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Beenzino's Ego Trip down the Runway

Beenzino, 28, is one of the hottest artistic figures in Korea today. In fact, he is more than a mere artist; he is the icon of the younger generation. He is everything – he is a rapper, singer, fashion model, painter, beat-maker, sculptor, sex symbol, instagram star, and the list goes on. The reason why he has successfully expanded his influence among the young culture scene is that he has co-worked with so many other artists of different genres, from an old-school ballad singer Yoon Jong Shin to a jazz artist Shimmy Twice. Thus, *Up All Night EP*, released in 2014 summer, is an extension of Beenzino's artistic career that focused primarily on collaborations. This time, he combines with a fashion designer, Woo Young Mi, as the short album was produced as runway music for the 2014 S/S Paris Collection of the her brand WOORYOUNGMI. A more ambitious move from Beenzino's part, the project is a crossover of fashion and music and should therefore fulfill the objective as not only contemporary pop but also runway soundtracks. However, on the initial hearing, the result does not sound like runway music at all; if anyone did not command the background knowledge, he would never recognize that the album was designed for any other purpose than ordinary pop music. Of course, no certain formula exists in runway music, and even if it did, violating the norm would not constitute a crime to an artist, but the degree of focus placed on Beenzino himself as a celebrity and artist is almost disconcerting. In other words, the actual content of the project album *Up All Night EP*, originally designed for live runway soundtracks, betrays the apparent concept and leans toward an egoistic showcase of the artist himself, leading to a confusing albeit interesting listening.

At first, though, the first two tracks of the album fits the theme of runway music, with their focus placed on objects described by Beenzino. In the opening track, "Jackson Pollock D*ck," the singer depicts as well as praises his muse, saying "I like the color of your skin" and "let me paint you like how Jackson Pollock did." As shown in these lines that mention "color" and Jackson Pollock, the icon of modern painting, the song accentuates visual imagery. Also, the cheerful tone of the track, achieved through repetitive guitar sound, is vibrant to the extent that one could easily describe it as colorful. Such synesthesia fits the concept of the album since it was produced for runway, also a synthetic art of the audiovisual. Similarly, the next track, "How Do I Look?" is full of visual impressions as the narrator verbally draws a picture of the overall outfit of a female fashion star. The lyrics portrays her in great detail in which she is described as a "fashion killer with Polo on" who wears "big T-shirts" and puts on a "vintage" "neoui oenjjok sonmok-e chan sigye [watch on her left wrist]." Of all the tracks, this song certainly fits the concept of the project most as the audience can easily naturalize the muse of the song into real fashion models walking down the runway. Notably, however, these tracks feature the strong presence of the narrator himself, too, as the lyrics puts him forward as an evaluator and also a chaser of the females whom he describes. For example, in the first track, he says, "I like the color of your skin," "you're the one that I dreamed of," and "nan algo sipeo dieopeo yu [I want to know you deeper]," while the next tracks feature the lines like "now I'm looking at you," "I like the way you dance," and "neoui otcharimi naneun mame deureo [I like the way you fit your clothes]." In these lyrics, the subject pronoun "I" can be found repetitively, constantly referring to the artist himself. In other words, the both tracks takes the form in which the narrator becomes the subject who describes the female muses that are primarily objectified by him. Nevertheless, the female objects secures the central focus of the songs, with the audience being able to associate them with fashion models on the runway.

However, in the following two tracks, the focal point shifts to Beenzino himself more prominently as he begins to narrate the story entirely of himself. For instance, in the third track "Mitch as Fuck," the speaker and the featuring artist Don Mills, his fellow rapper, search for gals that are "mitch as fuck [crazy as fuck]." To even more bafflement, the next track is an account of the narrator who chases anonymous girls in an attempt to soothe his loneliness only to find out that he has not overcome his ex-girlfriend. In these two numbers, the only motif that continues from the past tracks is the subject narrator that chases after females, and the audience can no longer find any elements to connect to runway music. Also, with the lyrics focusing on the narrator himself more, a formal change can be detected; the subject narrator becomes the object of the songs simultaneously. Moreover, as opposed to the first two numbers in which it was not sure whether the narrator was Beenzino himself, in the latter two the gap between the two becomes thin. Such shift can be detected in the first line of the third number when the narrator mentions his age that is in accordance with Beenzino's. Other lyrics such as "nae jeonakgwonryon teolryeo [I can spend my royalty]" and "I am a fuckin' star baby, let me buy you some sul [alcohol]" support the assumption that the narrator is explicitly referring to himself as the real-life Beenzino. To sum up, the middle two tracks deviates from the original concept of the project and instead strives to put forward the artist himself as a sexually predatory celebrity.

In turn, such form – Beenzino himself taking over as both the subject and object of the narrative – leads to ostentation of himself, which is presented through the motif of hyper-masculinity. That is, in terms of the content, the more prominent theme of this album is not so much fashion and runway as exaggerated sexuality of the artist and his objectification of women. As illustrated in the second paragraph, in the opening track, the narrator imagines an ideal partner, which mostly involves sexual objectification, with the narrator even wondering if the female shaved her genitals in a "Brazillian" way. Similarly, the second track reduces the

