

Beyond Borders, but how far beyond?—An album by Soulstice and SBe

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In 2008 many in the entertainment industry believed or hoped, with varying degrees of either naïveté or self-delusion, or both, that the election of Barack Obama would usher in a period of change and renewal in the United States, and even the world. Looking back on certain works from this time, particularly in hip hop music, one can get a sense of both the hope and enthusiasm among youthful musicians, as well as some of the confusion and disorientation.

Beyond Borders is a collaborative effort between American rapper Soulstice and Belgian producer SBe Audiologist. The concept behind the album was presented as “an international collaboration between artists of varying national backgrounds celebrating the universality of hip hop culture,” not, in itself, an unhealthy starting point.

Differentiating himself from the average rapper of both the underground and commercial varieties, Soulstice describes himself as a “progressive commercial artist.” The rapper is clearly making an effort to toe the line between serious work and something that will “sell.” As for the progressive part, Soulstice is a vocal supporter of gay rights. During the presidential election of 2008, he actively involved himself in the election campaign of Democratic Party nominee Obama, enough to earn him a “progressive” label in some circles.

Exclaiming “We worldwide, y’all” on the opening cut of *Beyond Borders*, Soulstice breezes frantically over a horn-heavy instrumental, dropping references to exotic locales, only to up and leave them with the next bar. The lack of real connection to any of the places mentioned in his rhymes seems a recurring theme. It is regrettable that the internationalist spirit proposed for the project is reduced to a kind of name-dropping or lyrical jet-setting. The artist is like a tourist ready to take a few photos upon touchdown and then fly away when his show is done.

An interesting lyric by guest rapper Supastition, who announced his departure from rapping last year, appears on the title track. He raps, “Switzerland and France got a brother here hustlin’/CD’s in hand hopin’ I can clear customs/the mainstream hardly likes us/so we take it overseas wishin’ every show could all be like this.”

A sad fact of reality for many underground artists, there is constant touring in order to make ends meet, the boarding of one flight after another to different countries with barely enough money to purchase lodging. Like many artists before them, including some of the leading figures in jazz music, these musicians have been compelled to seek work overseas to escape the difficulties in their home country. Some of them, like Supastition, have been forced to give up their pursuit of music. These lives and problems are interesting and worth considering, but the circumstances are not deeply addressed by Soulstice himself.

“Strange Kinda Love” makes an impression with lyrics in support of gay marriage. Sincerely expressed, and comparing the struggles of gay couples who want to marry to the struggles of interracial couples in an earlier period, the song is admirable for the very compassionate and thoughtful lyrics it contains.

However, the song is somewhat narrow in its treatment of the issue. “People fear what they don’t know, I guess that’s why change comes so slow,” raps Soulstice. “God is love,” he goes on, “so it’s meant to be. To use God for hate don’t make sense to me.” What goes unmentioned is more important: how do gay rights correspond to the general struggle for democratic rights and a change in society?

“To the Limit” features lyrics such as “I make what I imagine happen/take action, now I got fans in Athens,” which seem to take the view that one only needs to rely on determination in order to “make it,” a “pull yourself up by the bootstraps” mentality translated into song. This unfortunate message is repeated again later more directly with the lyrics “for everybody seekin’ the truth or readin’ *The Secret*,” in reference to the self-help book by Rhonda Byrne dedicated to positive thinking as the chief recipe for achieving one’s goals. In relation to challenging the existing political setup, in Soulstice’s eyes, “Pushing it to the limit” isn’t very far at all. The “limit” here, it would seem, is little more than the independent entrepreneurial spirit.

SBe is a solid enough producer, using soaring vocal samples and string melodies that seem to capture a feeling of excitement heard throughout. As large and fantastic as his samples are, it seems a shame that the more accomplished and subtle guest rappers/producers Oddisee and Kev Brown didn’t lend a hand in the production as well to stir things up.

Like so many works in hip hop, there are far too many songs on the album that devolve into battle rhyming and simple brag rap. At times, such songs can offer clever or entertaining turns of phrase and, up to a point, are entertaining. However, at their worst, songs such as these amount to little more than egoism and self-promotion. One can only urge these artists to begin considering the world with as much interest and vigor.

Perhaps the most ludicrous statements are made on the song “No Place Quite Like It,” which sees the supposedly international album retreat into patriotism and identity politics: “Patriotic when I hear the names Kennedy and King/Beyond all that my president is black!” A clear line is drawn from past leaders of American civil rights struggle up to the current administration, as if Obama were in fact the personification of Dr. King’s dream. For Soulstice, Obama is “progressive,” simply because he is black.

In speaking during an album interlude about what he draws inspiration from for his music Soulstice cites “traveling to powerful places, like a desert or a forest...in his mind.” While this may provide Soulstice with peace of mind, it doesn’t go a long way toward providing anyone, himself included, with insights into society. This is largely a running away from, rather than an exploration of, difficult questions. You can sense a relative docility in his music, not of an artist registering a critique of society, but one relatively pleased with his own contributions and status within the given social order.

To quote the final song on the album, “As we rap over these beats, I can’t help but feel we’re closer to peace.” The problem, of course, is that we are not.

Soulstice is an artist capable of humane sentiments, but he retains considerable illusions in Obama, various forms of identity politics and self-empowerment. When confronted with the task of illuminating social reality, of digging deeper into the complexities of human and social relationships, the artist comes up short.



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