

Review of *Experimental Rap* by JPEGMAFIA

6.2/10

An album titled '*Experimental Rap*', where the rap is as easy to predict as it gets.

Barrington (JPEGMAFIA) Hendricks, *EXPERIMENTAL RAP* (AWAL Recordings, 2026)



Never before has a 6/10 felt so disappointing. For an artist as groundbreaking as Barrington Hendricks (aka JPEGMAFIA), '*Experimental Rap*' feels like an exceptionally ordinary project.¹ For someone who has followed Hendricks for over three years, this is a disappointment born of knowing exactly what he is capable of but refuses to achieve on this album.

This album's biggest flaw is that it only *sounds* like a JPEGMAFIA album. It does not nearly have the depth of his previous works. Crudely, it sounds like someone tried to make a "*Peggy type beat*" without understanding what makes his previous work so enjoyable. The beats gesture toward furthering his signature abrasiveness without committing to experimentation, and the lyrics circle his usual provocations without landing them on a more interesting source of commentary. It is the musical equivalent of a cover version performed by someone who has studied the surface but missed the soul.

JPEG's music has been in the cultural zeitgeist since very early in his career. Hendricks' debut under the JPEGMAFIA name, *Black Ben Carson*, is a record that gestures toward the remarkable work that would follow, despite its minimal production and extremist political lyrics. His following album, *Veteran*, represents a notable step forward. Despite its own frustrations – with haphazardly used samples dressed up as experimentation and a production feeling more disjointed than purposefully avant-garde – *Veteran* was a significant work in pushing Hendricks, and experimental rap as a genre, into a more popular position. *All My Heroes Are Cornballs* is a considerably stronger effort, and *LP!* is finer still – a record that sits among his most accomplished to date.

His collaborative record with Danny Brown in 2023, *Scaring the Hoes*, merits particular attention. It is the sort of album that presents every conceivable reason to dislike it, wearing them all on its sleeve – irritating samples, relentless profanity and blasphemy, loud and obnoxious lyricism, aggressive mixing, and references that could charitably be described as terminally online – and yet, through some strange phenomenon, all of these qualities combine into one of the more genuinely

¹ Last.fm, 'JPEGMAFIA', *Last.fm*, <<https://www.last.fm/music/JPEGMAFIA>> [Accessed 10 June 2026].

brilliant and unhinged listening experiences in recent rap memory. The record pushes boundaries in every direction, opening on a bar complaining about Elon Musk’s introduction of paid Twitter / X verification.² The negatives of the album, so to speak, cancel one another out. It is worth noting, however, that the subsequently released director’s cut of the record represented a considerable step down from the original; Peggy’s additions – with substantially little contributed by Brown – came across as haphazard.

It is, however, his 2024 release *I Lay Down My Life For You* that stands as the cumulative highlight of his output to this point. The production of the album combines a gritty, post-punk metal style production with a dark, shouted rap that perfectly suits the overall style of the album. Both the album and its *Directors Cut* (2025) incorporate some of Peggy’s most mature uses of sampling and mixing. Where *Scaring the Hoes* suffered slightly from unbalanced mixing, *I Lay Down My Life For You* managed to improve on every technical level from it.

With this trajectory in mind, JPEGMAFIA wields a discography that, with one or two exceptions, has moved steadily upward. However, Peggy’s downward turn appeared to begin with his EP collaboration with Flume, *We Live in a Society*, which was – by any reasonable measure – quite mediocre. *theneedledrop* a disappointing 5/10, unimpressed by the basic choices for the songs.³ The EP was a reminder that the magic of *Scaring the Hoes* was not infinitely replicable...

Thus, one returns to *Experimental Rap*. Whether *We Live in a Society* was a genuine creative detour or simply an ill-advised departure from his own standards, its mediocrity planted a seed of doubt in his audience. *Experimental Rap*, unfortunately, does little to uproot it.

