

The New Voice of Protest Music

Bob Dylan sang, “the times they are a changin’” and it is as true now as it was in 1964. Music is not impervious to the changing times either. In a world where sub-genres like “mumble rap” are dominating airwaves and YouTube plays it is a sign of hope when lyricism, consciousness and talent take center stage. Bob Dylan’s form of protest music was calm and acoustic-folk driven, but the modern voice of change is loud, aggressive, and relentlessly forthright. Killer Mike and El-P’s project Run the Jewels is among the contemporary freedom-fighters providing the public with inspiration while proving that art can still have substance. Run the Jewels’ latest effort *Run the Jewels 3* dominating the charts as a rap, hip-hop/r&b, vinyl, and physical album is the sign of hope that we need.

I have been looking forward to this release since it was announced or, more realistically, since the second I reached the end of *Run the Jewels 2*. For those unfamiliar with the project- it is the musical duo of rapper Killer Mike from Atlanta, Georgia, and rapper/producer El-P from Brooklyn, New York. These are two cities with very distinct musical sounds, especially when you consider hip-hop/rap; you have the Southern rap sound tweaked by the funky, dirty beats of the ATL and then you have the classic East Coast vibes mixed with hustlers’ stories coming from Brooklyn. Mike and El come together to form something completely unique though and it is the kind of hip-hop that makes you want to bounce your head and throw your ‘bows. El-P’s production has a very aggressive, bass-bumping style to it that pairs perfectly with the vicious flows that both he and Killer Mike can spit. The last two outings from these guys were an introduction and a come-up. The latest venture, as displayed by the album cover’s now gold-plated Fist and Gun symbol that the duo is known for, is a victory lap for how far they have

come and simultaneously a rallying cry for the people as we are all thrust into some uncertain times.

The songs that best encapsulate the album's message are *Talk to Me*, *Hey Kids (Bumaye)*, *Thieves (Screamed the Ghost)*, *2100*, and *A Report to the Shareholders/Kill Your Masters*. *Talk to Me*, the first single released from the album, sets the tone for the record; with Mike's opening lines, "we return from the depths of the badland with a knife and gun in our waistband," we know the duo are coming out guns-blazing. The song includes references to the continued harassment of African Americans in the United States and the possible rise of fascism in the country. Mike's lines,

"born Black, that's dead on arrival, my job is to fight for survival

in spite of these All Lives Matter-ass white folk,"

air out frustrations regarding the habitual persecution of African Americans in America.

Meanwhile, El-P cites the sacrifices of veterans and the destruction of Hitler's empire, "you think baby Jesus killed Hitler just so I'd whisper," as reasons to not back down in the face of adversity. Within the first five minutes of the album both artists are using their lyrical prowess to discuss issues that are plaguing the country and they are not pulling any punches about them. They want listeners to know that these issues can be fought and that they are not going to sit quietly while their rights are being ravaged. The song sets the stage for a barrage of tracks that are made to address grievances and supply solutions.

The track *Hey Kids (Bumaye)* is one of the most infectious and empowering songs that Run the Jewels have released to date. An important idea conveyed throughout the album is the ascension of the common people to overthrow their "masters" and take back the power. The title

itself uses a Congolese word that translates to “kill him,” letting you know that the duo is suggesting the most drastic of means to bring freedom back to the masses. Mike, in his typical top form, starts his verse inciting the “classless masses” to take up arms and burn those palaces built by the fascists. He encourages the common people to recognize their strength and revolt against the powers that have kept them down. Mike uses his anger to stimulate that of the people, but El-P takes a different approach by proving himself more formidable than the powers-that-be. He uses his verse to describe the authorities as being merely a fraction as powerful as himself-

“I lived half my life to give half my cash to these half-man imps, aye

They got half a heart, they give half a f***, they got half the guns, woo!”

Again, both lyricists are using their platforms to encourage revolt from the people and to empower the masses. The beat bumps while the lyrics pump up the hearts of the listeners.

The eighth track of the album, *Thieves (Screamed the Ghost)*, begins with sirens leading into an audio clip from *The Twilight Zone* and can only be described as haunting. The ballad paints a picture of the effects of continued racism on society while discussing the causes of rioting as well as its place as a unique form of protest. Mike starts off the track talking to the ghost of someone who has fallen victim to brutality, likely at the hands of the police. The agony of despair can be felt in his words as he equates those murdered to “prey” in a deadly game. The true power of this song, however, comes from the back and forth between Mike and El in their respective second verses. El begins by describing the scene of a shooting through the eyes of a reporter who witnesses civilians with their heads hung low. Suddenly he sees the dead come to life and explains:

“So many years of this violence

Now we're surrounded by the souls of the dead and defiant

Saying, "Look what you've done, you designed it"

When the bough breaks, hear the wraith scream, "Riot!"

