something wrong with them. While this may be the case for some, others (including my own brother) have found that medication just makes them less of their self. Mac believes the world mistakes peoples creativity as delusion and something which needs to be medicated.

"If love is just a fantasy then what's the problem if you fall in love with fantasy? They assume she's confused with delusions she's creating; in the waiting room for psychiatric evaluation."

VI. Mrs. Deborah Downer

"Mrs. Deborah Downer" sees Mac returning to the question of direction and meaning of his life. The line, "somebody gave me a treasure map. Nowhere on the motherf***** say where the X is at" likens our lives to a treasure map with no destination. We are all given the key to life, but in the end, no one can tell us our purpose of direction.



JOHANSSON: "30 min"

McCormick: "I'm at 655 St. Andrews"

JOHANSSON: "With girl lol ?"

McCormick: "Arrrghh"

JOHANSSON: "Lol"

McCormick: "What's the total of everything else"

JOHANSSON: "5 oxy $150 ($30 each) 5 bars $25 ($5 each) 5 norco $50 ($10 each) 10 Addy $100 ($10 each) 2 g's (FREE) Girl $700. Total: $1025"

McCormick: "send thruuuu"

JOHANSSON: "S or N St. Andrews"

McCormick: "North"

JOHANSSON: "She's 31 min away"

The outro is a drug order read by Ashley All Day which in some way parallels the order which would lead to his death (pictured left). The dealer was charged with murder for selling fentanyl laced pills to Mac. Although due to the nature of his music at the time, many believe to this day that he took the immense amount of drugs with the intention of dying that night. However, many who were close with Mac have stated that he was in good spirits during the weeks leading to his death.

VII. Stoned

In "Stoned" Mac continues to analyze a girl who seems to be much the same as the previous song. She is lost in fantasy and terribly depressed due to a perceived loneliness. Because of this and a lack of support from her family and friends she and Mac turn to drugs as a quick means of relief. While the song is one of the grooviest on the record, it does not present much new material in it's themes and lyricism.

VIII. Shangri-La

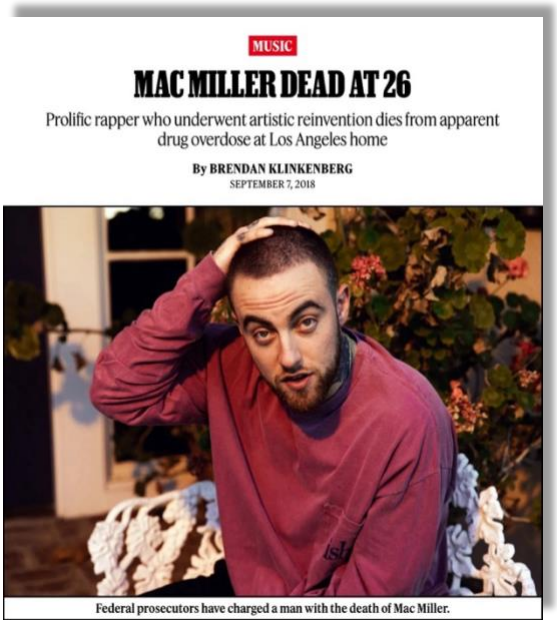
On, "Shangri-La" Mac is once again speaking on his struggle with drug addiction and death. Throughout his young life he found himself in and out of rehabilitation facilities

saying, “Life been a b**** since they let me out the doghouse… The codeine came back to get me high again.” He pictures the drugs he uses as something which come to him rather than something he is explicitly seeking out. This is obviously not how it works, however, any addict will tell you they did not want to be where they were in relation to drugs.

“I’m getting ready to sign my life away. The weather’s nice today, what a perfect day to die.”

Earlier on “Do You Have a destination?” we saw Mac compare his dedication to the music business as having already killed himself. He now repeats that theme, but adds the fact that he is preparing to sell himself to a major label.

IX. Funny Papers


MUSIC

MAC MILLER DEAD AT 26

Prolific rapper who underwent artistic reinvention dies from apparent drug overdose at Los Angeles home

By BRENDAN KLINKENBERG

SEPTEMBER 7, 2018

Federal prosecutors have charged a man with the death of Mac Miller.

“Somebody died today; I saw his picture in the funny papers. Didn’t think anybody died on a Friday”

Malcom McCormick died September 7th, 2018. He himself passed away on a Friday. Pictured above is a Rolling Stones article released the day of Mac’s death; his own picture in

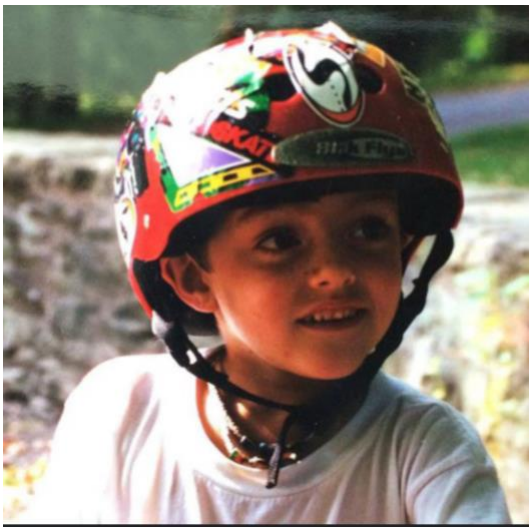
the “Funny Papers”. The song is a turning point on the album. We go from all of these questions about death and meaning to what Mac believes to be the truth of the matter.

