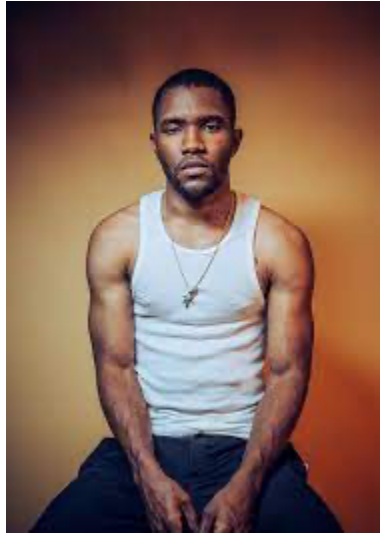


# Channel ORANGE by Frank Ocean

Reviewed by Sophie Forslund

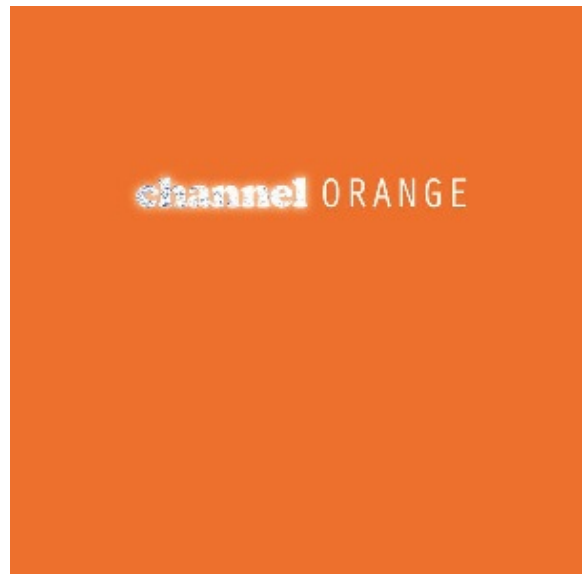


## Who is Frank Ocean?

Frank Ocean is a growing R&B/Alternative artist from Long Beach California. Frank has been making music for a long time, but finally released his first studio mixtape in February of 2011 called: *Nostalgia, Ultra*, which led to his first single “Novacane” to be his first song on Billboard’s top 100 list. 2012 is when he released his debut album *Channel ORANGE*, which is what really led to his career skyrocketing. After the release of *Channel ORANGE* Frank took a four-year break before releasing his next album ‘*Blonde*’, which made Frank Ocean a name that everyone knew. I chose to focus on *Channel ORANGE* because every time I listen to it, it proves itself to be more than just songs compiled together, it's art.

## Song 1: Start

The album begins with a 45-second-long intro. The album is full of these little clips that don't come with context, like *Fertilizer*, *Not Just Money*, and *End*. *Start* begins with the muffled sound of people talking and laughing and a phone chime. At about 8 seconds in it goes silent other than some shuffling around. Then about 23 seconds in you can hear a tv turn on and what sounds like a video game starting up. It has nostalgic background music that leads into the videogame beginning and then goes straight into the second song on the album. This intro could be interpreted in many different ways, but I see it as the beginning of a story. The video game beginning right as the next song starts leads me to believe that this album is going to be a journey, something similar to something you would see in a video game. There is also skepticism that the whole album is based on the summer that Frank met his first love, which would lead this opening to possibly relate to a memory he had with that person.



## Song 2: Thinking About You

Thinking About You is one of Frank's most commercially popular songs to this day. The whole song is filled with incredible imagery that really takes you into the story. It's full of small hints to deeper meanings in his life or this story he's telling. The song opens with "A tornado flew around my room before you came, excuse the mess it made, it usually doesn't rain in southern California, much like Arizona, my eyes don't shed tears but boy they pour when I'm thinking 'bout you." The line "it usually doesn't rain in southern California" seems to refer to the 1972 song "It Never Rains In Southern California" by John Hammond, a song that tells a story of an aspiring musician that moves to California to pursue his dream. This leads to another possibility from this opening verse, about how hurricane Katrina was the reason Frank moved to California to pursue music in the first place, maybe Katrina is the 'tornado' Frank is talking



about. The song is full of possible 'easter eggs' like this, which continues to prove Ocean's intricate lyricism. The song itself pertains to a continuous beat over a synthesizer repeating the same chord pattern over and over. It's a beautiful song that became an instant classic for Frank with almost 600 million streams on Spotify.

