

Puluche Album Review Rubric ©

Artist: Depeche Mode

Album Title: Violator (1990) – Mute Records

| Categories | Criteria | | | | Rating |
|-------------------------------|--|--|---|--|-------------|
| | 4 - Exemplary | 3 - Proficient | 2 - Developing | 1 - Underdeveloped | |
| <u>Compositions</u> | Every song is quality and has a distinctive appeal of its own. Tracks have a perfect flow and continuity that enhance the album's overall appeal. | Many quality songs with some distinctive appeal. Tracks have a good flow and continuity that enhance the album's overall appeal. | Some quality songs with distinctive appeal but not sustained. Track flow and continuity have little effect on album's overall appeal. | Few to no quality songs lacking any distinctive appeal. Track flow and continuity have little/poor effect on album's overall appeal. | 15 |
| <u>Breaking Ground</u> | Has impressive elements of high creativity and is experimentally innovative. Developing own signature sound. Shows extreme growth and/or potential as a substantial and influential artist. | Features elements of creativity and uniqueness. Shows growth and/or potential as a developing and influential artist, but some stagnation as an established artist. | Has very few moments of creativity and uniqueness. Shows a little growth and/or some potential as a developing artist, but notable regression as an established artist. | Has no creativity and uniqueness. Shows no growth and/or little potential as a developing or established artist. | 17.5 |
| <u>Engagement</u> | Music has a transcending quality with numerous songs that grab the listener on respective emotional/social levels. Many songs have an addictive effect and memorable quality. | Music has transcending qualities with some songs that grab the listener on respective emotional/social levels. Some songs have an addictive effect and memorable quality. | Music has some transcending qualities with few songs that appeal on respective emotional/social levels, as well as having any addictive or memorable qualities. | Music has minimal transcending qualities and few to no songs that appeal on respective emotional/social levels. No positive memorable qualities - only negative. | 17.5 |
| <u>Lyrics</u> | Has a strong lyrical voice with multiple thought-provoking messages with clear and/or possible meanings and depth. | Has notable lyrical voice with some thought-provoking messages and/or possible meanings and depth. | Has limited lyrical voice with few-to-no thought-provoking messages, meanings and depth. | Has a weak lyrical voice with no thought-provoking messages or meanings and seriously lacks any depth. | 15 |
| <u>Production</u> | Masterful sound quality with noticeable studio techniques employed that demand headphone inquiry. Vision flawlessly executed. Overall packaging and artwork effectively compliments and enhances album enjoyment. | Very good sound quality with some noticeable studio techniques that demand headphone inquiry. Vision is acceptable. Overall packaging and artwork compliments album enjoyment. | Decent sound quality with few-to-no noticeable studio techniques employed. Vision is questionable. Overall packaging and artwork fails to compliment album. | Questionable sound quality with no noticeable studio techniques. Lacks vision. Overall packaging and artwork fails to compliment album. | 20 |

Comments

With the start of the nineties, alternative rock was beginning to take the place of synthpop in the heart of the mainstream. With *Violator*, however, Depeche Mode managed to reconcile the two and incidentally capitalize on their timing, popularizing (and arguably helping to invent) a new genre: new wave.

Like a large majority of dance music, the album's general ambiance is one of amorality and borderline sleaziness, as it practically worships both. These characteristics, paired with the album's dark lyrics, would bring Depeche Mode into the new decade with an explosion, eventually appealing to both the DJ's and the "underground" crowd.

"Halo," "Personal Jesus," "Enjoy the Silence," "Blue Dress," and "World in My Eyes" all ring with the topic of human pleasure and its positivity. "Blue Dress" even ventures into what lead singer Martin Gore called "pervy" territory, saying that watching a woman dress herself "makes the world go around." Meanwhile, both "Halo" and "Enjoy the Silence" glorify the concept of one-on-one, solitary love. In one of the band's most recognizable pieces of music, "Enjoy the Silence" goes from a slow ballad into an upbeat dance rhythm with the words, "All I ever wanted/All I ever needed/Is here in my arms/Words are very unnecessary/They can only do harm."