The title of the project foreshadows its own greatest flaw: it is an album titled ‘Experimental Rap’ that fundamentally fails to be experimental. It fails at its own named purpose from the outset. If an album is named after the genre, it needs to be either genre-defining or genre-pushing. Which, at this point in his discography, JPEGMAFIA should be no stranger to doing. Unfortunately, especially on Peggy’s standards, there is not much *experimental* about it. It does not strive to challenge the listener – especially not returning viewers – further than a few abrasive beats. Even then, the beats which are sharper seem to remain less defining than his older songs such as ‘HAZARD DUTY PAY!’ and ‘Burfict!’, or his recent works like ‘AI Girlfriend’ and ‘either on or off the drugs’. *Experimental Rap*, in contrast to his previous albums – perhaps with an ironic exception to *Scaring the Hoes* – works as

² “Eight dollars too much [...] that’s expensive” – JPEGMAFIA and Danny Brown, ‘Lean Beef Patty’, in *Scaring the Hoes* (AWAL Recordings, 2023).

³ Anthony Fantano, ‘Flume & JPEGMAFIA - We Live in a Society EP REVIEW’, *theneedledrop*, 6 May 2025 <https://youtu.be/X3vp2Vg_7TY?si=5-mKBAXIf0X6bePd> [Accessed 10 June 2026].

a fun, frat-party soundtrack in some of the songs. However, the album isn't insane enough or boundary-pushing enough to leave the listener in any form of shock, thus negating potential for a re-listen.

One of the primary issues with this record concerns the lyrics. There is nothing particularly strange or interesting being said throughout them. The lyrics are, on the whole, rather disappointing – the same artist who produced genuinely unusual and controversial political statements throughout his albums. Now, however, he gives the impression of ticking boxes in his Charlie Kirk reference and the song entitled 'Meet the Dealers'. '1st Amendment', the song with the infamous Charlie Kirk bar, is closer to what one was looking for, but audiences had been anticipating a Charlie Kirk reference for some time prior to the album, it arrives feeling contrived and rather flat, despite its perceived controversial nature. The intro to the song repeats the Kirk name five times across six lines, deploying it as a punchline hinging entirely on the double meaning of "neck" and making a vague gesture at political violence. The joke, such as it is, exhausts itself on first listen, and the remainder of the song abandons the political framing entirely in favour of gun and sexual imagery that bears no relationship to the Kirk premise. Compare this to the Earl Sweatshirt diss embedded in '¥ (Yen)' where he says "battle with Devon / beef with a ghost", it lands harder because it is incidental and unannounced, a single cutting line that does not need to announce its own significance.

These criticisms come with an exception, 'GYBB', which contains some of the abrasive and unusual lyricism of the album. However, even here the song fails to extend into territory that feels *truly* shocking or experimental. The Russian-language sample that opens 'GYBB' – "Что шумишь / берёзонька?" ("*Why do you make noise / little birch tree?*") – gestures toward the kind of jarring cultural dissonance that characterised his best work, and the self-declaration "I'm racist, and I don't like that" carries genuine unease in its self-aware contradiction. But the verse that follows retreats into the same tropes as every other song – watches, sex, other rappers – and does nothing to develop or complicate the provocative frame the intro established. The opening earns attention; the song fails to justify it. Beyond the political posturing, there is also a tendency throughout the record toward promiscuous commentary on women that rarely amounts to anything beyond surface level objectification. This is particularly frustrating as these themes appear across many tracks, often overshadowing more interesting conceptual ideas - not even considering the horrible implications his has for the message of his music. Bragging about prostitution or about "your girl" is a consistent motif.⁴ This pattern manifests most bluntly in 'Babygirl', where the chorus pivots from ostensibly addressing a woman's independence – "baby girl, you don't really need no man" – to the post-chorus immediately

⁴ 'experimental cr*p', *who is whulo*, 23 May 2026, [23:16]
<https://youtu.be/DgHdPGz5XyA?si=HZvV5RZ_LsThyEgx> [Accessed 8 June 2026]

undermining it with “I’m rapping like Cuz, I’m f-ng his [girl]”, contradicting the previous reading into straightforward score-settling against a male rival. The woman in question functions not as a subject but as a weapon. The same logic governs ‘Mask On’, where lines about paying for prostitution sit within two bars of boasting about self-producing his record, as though financial autonomy and sexual commodification are equivalent achievements worth listing together.

