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The Identity Behind Tyler, The Creator's *IGOR*

On May 17th, 2019, Tyler, The Creator would release his project, *IGOR*: a diverse 12-track album, containing synth-heavy songs like “IGOR’S THEME” and “RUNNING OUT OF TIME”, melodic rhythms in “EARFQUAKE” and “GONE, GONE / THANK YOU”, and the fiery¹ “NEW MAGIC WAND”. Featuring world-renowned artists like Kanye West, Pharrell Williams, and Charlie Wilson, the album was a commercial success, earning a top spot on the Billboard 200, enabling a sold-out tour, and grossing over three billion streams since its release. Telling a somber tale of a love triangle between Tyler himself, a man whom he admires, and that man’s ex-girlfriend, the lyrical references and innuendos are unparalleled, and *IGOR* is undoubtedly Tyler’s magnum opus. In addition to the songs and their stories, the record is also a masterpiece for what it represents as a turning point project in Tyler’s career. That is, *IGOR* is an album about Tyler’s identity, both as an artist in the music scene and as a lover within the diegesis of the album.

A mere hour before the album was released, Tyler posted a picture to Twitter containing a set of ‘rules’ for how to listen to his project, that highlighted his vision for the record. He began his statement by pointing out to the listener that *IGOR* is “not Goblin”, “not Wolf”, “not Cherry Bomb”, and “not Flower Boy”, referencing the names of his previous works and alter-egos that he embodies on each of those respective projects. His inclination to disassociate himself from his

¹ Literally, as the song, which was performed by Tyler at the 2020 Grammys, featured an energetic presentation that ended in fires being lit on a neighborhood set and Tyler eventually falling down into a pit of VFX flames.

past 'lives' indicates his longing for a new identity as a musician. Indeed, he explicitly states that artistic expectations for his work will not be fulfilled, as he instructs the reader to "[not] go into this [project] expecting a rap album". In doing so, Tyler creates an empty stage that he can perform on, lacking expectations or demands². He is no longer confined to the style that gained him popularity and can now experiment with new styles and stories. Ironically, despite heavily prefacing the album as 'non-rap', Tyler would end up getting nominated and winning the Grammy for Best Rap Album in 2020. However, though he accepted the award, in an interview conducted mere minutes after his win (showing that his thoughts were unfiltered), Tyler stuck with the identity he strived to create on *IGOR*, claiming that receiving arguably the most prestigious prize in music was a misinterpretation, as he believed placing his work under 'rap' was a "backhanded compliment" for a Black artist attempting something "genre-bending". To Tyler, his musical persona took precedence over all else, even if it meant discrediting commercial success. This combination of deeply priming the audience beforehand, and sticking with this message even after winning an 'imperfect' Grammy indicates that the album (even without listening to a song or reading a lyric) started as and ended up being undeniably about setting a new identity for Tyler in the music sphere.

This newfound identity is not only unique to Tyler, but also applicable to the collaborators on his project. Since Tyler wrote, produced, and arranged all of the songs on the album, all of the artists that are featured act as extensions of Tyler's persona. As such, when other musicians push their boundaries on certain songs, they act as examples of how Tyler has influenced them to embrace new musical roles, furthering the notion of *IGOR* being identity-based. Perhaps the most unique identity that was exhibited on the album occurred during

² This metaphor of a stage is similar to the music video for the song "EARFQUAKE", which features Tyler performing on a stage, and disobeying the 'expectations' that he should not smoke, ultimately burning the set down.

the first track, “IGOR’S THEME”, where rapper Symere Woods (stage name Lil Uzi Vert) ‘broke character’, singing the chorus and first true vocal inflections of the album in a purely melodic style, extremely uncommon for the Marilyn-Manson-influenced trap artist who typically features fast-paced lyrics on punk rap beats. As Woods sang motifs that would flesh themselves out across the later parts of the project (hence the name “IGOR’S THEME”), the change in his delivery was so drastic that fans failed to recognize the rapper’s voice, only realizing that he was featured when Tyler tweeted out the exact lyrics that Woods sang in a post responding to a fan questioning Woods’ presence on the project. *IGOR*, by being a new way for its curator to express himself, also enabled differing expressions for its featured artists.