female fashion star to her outfit and body in the lines like "I see through her body," and "your freaking hip" while the other tracks use more abusive language to refer to females as "bitches" in "Mitch as Fuck" and "you fucking bitch" in "Up All Night." To put it in another way, in order to accomplish the status of a hypersexual celebrity, the artist inevitably diminishes females around him as sexual objects that he is ready to seduce at any time. However, such objectification does not develop into a wider degradation of women. In such perspective, the fourth track is as interesting as it is complicated. For the most part, the narrator flings himself to cursing his ex-girlfriend who looks unscathed after the break-up as opposed to the heart-broken male speaker. In an attempt to derogate the ex-lover further, he even uses a stereotyped image in describing her as full of vanity, mentioning that she "bissan bapman meokgo itji, husikeuron beolkkul eonjjeun aisucurim [eats only expensive meal, with honey ice cream dessert]." However, in the closing part of the song, the narrator changes his tone and begs for the woman to come back. Such change confirms that the whole other part of the song that slammed the girl as a lavish "bitch" was actually ironic, and he was deliberately acting a jerk in doing so. Also, one can possibly defend that the term "bitch" is used so often and customarily in contemporary hip-hop that it functions as a mere sound rather than an actual word that signifies any derogatory meaning. Considering these arguments, the artist seems to walk a fine line between mere sexual objectification of women and more abusive misogyny. Still, the artist's aggressive attitude, which objectifies every woman around him in order to show off his ego, sticks out as the album heads to the fifth and final track.

In the end, the final one is again and more blatantly about Beenzino, affirming the hypothesis that the album functions more as a showcase of his talent. The number, which serves as an outro of the album, is an instrumental track only composed of beats from the main producer Peejay, also a long-time collaborator and colleague of Beenzino. The concept of the song fits the title of it, "I Don't Have To Work;" this time Beenzino does not rap or

sing, so he literally does not “work” in this track. However, from the very absence of the artist and the title that indicates it, I could picture how Beenzino gleefully planted this track at the end in his studio with a grin on his face. In other words, Beenzino is declaring through this closing that he does not “have to work;” rather, pieces with which he plays, with his great talent and his old friend Peejay, becomes his “work.” In fact, such interpretation might be useful for understanding the confusion that this album brings about. After all, the whole work does not exhibit any grandiose artistic ambition that aims for a successful crossover of fashion and music. Rather, its main theme seems like a showcase of Beenzino himself who he is so full of talent that he even plays with runway music of some fashion designer’s brand. Such conclusion supports the hypothesis that this whole EP seems to be an ego trip for Beenzino, so much so that one can easily picture Beenzino walking down the runway bragging about his masculinity and endless talent whenever the music is played out.

To be fair, though, you cannot blame an artist for showing his ego off, and more important is how the ego that he chose to display looks like, which in this album comes across as monotonous and repetitive. After all, the album was released under the name of Beenzino, not its producer Peejay nor the fashion brand WOORYOUNGMI, so the artist is entitled to the right to modify the theme. In fact, Beenzino has shown incredible ability to shift the focus of any project in which he participates to entirely himself on other occasions, too. For example, in 2015 he featured as a guest rapper in Yoon Jong Shin’s single “The Color,” and although the theme was about Mark Rothko and his mastery of color in his paintings, Beenzino talked about how “he” fashionably employs color in his daily life and mostly to his clothing. Likewise, when he collaborated with HA:TFELT in her song “The Bond,” his verse placed the spotlight again on himself as a celebrity, a Korean James Bond whose “gun” is in demand from girls. As such, he is an artist who is not afraid to put himself forward and speak about his identity, and such characteristic manifested itself at the highest level in *Up All Night EP*.

The problem is, however, that the identity he expresses in this album is very limited to say the least. In the first track, he imagines a perfect sexual partner. In the second one, he praises a hot female fashion model. The third track features him again as a chaser of party girls. In the next one, yet again, the narrator pursues physical relationships with females in an attempt to overcome his past break-up. After listening to all these numbers barring the final track, I could not help but ask myself whether physical love and sexual objectification are all Beenzino can talk about. Compared to his most renowned work such as *11:11* and *24:26* in which he looked back at how he rose to fame in his mid-twenties to articulate his artistic ambition in detail, the characterization in this album is flat as well as categorized in a limited way – it almost seems like the album features only a horny adolescent boy who keeps his energy exclusively on how he could possibly render his fame into relationships with girls. Indeed, a sexually predatory pop star is one of Beenzino's identity, but it is just a segment of the whole. Thus, to be able to meet only the fragment in a five-track album must be a disappointment.

To put it simply, Beenzino has done it again in *Up All Night EP*, showing his unique ability to turn every project given to him into his personal ostentation. The same pattern occurred several other times before and after the release of this album, in which he successfully stole the show due to his undeniable talent and slick rap skills. The cheekiness, self-ostentation, egocentrism that Beenzino exhibits are at the core of contemporary hip-hop culture and perhaps the very reason why Beenzino is so popular among his generation. In his 2015 single "Break," he declares, "naneun saranghago sipeo, neodo narado anigo nal malya [I want to love myself, not you nor the country]." Such individualism, which constitutes the heart of Beenzino's work, is evident in *Up All Night EP*, and it represents the attitude of young folks who strive to survive in the era of hyper-competition. Thus, I do not intend to tackle Beenzino's ever-swelling ego in his artistic world, though I am worried that he is

getting closer to self-duplication in terms of the themes of his work. From *Up All Night EP* to his latest release *We Are Going To*, the artist has focused exclusively on “swaggering” for almost two years. Although he has produced more work than any other hip-hop artists during the period, primarily through collaboration and guest-featuring, the theme has hardly developed from a mere self-display of sexuality and celebrity. So far, the rise of Beenzino has been exciting to watch, his egoistic theme interesting, but repeating the same old them is not, and we can only await his highly anticipated first full album in the hope that he has diversified his content.

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