The powerful accusation is that vengeance is coming due to the violence of the officials sworn to protect us. Mike continues the intensity of the onslaught from the dead with his verse:

“Death gon' deal with the guilty, mane

The universe curses the killers, mane

Can't keep killin' God's children, mane

A pound of flesh is what you owe

Your debt is due, give up your ghost.”

The imagery of the dead returning for vengeance is a perfect allusion to the violence of rioting. As the news crews come in to report on the deaths there is a solemn silence as grief forms over the crowd. Once the grief grows and sees no resolution it is replaced with anger. Mike and El recognize that riots begin because of frustration when no other tactics are working. If we ignore the pleas of those who are dying at the hands of our lawmen the pleas will form into screams. As the closing audio clip from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. so perfectly summarizes- “in the final analysis, a riot is the language of the unheard.”

2100, my personal favorite track from the album, came out the day after the election of Donald Trump. It works to calm the public by giving their concern a voice. The tracks until this song have been very aggressive while discussing violence, riots, warfare, and revolution. The riff

in this track is more somber and creates a tonal shift conveying that Mike and El, like most of the country, do not want to have to fight forever. El's lines,

“I just wanna live/don't wanna ever have to load a clip

only hunt bliss, I am still a kid in my heart,”

paint the picture of a tired fighter ready to end his years of quarreling. Possibly the greatest line on the album comes from this track as Killer Mike sings,

“I'm here to tell you don't let 'em tell you what's right, wrong

make love, smoke kush, try to laugh hard and live long

that's the antidote, you defeat the Devil when you hold onto hope.”

Killer Mike is still encouraging defiance, but here he implores us to try living happily instead of fighting. The pain in this track is highlighted by the hope that is still blazing in the hearts of the rappers. Truly, this track could have been an album closer that leaves off on a somber note while there is still a flicker of fire burning. Instead, the rappers follow it with a succession of songs that return to the powerfully energetic tone of the album.

The album's closer, *A Report to the Shareholders/Kill Your Masters*, is a two-part banger that caps off the album's theme of overthrowing power when we are forced to stay in line. As if the barrage of rebellious swagger was not enough in the first thirteen songs, the boys brought in previous collaborator and the champion of Guerilla Radio himself Zach de la Rocha to finish off the album. It is on this track that Killer Mike and El-P are perhaps most in-sync. El starts his verse with the following lines:

“Beware of horses

I mean a horse is a horse of course, but who rides is important

Sitting high with a uniform, barking orders, demanding order.”

He is reflecting on the importance of recognizing who is really in control especially in terms of those that are leading us. Mike shares the sentiment with the opening to his verse:

“Choose the lesser of the evil people, and the Devil still gon' win

It could all be over tomorrow, kill our masters and start again.”

Both rappers are implying that we need to beware of the people who are trying to lead us and to always think rationally about their election. Choosing the lesser of two evils is an obvious reflection on the American sentiment about the 2016 Presidential Race that saw two very unpopular candidates take the lead. The message here is to only support those truly worthy of our support. The second part of the song kicks in with strong verses from the duo as well, but Zach de La Rocha’s closing verse perfectly punctuates the album’s message.

“Done appealing to our killers, man, to stop the bleedin'

This song's a dirty bomb for they dirty dealings...

The world surges, the nation's nervous

The crowds awaken, they can't disperse us

We ain't at your service

Won't stay sedated

Won't state our numbers for names and

Remaining faceless

We dignified, they can't erase us

We ain't asleep, we rope-a-dope through the flames

Man, the world gonna ride on what's implied in the name

Run 'em.”

If Run the Jewels came out with gun's blazing, then Rocha is ending the album without holstering those weapons. He explicitly cites the music as a means of dealing explosive truth and awakening the people to the realities of our world. He backs up the duo's emphasis on the strength of the average civilian and finishes off by paying them credit with his final lines.

The overall intensity of *Run the Jewels 3* utilizes a variety of aggressive, often violent lyrics to convey its message. The duo is not actually encouraging violence from the average citizen, but instead using their rhetoric and talent as the weapons for change. Listeners can relate to the artists' frustrations and feel empowered by the confidence that the duo are placing in the people. Modern protestors have seen the tactics of the past that asked for rights and equality. The difference here is that in this new era of unrest we are not asking politely- we are demanding. We have reached the point where we know that all people are created equal and we will not rest until there is freedom for all. Protests are a weekly, sometimes daily, occurrence. The fight has continued for decades and the flames of revolution have only grown, stoked simultaneously by those who oppress and those who empower. *Run the Jewels 3* is a rallying cry, a battle chant, and a preemptive victory march for anyone feeling unsure about the current political climate.