Rating: 8/10

## Song 5: Sweet Life

Sweet life is one of the many songs on this album that revolves around money. The song's protagonist falls in love with a woman who was born into wealth and begins by describing the area in which the love interest grew up. "Livin' in Ladera Heights, the black Beverly Hills Domesticated paradise, palm trees and pools", this paints a picture of an almost tropical paradise of a place to live. Later in the verse, you hear Frank mention how he can't relate saying "My TV ain't HD that's too real." The song's hook

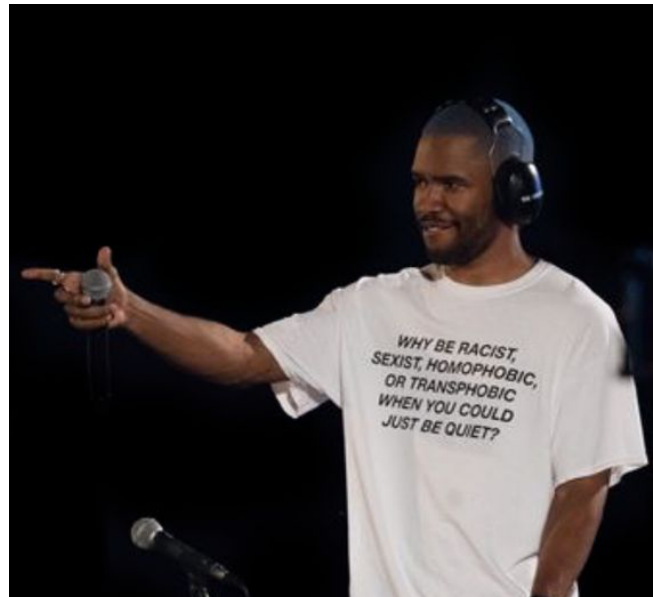
hints at the love interest's privilege by saying "You've had a landscaper and a housekeeper since you were born, the starshine always kept you warm." The bridge of the song alludes to how the rich neighbourhood may not be exactly all it's cracked up to be, "And the water is exactly what I wanted, It's everything I thought it would be, But this neighbourhood is gettin' trippier every day, The neighbourhood is goin' ape shit crazy." These lyrics almost remind me of The Monkees' song "Pleasant Valley Sunday" and how it goes into the dissatisfaction of life in the suburbs. The song consists of a catchy bass riff mixed with keyboard, until the first chorus hits and we hear the drums. The musicality of it progressively gets more and more intense with multiple instruments added the farther into the song you go.

Rating: 7/10

## Song 7: Super Rich Kids

Super Rich Kids is about exactly what you'd expect- super rich kids, but not just kids born into a wealthy family, but also how happiness diminishes when you've always had everything you've asked for, and never had to work for anything. The song opens with piano chords that eerily match Elton John's "Bennie and the Jets", but it continues to go uncredited. The song opens with the hook, which talks about many material things like "too many bottles of this wine we can't pronounce." This leads the listener to believe that they were expensive bottles of wine, (the type that people save for special occasions like anniversaries etc.) and they just drank them like they meant nothing because they don't. Another line in the hook is "maids come around too much, parents ain't around enough, too many joy rides in daddy's jaguar" which takes from the stereotype that rich parents buy materialistic things in place of love and affection for their children. One of my favourite lyrical setups of all time comes in the first verse of this song. Frank says "point the clicker at the tube, I prefer expensive news" which makes you think 'oh he's turning on his expensive tv', but then a few lines down he says "New ice, new glass, New watch, good times, babe, It's good times, yeah". To break this down I'll start by saying "new ice, new glass, new watch" is all alluding to his expensive diamond jewellery, including his watch, then it says "good times, good times yeah" the first good times is talking about time itself because he just talked about his watch, but Good Times is also a sitcom from the '70s. You may think I'm reaching here but Good Times is actually what came on when he turned on the tv, and to prove it in the last part of the verse you hear tv chatter in the background and then very clearly hear a man say "dynamite!" which is a catchphrase from one of the characters in the Good Times. This is such a strategic and clever tie between the lyrics that most people won't hear it at all when listening to the song, but Ocean has found a way to create these connections, and it's only the first verse of the song. There is so much more I could say about the artistry of this song, but I'll spare you.