In the song ‘Meet the Dealers’, despite the collaborative nature of the track, Peggy returns to objectifying language even in the midst of a more interesting concept. This issue also seeps into ‘Since Met Yay’ – which will be discussed in further detail shortly – where a song title with such high potential for introspective storytelling winds up falling back onto a trope that Hendricks creates for himself. The verse in the that most clearly illustrates this is the second, where the Kanye commentary – notably conceptual core of the track – occupies barely two lines before dissolving into more lyrics about women. The song’s title promises an interesting perspective; but the lyrics deliver a brief shrug followed by a return to the default register. For an artist so renowned for his political commentary, this is especially disappointing.

There is a considerable reliance on triplet flows throughout the record, which grows repetitive. He rarely ventures beyond it - which is, again, a disappointment for what presents itself as experimental rap rather than experimental production. A similar criticism was levelled at Drake’s ‘Iceman’: the development of a particular rapping style and the subsequent refusal to depart from it. JPEGMAFIA is no different - it is a kind of mixed, agitated delivery that accelerates at certain points and breaks into something approaching a shout when the beat demands it. This is audible across ‘Burning Hammer’, ‘Meet the Dealers’, and ‘Degenerates Prayer’ in almost identical form: a mid-tempo triplet pattern that tightens and accelerates toward the hook before releasing into a brief shouted phrase, then resets. By the third instance of this structure on ‘Degenerates Prayer’ the style has become so familiar that the aggressive content it is meant to deliver feels more neutral. The listener has already adjusted to the rhythm before the threat lands. It does not venture offbeat, nor does it do much of genuine interest. Despite JPEG’s visceral criticisms of Drake’s bland, repetitive formula of a style; Peggy appears to have become the Drake of the experimental rap genre, using the same style and discussing the same topics on repeat.

The most conceptually interesting song, ‘Since I Met Ye’, is simply dim and predictable in its lyricism. The notion that he was criticised for collaborating with Ye (formerly Kanye West) on *Vultures I* and has chosen not to concern himself with public opinion is not a revelation.⁵ The chorus

⁵ Sheldon Pearce, ‘JPEGMAFIA Looks Inward on “I LAY DOWN MY LIFE FOR YOU”’, *NPR Music*, 8 August 2024 <<https://www.npr.org/2024/08/08/g-s1-15480/jpegmafia-i-lay-down-my-life-for-you-review>> [Accessed 10 June 2026].

- “since I met Ye, I’m dead to you [...] / that’s why I wear jet black” - states the premise plainly, but the verse offers nothing beyond it. There is no reflection on what the collaboration cost him, no engagement with why the criticism stung or didn’t, no texture to the defiance. “I’m dead to you” is only asserted. For contrast, the equivalent moment on ‘¥ (Yen)’, where industry dismissal is framed through the lens of financial paranoia and self-erasure, saying “wake up a target, I might get erased”. This communicates psychological weight that ‘Since I Met Ye’ tries to have. That said, the production on the track is remarkable. The production of the song is among the more unusual and avant-garde pieces he has produced in some time, and one that blends effectively into what is perhaps one of the finest songs on the album.