Besides the lyrics (which give more "implicit" suggestions about their meaning) perhaps the greatest contribution to the album's semi-sadistically hedonistic vibe is Gore's vocals—edgy, sleazy, and with a hint of nonchalance and arrogance, they are the perfect complement to music which is played in both the discotheques and the rock halls. Some of the most interesting vocals on the album can be heard, for example, in "Policy of Truth," as dizzyingly overlapping voices and synthesizers give the listener juxtaposed feelings of both uneasiness and calm.

The instrumentation, on one hand, is heavily inspired and follows the trends of the eighties. Synths, echoing percussion, and richly drawn-out guitars are all signs of the album's origins. On the other hand, the compositions of *Violator* demonstrate Depeche Mode's first moves into newer, more experimental territory. The success of "Enjoy the Silence" is even attributable to this innovation, as instead of Gore completing the entire demo (as they had done in their previous albums), keyboard player Wilder took the song from a slow-paced harmonium to an upbeat dance track. In this way, the artistic license taken by the band flowed into the mainstream, thereafter widely influencing both pop and alternative music.

Despite the album's components lacking much innovation for the time (vocals similar to Gore's were common of the eighties, along with the instruments used), the album's greatest experimentation lies in its ability to take essentially electronic music and give it its own sinister personality. Regret ("Policy of Truth"), reckless love ("Halo") and unadulterated human desires such as in "Blue Dress" are described in a sentimentally unashamed fashion. The mainstream rise of grunge can even be attributed in part to the darkness of *Violator*, as Gore commented, "We decided our first record of the nineties ought to be different."

In terms of popularity, the decision to experiment with sound and lyrics ended up being the band's best decision to date. Though it received mixed reviews (some critics even claiming the band was selling out to teenagers who solely wanted a party), *Violator* propelled Depeche Mode into incredible fame in the United States and the UK, and eventually became renowned as a classic. Perhaps its greatest impact, however, was

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| | its paving the way for other alternative artists into the mainstream media, allowing a greater diversity of musical creativity to become exposed to a large audience. | |
| <u>Commendations</u> | <p><i>Violator</i> marked Depeche Mode’s peak; with over fifteen million copies sold, it is currently the band’s best-selling album to date. The best moments within <i>Violator</i> conveniently come in the form of Depeche Mode’s two most popular singles: “Enjoy the Silence” and “Personal Jesus.” The latter is heavy and founded on rhythmic bass in lieu of synthesizers, a breakaway from the band’s typical usage of electronic instrumentation. The dark, alternative feel of the composition goes hand-in-hand with its slightly condescending and irreverent message, fitting into the niche of the pre-grunge era. On the other hand, “Enjoy the Silence” manages to simultaneously be soothing yet epic, thanks to the band’s newly-found mode of writing music.</p> <p>The irony of <i>Violator</i>—its multiple references to sacred topics while being incredibly amoral—gives the album its ambiguously sleazy appeal. Overall, the album is not musically perfect or thought-provoking, but it is undeniably catchy; its ability to be both a “classic” and a “guilty pleasure” has made the album one of the greatest alternative successes to date.</p> | |
| <u>Next Steps</u> | <p>Three years later, <i>Songs of Faith and Devotion</i> was released to less explosive popularity, and already-present tensions within the band were exaggerated to the point where Wilder quit the band to make his side project, Recoil, his full-time focus. Alcoholism, depression, and drug addiction were all tribulations Depeche Mode subsequently experienced throughout the late nineties, but the band is still active today as a trio. After having overcome their personal and group struggles, they have released six albums since <i>Violator</i>, the latest of which was <i>Delta Machine</i> in 2013. They are commonly cited as one of the most globally influential bands in the history of alternative, and new artists, from The Killers to Shakira, continue to use the band’s incredibly “spine-tingling” music as an influence.</p> | |
| <u>Reviewer</u> | Kaitlyn Rabe | IRC: Lucy Patton |