Rating: 9/10



## Song 8: Pilot Jones

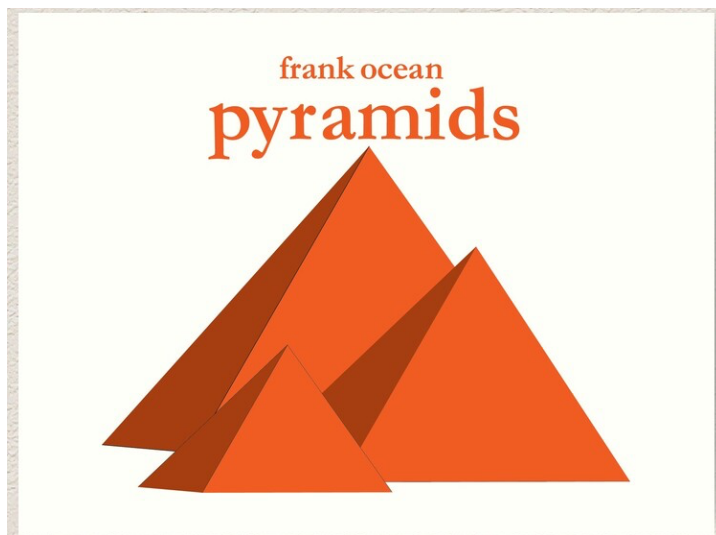
Pilot Jones is a song filled with metaphors and other meanings. On the surface, it's about Frank's complicated relationship with a woman addicted to drugs, he calls her Pilot Jones. The name Pilot Jones is clever because Pilot because she gets him high off her love, like a pilot would take a plane high, and Jones because she's his fix, he's 'jonesing' off of her. The first verse starts with the protagonist already being mad at the girl for getting high in the house without regard to the protagonist's life "You always smokin' in the house, what if my mother

comes over?” At the end of the verse, the protagonist explains why he can’t stay mad at her, “You’re the dealer and the stoner, with the sweetest kiss I’ve ever known.” ‘Pilot Jones’ is the dealer because she’s getting the protagonist high off her love, and she’s the stoner because she’s an addict in the drug world. By the end of the song the protagonist gives into Pilot Jones and says “But if I got a condo on a cloud, then I guess you can stay at my place” meaning ‘maybe we could just stay high together.’ Altogether I think it’s a beautiful song.

Rating: 8/10

## Song 10: Pyramids

Pyramids was Channel ORANGE’s second single before the album was released, but at almost ten minutes long, it’s not your regular introduction to an album, though it did set the tone for Frank’s storytelling abilities throughout Channel ORANGE. The song is split into two separate stories, each revolving around the protagonist Cleopatra. The first part of the song is led



in with moody chords of a synthesizer to introduce an uneasy feeling; along with the synthesizer is a drumbeat that was recorded and then played backwards to create an unusual sound. The hook that leads to the first verse gives hints that Cleopatra was taken from the palace and the palace is panicking. Now right before the first verse you get a strong synthesizer riff, the interesting thing about this riff is that it ascends four notes up and then descends the same notes back down, if you saw that laid out in front of you it would be the shape of a pyramid. The