Returning to the subject matter of ‘Since I Met Ye’, it is worth contextualising this record within JPEGMAFIA’s recent conduct more broadly. As he portrays himself as a controversial nonconformist who does not care about how audiences perceive him, he has attracted a considerable amount of controversy. Despite his previous attitude painting him as a self-aware figure that argues with anybody, with lyrics complaining about all sorts of subject matters, he has developed more serious criticism of late. A public dispute with Earl Sweatshirt⁶ and pointed remarks directed at former collaborator Danny Brown being among the more notable examples.⁷ This is, of course, not without precedent; he has previously taken aim at Armand Hammer in similar fashion.⁸

Whether this constitutes a deliberate persona – effectively painting himself as a villain to manufacture an audience that wants to dislike him – is a reasonable question.⁹ Peggy argues that the hostility directed at him by industry figures and online observers was already present, and that he has simply chosen to lean into it. He states that he withheld the album from advance listeners in order to see how the industry handles work from an artist it has already decided to dislike, contending that many lack the maturity to separate art from artist.¹⁰ There is, however, a less charitable reading of this response: that a significant portion of this behaviour is a reaction to the lukewarm reception *Experimental Rap* received, and that manufacturing controversy served as a convenient shield for an

⁶ Joe Price, ‘Earl Sweatshirt Calls Out JPEGMAFIA for Seemingly Taking Subliminal Shots: “Lmao Leave Me Alone”’, *Complex*, 1 May 2026 <<https://www.complex.com/music/a/backwoodsaltar/earl-sweatshirt-calls-out-jpegmafia>> [Accessed 8 June 2026].

⁷ Mark Elibert, ‘JPEGMAFIA Fires Back at Danny Brown Over “Scaring the Hoes 2” Comments: “This Isn’t True”’, *Complex*, 8 November 2025 <<https://www.complex.com/music/a/markelibert/jpegmafia-fires-back-danny-brown-scaring-hoes-2-comments>> [Accessed 10 June 2026].

⁸ Mason Stoutamire, ‘JPEGMAFIA Severs Ties Across Samples in “LP!”’, *New University*, 10 November 2021 <<https://newuniversity.org/2021/11/10/jpegmafia-severs-ties-across-samples-in-lp/>> [Accessed 8 June 2026].

⁹ Anthony Fantano, ‘JPEGMAFIA’s Response Is Pretty Bad’, *theneedledrop*, 30 May 2026 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tdacFzElhe0>> [Accessed 10 June 2026].

¹⁰ Ibid.

album that did not perform as expected. Both readings could be accurate, but it does not negate the significant lack in quality of the album as a whole.

What Peggy fails to acknowledge is that much of the poor response has been about the quality of the album, which is very lacklustre. Most of the controversy comes from outside of the album itself. The album is stockpiled with lyrics that allude to controversy, but very few that provide reason to stir any. The track titles, such as 'Meet the Dealers' and 'Degenerates Prayer', suggest songs that will be aggressive and confrontational, yet in practice they are almost humorously tame. It almost feels like the controversy around the album is to compensate for its own lack of punch. The most controversial thing about the songs may well be how unremarkable his performances are.

This extends to a broader problem with the album's confrontational tone, which frequently feels performed rather than felt. The score-settling writing of the album is rarely elaborated upon with any conviction. 'Chat' is the most notable example of this. The song opens with a dedication to Rodney Hinton Jr. and a chorus demanding justice which represents the kind of political directness his earlier work was built on. But by the second verse, the political content has diffused into generalised militancy that gestures at revolution without committing to any specific argument, before the verse moves once again on to sexual boasting. The genuine grievance is present but there is no willingness to sit with it. The Kanye commentary, for instance, amounts to little more than a single bar before the subject is abandoned entirely (in favour of the aforementioned objectification of women). For an album that positions itself as a reckoning, it is reluctant to reckon with anything in much depth at all. The title of 'Degenerates Prayer' implies a confrontation with Hendricks' own contradictions, but the lyrical content doesn't offer any resolution to this. The repeated "do it alone" refrain of the outro lands as self-mythologising rather than self-examination. Compared to 'War Over Land', where he asks, "why [his] mind [is] always focused on war?", it reads as a genuine question rather than a flex. This works as a rare moment where the performance drops and something unresolved surfaces. That this moment is isolated makes the surrounding performed defiance harder to accept on its own terms.