“I heard the answer in the gibberish of an old drunk. All he said was he’s in no rush.”

Here we have what seems to be the answer we’ve been looking for. All of the searching for purpose: the hustle of our lives, the confusion, the wanting to move fast leads us in the wrong direction. Nothing will be answered that way. The only way to find purpose in life is to live it for yourself and appreciate the moment. The second verse then sees Mac read about the birth of a baby boy which he also saw in the “Funny Papers”. There is a push and pull; a sadness and happiness. By the end of the song Mac asks why all of what we see on the news matters. What difference does it make?

X. Excelsior

“Excelsior” is a sense of longing for the simpler times. Due to his accelerated path to fame Mac felt this desire even at the young age of 22. This is a struggle that nearly all people will deal with at some point or another through the course of their lives. Whether we are old our young, we all look back on the days of old as a better, simpler time. Mac paints the picture of kids on the playground and the big things in their life which seem trivial to us as adults.



"Me, I used to want to be a wizard. When did life get so serious? What ever happened to apple juice and cartwheels?" Is a simple yet striking line. It has the ability of taking us back to the simpler times of our own lives. I remember the time I wanted to be a treasure hunter like Indiana Jones. Now, I want to pay off my loans.

(Above: Malcom McCormick as a child. sourced from E! News).

XI. Transformations (feat. Delusional Thomas)

The single worst song on the album, "Transformations" sees Mac introduce the alter ego Delusional Thomas. The vocals are constantly pitched up and down to create a trippy effect, but in the end this song concept dos not work for me. In general, Mac is playing around on this song. With vulgar lines that sound more akin to his frat rap days than any other songs on this project. We see again the theme of excessive drug use, however, it is done in a less tasteful way for this song in particular.

XII. Manakins

Although it was one of the more forgettable tracks for me, "Manakins" has some of the most overt representations of the themes of drug use, death, and our meaning. The title refers to how we play dress up and pretend to be what we aren't as a way of making life less

boring. While, “Playing superhero makes it fun. But why is ‘heroism’ so close to ‘heroin’” is admittedly not the greatest line, it does point to the different forms of escape people choose. He then goes on to state in the chorus that he feels as though he is dying (and that he is dead). This is most likely in reference to the feeling he gets from drugs.

XIII. Rick’s Piano

“The best… is yet… to come.”

The mantra above is the primary theme of this song. Mac is afraid of the complacency which having “made it” brings to people. He does not want the fame and acclaim which his music has brought him to change who he is as a person. Constantly through his career he made the point of pushing himself forward and changing his music as he grew. In the second verse he points to our nature as humans. Explaining through strange allegories that our desire for the norm and what is known to us makes us fear change.

XIV. Tomorrow Will Never Know

The final track of the album, “Tomorrow Will Never Know” is one of Mac’s most menacing and emotionally devastating. It is also his longest song through his entire discography; running a total of 11 minutes and 53 seconds. In the first half Mac explores his own mental state. The opening line, “Do you fear that you’ll have no control? You walk through this world with your head above water. Shoes made of copper; just trying to float.”

The lyrics are more emblematic of his later R&B songwriting style than anything from his 2011-2015 stretch.

"Your call has been forwarded to an automated voice messaging system"

This statement rings throughout the entirety of the song. Splicing into the his lyrics in the first half and as the only words in the remaining 6 and a half minute instrumental. The eerie ending features overblown phone ringing, distant drums, and slowly disintegrating synth lines placed over the sounds of children playing and laughing together. At the time (and in the context of the album), it is a reminder that our call for answers to the question of our own meaning and purpose is one which can not be answered for us. Now, it is a reminder that the man who made this music for us is gone.

What is Balloonerism?

Balloonerism is the desire for escape. The endless search for your own heaven and the recapturing of the child-like wonder which is lost in the bustle of our lives as we grow old. For Mac (like many others), this search lead him astray and turned him to the use of heavy drugs. Mac's desire for a quick escape from his life would eventually lead to the final escape in his death. It is a true tragedy for an artist such as Mac, who constantly reinvented his sound and pushed his music to new limits, to pass at such an early age. Tomorrow will never know what he could have accomplished next and where he might be today. Rest in peace Mac Miller. You and your music will not be forgotten.

While it may be recency bias, *"Balloonerism"* is my current favorite project from the late Mac Miller. I have work to do, as I have yet to listen to the fan favorite *"Faces"* and have not spent enough time with *"Swimming"* to form a full opinion. However, this album represents the boundary pushing artist that Mac was, and for him to have released this off the heels of more childish projects is a testament to it's greatness. It feels meaningless to rate it, but for the sake of comparisons later down the line I would place it around the 9-9.5/10 range. Truly an amazing work of art.

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