

Ella Yelich-O'Connor has a problem that very few thoughtful, bookish 17-year-olds—"socially observant" is the term she uses for herself—are ever likely to have. As the singer/songwriter more popularly known as Lorde, Ella has already touched the lives of millions with her breakthrough hit "Royals," a catchy, cleverly produced paean to the joys of living the pop life on a budget, which brings her to the top five of the singles charts this week—a feat that's totally unprecedented for someone of Yelich-O'Connor's age, genre and nationality. (The song is just that smart, that good.) But now that she's reaching stardom, Ella risks becoming a dangerous cliché of her own—that of the successful singer performing outsider songs from the inside, of becoming a part of the machine that she originally mocked. And because of that, it's hard not to wonder how "Royals" will age as a result.

The first verse of "Royals" details Lorde's humble, small-town roots, growing up in the suburbs of Auckland, New Zealand:

**I've never seen a diamond in the flesh
I cut my teeth on wedding rings in the movies
And I'm not proud of my address,
In the torn-up town, no post code envy**

In the pre-chorus, we find out that the reason she's bemoaning all this is because of the disconnect it creates between her and the pop world she's exposed to—maybe the more hip-hop side of it—whose fabulous and unapologetically ostentatious trappings she can't at all relate to:

**But every song's like gold teeth, grey goose, trippin' in the bathroom
Blood stains, ball gowns, trashin' the hotel room...
But everybody's like Cristal, Maybach, diamonds on your time piece.
Jet planes, islands, tigers on a gold leash.**

The details described by Lorde sound enticing but inherently ridiculous, and it's pretty clear that even if a part of her aspires to them in some way, she mostly sees them as silly and unnecessary. This is confirmed when she gets to the conclusions of the pre-chorus:

**We don't care, we're driving Cadillacs in our dreams.
We don't care, we aren't caught up in your love affair.**

However, there's two different (and arguably conflicting) sentiments being expressed here. The "Cadillacs in our dreams" line makes it sound like Lorde and her implied friends don't live the pop lifestyle because they don't have the means, but are OK with it because they can fantasize about it with one another and that's almost as good. But the "love affair" line makes it sound like they're simply not buying what the pop world is selling, that they don't want the Cadillacs at all, that they aren't tempted but such showiness.

The conflict of this message is echoed in the sentiments of the chorus proper:

**And we'll never be royals (royals).
It don't run in our blood,
That kind of lux just ain't for us.
We crave a different kind of buzz.**

The "Royals" of the title makes its appearance here as an obvious stand-in noun for standard pop stardom, a status which Lorde declares herself not only to not be a part of—by her DNA, even—but which she seems to hold no aspiration towards, saying that she wants something else out of her life and her music. (Again, she uses the "We" here to strengthen her position, implying a group of like-minded individuals backing her up—a feeling echoed in the song's layered backing vocals, even though all are actually just Lorde herself.) But the second part of the chorus offers a somewhat different perspective:

**Let me be your ruler (ruler),
You can call me queen Bee
And baby I'll rule, I'll rule, I'll rule, I'll rule.
Let me live that fantasy.**

Here, Lorde does seem to be shooting for some sort of pop stardom, though the changing of "we" to "me" and "you" makes it sound like now she's addressing her friends as their representative to the outside world, saying "let me tell our story to the Top 40." In other words, it seems like Lorde does want a seat at the mainstream pop table, but perhaps only on her own terms, and only as long as she continues to express the views of her own people.

The final line, "Let me live that fantasy," makes it sound like Lorde realizes that as wonderful a world as that would be for her, where she gets to be a pop star while being herself and still speaking for her small-town friends, the whole thing is pretty farfetched and will probably never happen. However, in fact that is exactly what's happening right now, and Lorde seems a little bit scared of all of it—in a recent interview with *Billboard*, she seems uneasy with all the time she's spent in New York recently, and tells the mag that "part of me wanted to go back to writing for me and for my friends, and write something that I felt related to us a little bit." She seems worried about losing that connection with her own people, and subconsciously becoming one of the Cristal-sipping, Maybach-driving stars she derides in "Royals."

It's a fair concern, and one that a number of pop stars have had to come to terms with over the years—when you build your name on your independence, how do you reconcile that with becoming part of the mainstream? Fellow 2013 breakout stars Macklemore and Ryan Lewis came across this problem when their *Heist* album went supernova, but they've mostly dealt with the problematic issues of becoming the world's most popular indie act by ignoring them entirely, excusing the contradictions made by them performing an edited version of their anti-Nike song in a commercial for NBA All-Star Weekend by acknowledging their own hypocrisy and saying that just makes them "human." Some fans have understandably been turned off by Ben and Ryan trying to have their cake and eat it too, but it certainly hasn't hurt their popularity any.

Will the words of "Royals" similarly come back to haunt Lorde, should she perform the song at the Grammys in a big gown and jewelry and with none of her high-school friends on stage with her? Her obvious reticence to step whole-heartedly into the spotlight would lead us to believe she'll do a better job of skirting such issues, but we'll have to see what happens when Lorde releases her debut album *Pure Heroine* later this month and likely takes her career to yet another new level in the process. We're rooting for her to mostly keep it real—as is the majority of suburban New Zealand, no doubt—but better women than her have been tempted by the jet planes and gold-leashed tigers. If she ends up selling the song to a Timex commercial or a *Real Housewives of Beverly Hills* promo, then we'll know we're in trouble.