first verse is brought to us with a dance beat. The lyrics describe Frank imagining Cleopatra coming back as he says, “We’ll run to the future, shining like diamonds, in a rocky world, rocky-rocky world.” Then he begins to describe a dance club within the walls of the pyramid. He uses great description in his lyrics as he describes them and the palace, “Our skin like bronze, and our hair like cashmere, As we march to the rhythm on the palace floor.” These descriptions really help paint a picture of what Frank wants us to imagine. This first verse is foreshadowing for the second half of the song where we do find ourselves in the future. The second verse comes after another rendition of the hook and starts with, “The jewel of Africa, jewel, what good is a jewel that ain’t still precious?” this reminds me of how Zimbabwe used to be referred to as the jewel of Africa, but had the title revoked when it experienced an economic fall, which refers to “what good is a jewel that ain’t still precious?” This has us think that for some reason Cleopatra

has lost her status as the jewel. Now, the last part of the second verse is “I found my black queen Cleopatra, Bad dreams, Cleopatra.” Now Cleopatra’s ethnicity has been something of an academic debate forever. People have portrayed her to have the lightest skin and the darkest skin, so this lyric here is Frank establishing that his Cleopatra is black. Then with “Bad dreams, Cleopatra”, this could refer to it being Frank’s ‘worst nightmare’, but I interpret it as the whole first half here being a dream sequence, which would make sense compared to the second half of the song. The last hook of the first half describes the death of Cleopatra, saying “Our war is over, our queen has met her doom” and “no more, serpents in her room, no more, he has killed Cleopatra, Cleopatra.” The death of Cleopatra in the song vaguely relates to the theory that the real Cleopatra killed herself with the bite of a poisonous snake. This is the end of the first half of the song, which is separated from the second half by that same strong synthesizer riff we’ve been hearing since the beginning, which bleeds into a sort of a synthesizer interlude as the whole song now changes key and drops in speed. When Frank begins singing again he describes a motel room, lipstick, underwear, and high heels. This is obviously a time jump as we’ve entered a more modern era. He also says, “Wake up to your girl, for now, let’s call her Cleopatra, Cleopatra”, this is just a reminder that although the story has changed, the love interest is still Cleopatra, which may allude to this girl’s high status in Frank’s life, as a queen would have. Then as the chorus comes we are reintroduced to the same synthesizer and chord progression as the first half of the song. The chorus says “she’s working at the pyramid, she’s working at the pyramid tonight” this is repeated continuously to complete the chorus. This alludes to Cleopatra being a stripper at a club called the pyramid, but we get more clues as to who our new narrator might be in the second verse. The second verse comes in with “pimpin’ in my convos, bubbles in my champagne, let it be some jazz playing,” now we know that our new narrator that Frank is portraying is a pimp, assumingly for our new Cleopatra. The rest of the verse continues to describe this lavish lifestyle he’s living, talking about motel suites, nice tv, jewels and jewelry. He ends the verse by saying “Got your girl working for me, Hit the strip and my bills paid, that keep my bills paid.” This just solidifies the idea that Frank is a pimp in this new narrative. Saying “hit the strip and my bills paid,” is basically saying that our new Cleopatra is a prostitute working for Frank. Also, saying “top floor motel suite,” is a sort of oxymoron since motels are often cheap and dirty whether they’re called a ‘suite’ or not. Also ‘convos’ is short for converse shoes, a typically cheap pair of shoes. It almost seems like Frank isn’t making the amount of



