Culture



In A24's psychological thriller "Mother Mary," Anne Hathaway plays a fictional pop star with religious imagery. (A24)



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A24's psychological thriller "Mother Mary" premiered in U.S. theaters last weekend to mixed reviews. Directed by David Lowery, the film explores the strained creative — and, it is implied, romantic — relationship between an aging pop star (Anne Hathaway) and her former costume designer (Michaela Coel). Hathaway's titular character draws aesthetically and lyrically from religious imagery, and appears to be inspired by pop icons like Madonna and Lady Gaga. But some argue the concept may have another source: the electropop duo MOTHERMARY, who have been making music that centers religious iconography and queerness for the past decade.

Ex-Mormon identical twin sisters Elyse and Larena Winn are the "real life" MOTHERMARY, and they have been vocal about feeling hurt, confused and angry about what feels like intellectual property theft. In addition to the film, A24 has also released a soundtrack album called "Mother Mary: Greatest Hits" with songs performed by Hathaway and co-written by huge industry names FKA twigs (who has a supporting part in the movie), Charli xcx and Jack Antonoff.

Speaking with NCR, the sisters said they wish they had been asked to consult on the film. Their frustration stems from how very personal MOTHERMARY is to them, not just as artists but as women who have left high-control religion. A24 did not respond to NCR's request to comment.



Twin sisters Elyse and Larena Winn originally formed the electropop MOTHERMARY as a way of working through the trauma they experienced in the Mormon church. (Courtesy of MOTHERMARY)

"What this [band] was for us," Larena explained, "is examining our morality, our values from the ground up because what we were taught, we don't believe anymore, and we need new ones, so we got to figure out what that is."

One deliberate choice the pair made was in choosing the band name.

"I think originally I was just really angry after leaving Mormonism," Elyse explained, "and I wanted to be really sacrilegious, and I was like, who's the holiest woman? Obviously Mother Mary! So I wanted to reclaim that story and tell a version of it for myself. ... Mother Mary is like the ultimate example of impossible expectations that women were supposed to be."

"She was the only example in the Bible," Larena agreed. "It was that, or the sinner woman, the harlots, the seducers. ... The only example is impossible. She didn't choose her life at all. God just chose her. He just impregnated her out of the blue. ... It's not a beautiful [story] to me at all."

In hindsight, the Winns feel that Mary's perceived hyperfemininity pressured them and their female peers into a purity culture that felt harmful.



Anne Hathaway plays a fictional pop star in A24's psychological thriller "Mother Mary." (A24)

"We were told that if we had sex before marriage, you were essentially ... they compared us to a chewed piece of gum. That's done so much harm to us," Elyse explained.

Larena continued: "There's a scale of how pure you can be, and the ultimate again, goes back to Mother Mary. Virgin, also a mother, most pure, but the rest of us have to have sex, but we have to stay pure, so how many partners have you had, and how do you dress? How do you speak? It's all control, and you can never win, and you're never going to measure up."

Forming MOTHERMARY was part of processing this trauma, allowing the women to wear what they wanted and to enjoy their sexual personhoods.



Anne Hathaway plays a fictional pop star in A24's psychological thriller "Mother Mary." (A24)

"I never want another woman to feel the way I did when I was 8 years old when I thought I was going to burn in hell forever," Elyse told NCR.

By developing a more authentic relationship with their own bodies, the sisters discovered things about themselves even they didn't know.

"[I realized] I've always been attracted to women," Larena remembered. "I am queer. I was exploring that queerness but that comes early on with a ton of shame and feelings of self-hatred and the need to guard yourself against the world. ... You have to put that armor on, and I feel like MOTHERMARY kind of was that for us."

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For Elyse and Larena, MOTHERMARY was also an armor that helped them deconstruct deep-seeded religious trauma. It is a name that neither of them take lightly, knowing the importance of Mary to many religious communities, including their former church. This kind of personal connection is part of what makes it so painful to feel that Hollywood had co-opted their identity.

Through engagement with Mary in all her mythic proportions and dimensions, the Winns have reimagined what it means to be a mother — not just to children, but to fans and members of their community. Larena explained that they "also wanted to reclaim this idea of a mother doesn't always look one way. Motherhood [doesn't] only look like having six kids as a Mormon. ... I think being a good mother can also just be being a good matriarch, mothering your community."