

Pharrell Williams: Just Exhilaratingly Happy

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By Ken Tucker

Pharrell Williams, who frequently goes by just his first name, is the sort of pop star whom many people would like to view as a friend. Emerging from hip-hop, he makes charming recordings that suggest a deep appreciation of pop, soul and R&B music extending at least as far back as the 1960s. To hear Pharrell on his new album *G I R L*, you'd think his world consisted of grooving on catchy beats and flirting with women. It's a lightweight image that draws gravitas from his prolific work ethic and a shrewd deployment of those influences.

"Brand New" is a song that dares you to think of it as brand new, as opposed to a canny recasting of riffs reminiscent of the Jackson 5. Pharrell is so confident in his ability to beguile you as producer, songwriter and singer, he all but buries the major guest star on that track: Justin Timberlake. Even when Pharrell dares to come off as slightly predatory, as in "Hunter" — about tracking a woman — it's all done in the mildest manner possible. "Hunter" is also one of the high points of this album, with a rubber-band rhythm that stretches and snaps with witty elasticity. His high voice can remind you of Smokey Robinson and Marvin Gaye, as can a few of his musical hooks, but his tone is also pleasantly ghostly, wafting in and out of a melody with sinuousness that can be sly or sexy or serene.

Pharrell Williams began his career as half of a production duo called The Neptunes, providing material for acts as various as Nelly, Clipse and Jay Z. He was glancingly involved in a little pop scandal last year as a producer of (and video guest star in) "Blurred Lines," Robin Thicke's appropriation of Marvin Gaye. Pharrell can even confer fame upon inanimate objects: The Vivienne Westwood-designed hat he wore to the Grammy Awards achieved such fame, it was conscripted to help out again during the Oscars. In the new "Come Get It Bae" he says, "I can do anything you like," and it barely registers as boasting.

Pharrell has come in for some criticism recently as being merely a glossy pop hitmaker; for lacking edge. I find that this sort of critique is really code for his declining to revel in irony, sarcasm or a bleak view of the world. And that is, in turn, why I find Pharrell Williams — and particularly the Pharrell on display throughout *G I R L* — an exhilarating performer. His big hat can barely contain his radiant braininess.