

# Xue: SZA'S SOS is a force to be reckoned with

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Five years after her debut album Ctrl, SZA finally released SOS, her sizzling and eclectic sophomore album, on Dec. 9. SOS is wholeheartedly unique, effortlessly exploring the spectrum ranging from a confident feminist to a heartbroken ex plotting for revenge. Despite the range of the 23-track record, SZA masterfully delves into her vulnerability and establishes her dominance over the charts and the R&B genre.

SOS has long been in the making. Though she only released a few singles, including "Shirt" and "Good Days," after 2017's Ctrl, SZA wrote hundreds of songs in the meantime that she condensed to only 23 on SOS. In fact, SZA originally promised a "SZA summer" in 2022 before her record label pushed her album release date further back to December. To placate her fans, she vowed, "I'm making the best album of my life for [SOS]," to Flaunt magazine, and she delivered.

The cover art of SOS immediately establishes the tone of the record. The art prominently displays SZA perched on the edge of a diving board against the backdrop of a deep blue ocean. SZA was inspired by a photograph of Princess Diana in 1977 and intended to convey a similar atmosphere of isolation. However, the title track, with its Morse code distress signals juxtaposed against a passionate anthem of independence, opens the door to other tracks exploring deeper reaches of her subconscious beyond her isolation.

SZA is most notable for subverting R&B's traditional tropes, and SOS is no different. "Kill Bill," a cutthroat stab at an ex overlaid on a powerful electric bass, proclaims, "I might kill my ex / Not the best idea." Unafraid of displaying her most disturbing, dark thoughts, she declares, "Rather be in jail than alone."

Departing from the severe, riveting chorus of "Kill Bill," she slides through luxuriously breathless riffs and demanding punches on "Seek and Destroy" before she blends with the strong percussion in "Low" and "Love Language." Further undermining traditional songwriting structure, SZA blends pop grunge and country elements in "F2F" before reminiscing on the age of physical mixtapes in "Smokin' on my Ex Pack."

Coupled with these insightful declarations, SZA balances the album with mid-tempo songs that reveal the most intimate facets of her psyche. The rolling vocals of "Ghost on the Machine" feature Phoebe Bridgers's indie voice. Though they seem like an unlikely pair, SZA and Bridgers's voices layer exquisitely as they question the love of humanity with a metaphor of artificial intelligence. "Gone Girl" exposes a similar level of vulnerability, as SZA muses over her need for space and not for scrutiny. However, the peak of her transparency reveals itself in "Special" when she plunges into her self-doubt and body dysmorphia. She compares herself to "the girl at the Gucci store," when she professes, "I never liked her, wanted to be like her / Hate how you look at her, 'cause you never saw me / Like I was an art piece, like I was an ordinary girl."



The Come Up Show CC BY 2.0 [Wiki Commons]

On her sophomore album, SZA establishes her dominance within R&B, exploring a spectrum powerful emotions.

SZA's masterful artistry extends far beyond the lyricism of her songs, to frame the structure of the record itself. SOS' 23 tracks amount to more than an hour of music, yet each track is only two or three minutes long. "Good Days" and "Gone Girl," the album's longest songs, are four minutes long. Instead of jamming an abundance of material on a smaller number of songs, SZA has intentionally spread her content out, making her album a marketing masterpiece.

SZA's strategy is just one case study in a recent trend of shorter songs at the top of the Billboard charts. While she may be increasing her listeners' attention with shorter tracks, she's simultaneously improving her chances of landing more hit songs on the Billboard.

SZA's strategy seems to be working. As of Jan. 8, SOS has been the No. 1 album for four weeks in a row on the Billboard 200 Albums Chart, making it the first R&B album by a female artist to do so since Janet Jackson's Janet in 1993. "Kill Bill" also trended on TikTok, along with SZA's Saturday Night Live jingle "Big Boys," giving her vast exposure and even catching the eye of Taylor Swift, who praised the artist's works on Instagram on Jan. 17.

Despite her exponential rise to fame, the very length of the album brings up questions on whether SOS is the beginning of the end of SZA's musical career. Considering SOS is not a deluxe edition album, some critics have speculated that packing an eclectic mix of tracks onto one album is a sign of departure from the music industry.

SZA fans and newcomers alike can only hope SOS is not a distress signal from the star, indicating it's too late to save a gone girl. In the meantime, SOS offers just a glimpse into SZA's imaginative musical genius, proving she and her works are forces to be reckoned with.