money that it seems he is trying to portray. We then go back into the chorus. Now the “working at the pyramid tonight” line makes sense since he said “hit the strip”, we can assume that the pyramid he’s speaking of is the Luxor Hotel in Las Vegas right off the strip. Our queen Cleopatra has now been reduced to a prostitute. As we move into the last verse of the song we hear the narrator’s point of view change as he begins talking directly to Cleopatra in the present tense. The lyrics in the last verse probably are school appropriate so I won’t go into all of them, but the way it’s written almost seems like the narrator is no longer the pimp, but someone who has a romantic history with Cleopatra. In the first line it says “showed up after work,” which leads us to believe that Cleopatra coming to see this man isn’t due to it being work for her, but at the end of the verse, he says “but your love ain’t free no more,” which contradicts that. Maybe our narrator thought she was there because she wanted to be, but she knew that she was doing it for money. After the verse, we hear our last chorus before the song ends. Looking back on this song its storytelling and metaphors are incredible. Breaking down the two halves of this song shows just how much detail went into writing it, and I’m sure I missed a ton of other little things. Frank Ocean releasing Pyramids as one of the two singles for channel ORANGE was a crazy thing to do from a record label standpoint im sure, but as an artist, I’m sure it felt like an accomplishment. Pyramids is so much more than music, it is its own work of art separate from the album.

Rating 10/10

### **Song 13: Monks**

Monks is my personal favourite song on the entire album due to its upbeat musicality and incredibly descriptive lyrics. It starts with a percussion-heavy intro and describes Frank’s relations with women from his concert, and relates performing to a religious experience. In the



first verse, he says “Mosh pits and bare chest, stage diving skydiver” which paints a picture of a rowdy concert. In the second verse, he switches to after the concert and he says “African girl speaks an English accent” and then at the end of the verse says “shows me her passport, she’s on her own tour” so he’s comparing her travels to the tour he is currently on. A phrase repeated multiple times through the song is “wave them high” which would refer to hands at a concert, but is used in a few different ways as the song continues. During the chorus, he uses allusions like “we’re in the clouds” with the repetition of “wave ‘em high girl, to the sky” to describe getting high. The third verse now describes the same concert as the first verse but changes the people to monks, “Monks in the moshpit, stage diving Dalai Lama, feet covered in cut flowers, they mosh for enlightenment.” this now shows

performing or concerts as something that is maybe cathartic to Frank like practicing a religion.

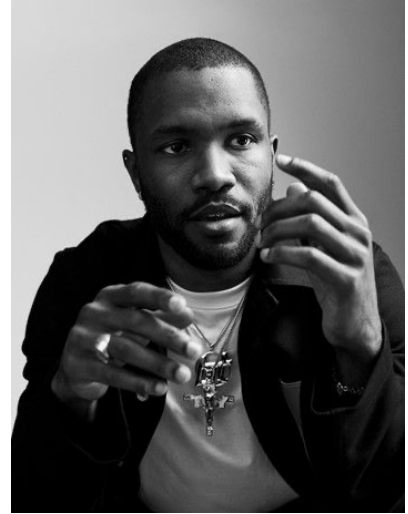
Then, in classic Frank Ocean fashion, the narrative changes again, now switching to verse four with “Indian girl sleeps above the temple, planning a runaway young at heart, you found a boyfriend and now you want to get away,” so we have now switched to a girl in a forbidden love scenario where she must run away from the temple to be with the one she loves. Verse four ends with “at sunset they’re gonna try and get away,” and then we lead into the second chorus. This chorus is no longer about getting high, but it’s about running away. It says “I never ask for much, but please keep up lover, we’ve got no choices left, the running’s fast, run run run run.” After this chorus, we hear “we made it safely, even with your father’s army trailing us, we escaped him, even with his archer’s bows at our backs.” The father that is forbidding the relationship could also be a metaphor for society. The archers could be people who attack online for a relationship that’s not approved of. Now the last verse of the song is my favourite because it paints such a clear picture, “We’re lost in a jungle underneath these clouds, there’s a monsoon that never ends, a coke white tiger woke us from our slumber, to guide and protect us till the end.” I can visualize this jungle so clearly, and describing the colour of the tiger as white as cocaine was such a good description as cocaine is a common drug within the music world and among rich people, so it could definitely be pulled from his own experiences. The song then ends with another chorus, this one the same as the first about getting high. I think it’s interesting how after the first chorus about getting high, we start to be given all these weird images that have nothing to do with the beginning of the song, almost as if that’s what he’s seeing or imagining while he’s high since the song ends with the high chorus again. All in all, I love this song and the rich imagery it brings.