The production is one of the album's greatest strengths, but even then, it isn't without its flaws. Many of the songs seem to borrow elements of his previous albums, which works stylistically but does not progress his work in any particular direction. None of the songs reach the same heights as his previous work either.

One of the main mastering / production issues with the album is that it suffers considerably from its pacing. The tracklist holds a considerable length, at twenty-five songs total, while only sitting at fifty-two minutes. The result of these short, snappy tracks is that the record invites a degree of incoherence. Individual songs simply do not resolve or have space to properly develop into something

interesting, almost becoming like a formula to follow the aforementioned JPEGMAFIA *style*. The final guitar outro is a particularly deflating example of a track that trails off where it ought to arrive somewhere. Another result of the tracks' lengths is that they do not develop particularly far, and when Peggy resorts to the same surface-level comments about how you should not chase women and should instead chase money, it falls incredibly flat.¹¹

'\$ (Money)' is a prime example where this *borrowing* has been done effectively, replicating the genre-switching and instrumentation of *Scaring the Hoes*. It is potentially his most well-produced track on the album, becoming genuinely unhinged in the best possible sense. However, 'Tsar Bomba', for example, is the closest in spirit to *I LAY DOWN MY LIFE FOR YOU* of anything in the record, which is enjoyable enough, but if one wanted that album, it would be better to listen to that album. 'babygirl' features an inventive and engaging beat – a structure built from chopped vocals with a compelling beat switch into a more rock-oriented sound also reminiscent of *ILDMLFY* – but the lyrics are once again particularly underwhelming and subtract a lot from the song. 'Mask On' is another strong rock-oriented beat in the *ILDMLFY* vein – it is loud, obnoxious, and very effective effective in those qualities. And yet it blends, somewhat surprisingly, into the surrounding material. Despite being such an avant-garde song, in context it feels rather samey because of the formula that Peggy seems to utilise throughout the album and becomes so present in the latter half.

Overall, however, the production is predictably stellar. 'Burning Hammer', for example, is a song that features exceptional production techniques. There is something oddly effective about moments where the beat overwhelms the lyrics and drowns out his performance. The vocals almost function as simply another instrument within the composition. The layered vocals and instrumentation are very enjoyable – and an actual example of *experimental* rap.

'His Will', by contrast, is unfortunately very underwhelming – not unlike the album's introduction, it feels purposeless. Simply operating as an interlude, it comes across as dull and reads as a somewhat obligatory religious reference deployed for the sake of edginess. Within that, it does not do much creative with the sample – a similar problem reflected in the Introduction and Conclusion of the album. The more stripped back cuts on the album are where it seems to be at its weakest. Songs like 'New Era', 'One Day It'll be Over', and the opening of 'War Over Land' all feel like extended transitions into something else. They feel like an overlong interlude that is misplaced, as though the album is announcing a quieter register without having adequately prepared for it. 'War Over Land' itself, however, is genuinely remarkable. It is among his most vulnerable pieces – unguarded in a way

¹¹ JPEGMAFIA, 'You Will Always Lose Money Chasing Women, But You Will Never Lose Women Chasing Money', in *EXPERIMENTAL RAP* (AWAL Recordings, 2026).

that feels rare for Peggy – and the dramatic ambient conclusion is stunning. The song accumulates slowly and earns every moment of its runtime. It functions simultaneously as a denouement and as the emotional centrepiece of the record. ‘War Over Land’ is an exceptional song. It simply deserves a better surrounding to uphold it, as it struggles to hold the emotional weight on its own when the other refuse to have any lyrical depth.