Even the collaborations that failed to come to fruition tell a story about identity. The next song on the project, “EARFQUAKE”, was a song that Tyler initially “wrote for [Justin] Bieber”, and later attempted to give to Rihanna to “sing the hook”, but “did [not] hear back” from either artist³. When writing the song in 2017, Tyler’s persona was still based around somewhat mainstream hip-hop, but he desired to release pop songs, and the easiest way to do so was through other artists who had more solid foundations among pop music fans. Upon the release of *IGOR*, however, Tyler embraced this change, doing what *IGOR* is all about, and embodied a new, unexpected identity, taking upon the role of a pop star, and using his reference vocals meant for Bieber and Rihanna on the final release. Similar to “IGOR’S THEME”, “EARFQUAKE” features another rapper experimenting with a different style, Jordan Carter (stage name Playboi Carti). Here, Carter’s high-pitched, baby-like voice rests over a soothing piano, an instrumental that is unlike the rest of his discography, which, at its extreme, features much more hardcore beats with heavy, metal-inspired guitars and drums. For both the aforementioned Woods and Carter, Tyler’s embracing of a new identity on *IGOR* bleeds into each of their verses, and while

³ This information was revealed during an Apple Music concert on August 13th, 2019.

speculative, Tyler likely encouraged a new style of singing from both of them, once again, indicating that the album is identity-based.

When evaluating Tyler's identity, it is also important to consider the persona he embodies within *IGOR* itself. On the seventh track of the album, for instance, like his unconventional identity in the creation of the project, he twists a traditional expression "a girl is a gun" into the song's title: "A BOY IS A GUN*". The rephrasing of the track's name, which repeats throughout the song in a background vocal, illustrates to the reader the potency of love, and how Tyler's love interest "could be dangerous to [him]", while also doubling as a means of protection, "[keeping him] safe", as a gun might. Beyond its meaning in relation to the story of the album, the song's title, in particular, the asterisk, represents exactly what *IGOR* is about. Being the only song on the tracklist containing any sort of emphatic punctuation (and thus significant in its meaning), the asterisk indicates to the listener that there exists a blatant change from existing notions. Much like the project itself and Tyler's persona in the music world, the song (and his love interest's literal identity as a gun) is aberrant and as a whole, differs from what is expected.

In regards to Tyler's identity both within the album and within the world of music, it would be a disservice not to mention his sexual identity in regards to his songs, especially since much of *IGOR* is about love. While Tyler has never openly admitted to his sexual preference, much of his music hints at his past lovers. For example, in the song "I THINK", Tyler sings about how he wishes his lover would "call [him] by [his] name", an apt reference to the 2017 film *Call Me By Your Name*, whose plot revolves around a gay relationship. Though this and other other lyrical references⁴ are slight, the aforementioned word change in "A BOY IS A GUN*" is one of the more clear examples of his sexual experimentation. This song was also

⁴ Another slight nod to Tyler's queerness is his reference to Janis Joplin, a 1960s artist who was known to be openly bisexual and promiscuous, on the song "NEW MAGIC WAND".

accompanied by a music video, in which Tyler, playing himself, laments over a male partner, singing to him and insisting that he “take [his] hoodie off” to stop “[hiding his] face from [Tyler]”, an allusion for his desire for his partner to come out of the closet⁵. This openness surrounding his sexuality is unprecedented among his released albums, and is what makes *IGOR* so unique. Unafraid to deal with the rawness of relationships, Tyler now embraces a new identity, and much like his preface to the album that classified it as non-rap or his influence on other artist’s sounds or the symbolism of certain songs, *IGOR* is undeniably identity-based, and unapologetically Tyler.

⁵ Another nod to this idea is on “RUNNING OUT OF TIME”, where Tyler asks his partner to “take [his] mask off” and “stop [lying]” to both other people and himself.