Rating: 10/10

## **Song 14: Bad Religion**

Frank Ocean’s Bad Religion is definitely the closest song on the album to a ballad. An almost heartbreaking song full of religious overtones. It begins with an organ playing a simple chord progression, giving off the feeling of being in a church since that is often where you hear an organ. The first verse describes Frank in a taxi cab talking to his driver as if he was in a church confessional booth. “Taxi driver, be my shrink for the hour, and leave the meter running, it’s rush hour, so take the streets, if you wanna, just outrun the demons, could you?” It’s clear that Frank is in a distraught state, so much so that he’s asking a stranger to just listen to him so he has someone to talk to. He even asks him to take the main roads in rush hour so he has more time to talk, but says he can leave the meter running so he makes more money. In the pre-chorus, the taxi driver responds with “Allahu Akbar” which in English translates to something similar to “God is greater” or “God is good”, Frank’s response to this is “Don’t curse me” obviously misunderstanding what the driver is saying, the driver reiterates himself by saying “Bobo you need prayer” and Frank responds with “I guess it couldn’t hurt me.” This is a pure interaction between the driver and Frank, showing how the driver can obviously see how distressed he is. This leads us into the chorus where Frank says this possibly contradictory line, “If it brings me to my knees it’s a bad religion” this seems like a strange thing to say after saying prayer couldn’t

hurt to try, but as the chorus continues we see that it's not a regular religion Frank is talking about. "This unrequited love, to me, it's nothing but a one-man cult, and cyanide in my styrofoam cup, I can never make him love me, never make him love me." Now we see that this religion Frank is talking about is his unrequited love for another man, and he compares this love to a "one-man cult" continuing with the cult theme he says "cyanide in my styrofoam cup" a direct reference to the Jonestown cult mass suicide. This is Frank saying this love is almost like him ending his own life, this love is going nowhere. In the second verse, Frank mentions that he feels like he's living three lives at once, "Taxi drivers, I swear I've got three lives, balanced on my head like steak knives" this description paints an image of how much stress Frank must be under. We can assume that his three lives would be his public image as an artist and performer, his private life with family and friends, and his love for this man, which could also just be speaking on his love for other men in general. Frank continues by saying "I can't tell you the truth about my disguise, I can't trust no one." This just continues to show how much pressure Frank is under, and how this unreciprocated love is causing him so much stress and fear. We then go back into the pre-chorus which hasn't changed along with the chorus. After the chorus, we get one more verse as the song comes to an end. He says, "it's a, it's a bad religion, to be in love with someone who could never love you, only a bad religion could have me feeling the way I do." I think this is the perfect ending to this heartwrenching song. It's true, having strong feelings for someone who doesn't feel the same way is an awful feeling, and describing it as a 'one-man religion' is a really interesting take on a subject we've heard about in music time and time again.



Rating: 9/10

## **Conclusion:**

I think my feelings on this album are very clear based on my ratings of the songs. Channel ORANGE is an artistic masterpiece full of metaphors and allusion to things we've never seen brought into music like this before. His use of religion, drugs, and love, in his music is repeated but never done quite the same, nothing is too repetitive since every song is its own story. The descriptive lyrics and use of imagery are my favourite parts of each song since you can really visualize what Frank is trying to describe; you really feel like you are inside his head seeing the things he was thinking about while writing the music. I think the album is a beautiful piece of art and I hope to see him releasing more music soon.

Rating: 10/10

## **Citing**

Citing goes to Cole Cushna, the host of the Dissect Podcast, which showed me the coolest connections and correlations in Frank Ocean's lyrics that I hadn't heard before.