On the note of the poor sample use from the aforementioned tracks, the album struggles with underused samples at several points in the album, where previous works like ‘Fentanyl Tester’ would crudely – but expertly – incorporate ridiculous samples like ‘Milkshake’ by Kelis.¹² ‘Lights’ on the other hand is, frankly, a misstep. Nothing unique is achieved with it and is an unremarkable interpolation of one of Kanye West’s most iconic tracks – ‘All of the Lights’.¹³ Given Peggy’s insistence on keeping positive (and only mildly provocative) references to Ye in the album in ‘Since I Met Ye’ and his collaborations with West, the decision to invoke one of his most recognisable samples elsewhere on the record feels almost essential for his persona. However, outside of its implicit meaning of being a statement about Ye, the usage of the sample is quite cheap. It fails in every respect to live up to its source material and serves only to remind the listener that the original is so good.

‘No Strippers in Heaven’ is an example of a clever sample use that seems to fall into the JPEGMAFIA-type-beat trap. At the very least, it offers a distinctive instrumental in which Peggy raps over angelic vocals. The pitfall is that the angelic vocal sample – pure, unaccompanied and disorienting against his delivery – is virtually abandoned roughly halfway through in favour of a more conventional trap-adjacent beat. clipping.’s ‘Get Up’ is an example of what the track could have gone for. That song sustains the alarm sound - without many additional instruments - for its entire runtime, never resolving into a recognisable rhythmic structure, which means the listener never acclimatises and the discomfort compounds. ‘No Strippers in Heaven’ eases the tension when it could be tightening it.

With all of these criticisms stated, ‘¥ (Yen)’ is simply exceptional. While it still suffers from several of the concerns already outlined, it recalls precisely what made JPEGMAFIA compelling in the first place. There is a weight to it that much of the album fails to achieve. The production has an unsettled, lurching quality – it feels as though it is threatening to collapse beneath itself but never quite does, almost like its overwhelming itself in a dank, disorderly mess which somehow holds some beauty. Lyrically, it is not among his most adventurous, but the weariness in his delivery feels genuinely earned

¹² Lara Mullen, ‘JPEGMAFIA and Danny Brown Push the Boundaries of Music’, *The Wilkes Beacon*, 16 November 2023 <<https://www.thewilkesbeacon.com/opinion/2023/11/16/jpegmafia-and-danny-brown-push-the-boundaries-of-music/>> [Accessed 9 June 2026].

¹³ ‘JPEGMAFIA – “Lights”: Samples, Covers and Remixes’, *WhoSampled* <<https://www.whosampled.com/JPEGMAFIA/Lights/>> [Accessed 9 June 2026].

– as though, for once, he is rapping from a place of authenticity. It is the moment on the album that comes closest to justifying its title, because of how outlandish and bombastic the piece is. Similarly, ‘Bridges on Fire’ pushes toward a similar level of success but does have its pitfalls. It is an excellent fast-rap track and is enjoyable for what it is. Peggy seems to actually experiment with his rapping in the song to a greater level. Though it is perhaps still too subdued to be featured on an album with these particular ambitions. Because despite ‘Bridges on Fire’ pushing towards experimentation, it is still not Experimental enough – particularly in this day in age – to warrant such a title.

This album should have had the same compulsive quality that characterised his previous work, perhaps even more. Despite its considerable merits, JPEGMAFIA retreated where he ought to have advanced. For an artist bold enough to name his record after the genre itself, Peggy struggles to experiment with much at all on this project and keeps things as close to his preestablished style as possible.

The album, for what it’s worth, could function primarily as transitional listening; serving as a reasonable entry point for a new listener, though both *Veteran* and *All My Heroes Are Cornballs* remain superior introductions.

Ultimately, JPEGMAFIA named this record after a genre he once threatened to redefine. The tragedy of *Experimental Rap* is that it fails in much more quiet, unassuming ways. Settling instead for competence, when he previously reached for something far more interesting.