

“Like a Virgin”—Madonna (1984)

Added to the National Registry: 2023

Essay by Matthew Rettenmund (guest post)*



Madonna

Madonna being included in the Library of Congress's National Recording Registry for the very first time is, appropriately, to honor her 1984 album “Like a Virgin.”

Though her 1983 self-titled debut had been a slow-burning smash, establishing her as a successful dance diva, it was “Like a Virgin”—a follow-up whose release had been stalled for months due to the stubborn success of “Madonna”—that introduced Madonna as a global sensation, chart-topping hitmaker and controversy engine.

The album is a classic today, but at the time of its release, it rankled mostly male rock critics, who sneered at Madonna's unbridled sensuality. Still basking in the glow of 1979's *Disco Demolition Night*, many reviewers found creative ways to critique the album without resorting to the mantra that seemed to bubble under their words: “Disco Sucks.”

Importantly, Madonna's second album, like her first, *was* a bridge from the Disco Era to the era of '80s power pop, melding many elements of disco—and drafting as its producer Chic's Nile Rodgers—while embracing a more Top 40 sound, not to mention lyrics that were at once teen-friendly in the same way alcohol is, and also pop poetry.

Unlike her first album, “Like a Virgin” felt completely unified, great aural sex from a woman who would, in short order, establish herself as the greatest female in rock history.

And she was on her way to doing that with that winking title track.

Written by Billy Steinberg and Tom Kelly, the song was meant to relate vulnerability from the point of view of a man who had had his heart broken and was overjoyed to find new love. In Madonna's hands, the song became more lascivious, sounded more like it was being sung by a girl who had been around the block a few times and was finally settling down.

Even the use of the word “virgin” in a song--though “Silent Night” beat it by more than 160 years--was shocking for 1984, let alone in a song being cooed and chirped by the sexually confident Madonna. The word was so charged it inspired Quentin Tarantino to devote an unforgettable scene in “Reservoir Dogs” (1989) to what he thought was the true meaning of “Like a Virgin,” a crass, sexual one.

Madonna corrected him, informing him it was simply “about love.”

Perhaps that is why the song works so well (that and its famously inverted “Billie Jean” bassline): it is sexy, but it is about love. Like most of Madonna's controversies, it was designed to lampoon any clutch-the-pearls responses, and it spoke directly to young people who knew right away that it was an unconventional, indelicate love song, but a love song nonetheless.

Hammering everything home was Tony Thompson on drums. In 2022, the album's main engineer, Jason Corsaro, declared the album's title track “the first dance-pop record to have a real rock drum sound.” The ease with which Madonna embraced rock 'n' roll--her roots were as a rock drummer and guitarist in downtown Manhattan--undoubtedly contributed to her induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame her first year of eligibility.

“Like a Virgin” became her first of a dozen #1 hits in the US, and the album her first of nine chart-toppers.

Nearly as impactful was her follow-up single, and track one on “Like a Virgin,” the peripatetic “Material Girl.” The Peter Brown/Robert Rans tune was written as if an ode to capitalism, perfect for the age of Ronald Reagan in which it was released, but Madonna turned its meaning upside down by singing it in a comedic pitch. To ensure the listener got her point, her accompanying music video, directed by Mary Lambert, emphasized her belief that materialism isn't where it's at. Like so many great songs, it thrives on that duality, and it is timeless because of it. How many other songs released in 1984 sounded so pristine and were so relevant that they re-exploded on TikTok and spawned a remake 38 years after the fact?

“Like a Virgin” is also noteworthy for showcasing Madonna's sheer range, and blazing a path for pop singers to explore various styles and expose various aspects of their personalities. Along with stompers, she offered the breezy, beautiful “Angel,” characterized by unironic sentimentality, and the assertive “Stay,” reworked from an earlier demo, in which Madonna asserts she will make us love her, love her, love her--12 times over. It worked.

Vocally, Madonna offered a melodramatic ballad in the form of a remake of Rose Royce's “Love Don't Live Here Anymore,” proving--along with the 1985 non-album single “Crazy for You”--that the woman branded “Minnie Mouse on helium” by some of her critics had pipes.

At a time when pop stars were not allowed to contribute songs to their own albums, Madonna's songwriting ability was also in full effect on "Like a Virgin," with six of 10 tracks--including "Into the Groove," tacked onto later editions--co-written or entirely written by the relative newcomer.

"Into the Groove," arguably one of Madonna's finest songs, belongs on "Like a Virgin," but was not included on the album initially, added to a 1985 international reissue by popular demand.

While filming her first starring movie role, in Susan Seidelman's "Desperately Seeking Susan," Madonna co-wrote the song with Stephen Bray. When filmmakers needed a song for a scene, Madonna brought in a cassette and offered "Into the Groove." They (wisely) loved it, but no one on Madonna's team was even aware of the song yet. At first, Warner Bros. tried to persuade the filmmakers to instead use "Material Girl" or another song, but finally relented. "Into the Groove" was used in a scene in which Madonna's enigmatic Susan character dances in a club. It wound up being documentary footage of Madonna dancing in Danceteria, one of her signature hangouts.

"Into the Groove" was released as a B-side on the 12" single of "Angel," but quickly overshadowed that tune, itself a Top 5 hit. "Into the Groove" wound up being Madonna's "Isn't She Lovely" (by Stevie Wonder)--a song so phenomenally popular it defines an era and is one of its artist's greatest hits, yet a song that was not a commercial single in her home country. After saturating MTV via a music video fashioned from movie clips, "Into the Groove" became a US #1 dance hit, going to #1 in England, Spain, Italy, Australia and elsewhere, earning its place on "Like a Virgin" and in Madonna's cadre of hits.

Nearly 40 years after its release, "Like a Virgin" retains its sheen. It is a perfect pop package that boasts arguably three of the best songs Madonna has ever recorded. It offers fun, tears, sex, romance and the essences of both Madonna and Nile Rodgers, two of the greatest pop musicians to ever do it.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.