

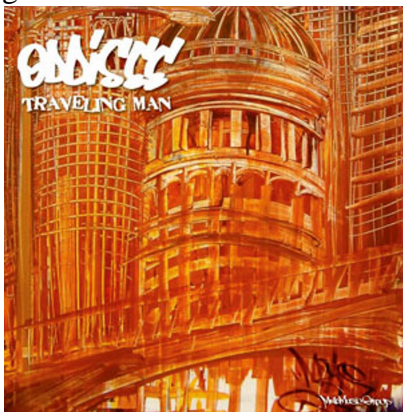
Oddisee's *Traveling Man*: Globalized society through the lens of a hip hop artist

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“As a musician, life is often lived on the road. Each city leaves its imprint on the artist as they develop their craft,” explain the liner notes to *Traveling Man*, an instrumental album produced by Washington D.C.-based rap artist-producer Oddisee, released in 2010 on the Mellow Music Group label.

Differing from many of his hip hop production peers, Oddisee (born Amir Mohamed el Khalifa in Washington to an African-American mother and Sudanese father) includes a good deal of live instrumentation in his music, as well as the influence of jazz, rock and electronica. Many beats follow a playful, free-wheeling and loose pattern, while remaining attentive to melody and composition. The results are often large and expansive compositions, which remain intricate and integral in their individual sections.

Oddisee's family background, travel and interests bear witness to the unprecedented level of global integration in cultural life.



Traveling Man is a collage of 24 instrumental compositions created by the artist while he stayed in the given locales—mainly large metropolitan areas around the world. The sounds are lush, varied and woven together to evoke a particular surrounding.

A high-speed bullet train goes whizzing past in “Tokyo,” a song whose smooth and polished sound seems to suggest the height of modern technological achievement. Contrasted sharply to this is the bare-bones and low fidelity atmosphere in “Khartoum,” dedicated to the capital of Sudan, a locale off the conventional beaten path. The plodding, somber piano melody in “Stockholm” is similar to “Khartoum” in its restrained approach.

The Sudanese capital notwithstanding, many of the album's “beats” were produced in major and much frequented urban centers (New York, Los Angeles, London, Paris, Tokyo, Chicago, Las Vegas, Miami, Atlanta, Boston, Philadelphia, San Francisco, Houston, etc.), associated perhaps too easily with familiar sounds.

In other words, Oddisee has not often ventured too far off a predictable course during his travels. Of course, this is not entirely his fault. His route reflects uneven global development, with many countries and even certain continents almost literally “off the map” under present-day conditions. This unavoidably deprives the artist of the chance to come into contact with people in whole regions of the world.

Perhaps as a result, certain less-inspired moments occur on the album. In those he seems to be falling back on more tried and true themes. Club tracks similar to those heard on “Atlanta” and the back-to-back inclusion of West Coast “gangster rap”-influenced sounds on “Inglewood” and “South Central” (both referring to the Los Angeles area) could have been left off. This may be a small point, but one does tend to know what's coming next on a few occasions.

However, the majority of Oddisee's instrumentals manage to depict cities or communities with highly developed musical scenes in unique and thoughtful

ways. The many undulating layers of sound in “Detroit,” backed by a low-fidelity drum kit, create a feverish, suffocating atmosphere. Perhaps the artist is referencing the city’s cold winters, or perhaps he is speaking to something more compelling; the misery and impoverishment afflicting tens of thousands of people in this once mighty industrial center? In any case, the song doesn’t strike one as an attempt to mimic a particular sub-genre of hip hop, it has a genuine story to tell.

After having first gained noticeable attention with work as a guest producer on *The Magnificent* (Rapster/BBE), a 2002 compilation album from DJ Jazzy Jeff (of DJ Jazzy Jeff and The Fresh Prince fame), Oddisee has gone on to a prolific career in rap-hip hop, producing for acts such as Talib Kweli, Little Brother and other well-known artists.

This extensive body of work can be seen as a testament to Oddisee’s immense musical talents. Nonetheless, there is always the danger that the increased workload and corresponding demands on an artist seeking to maintain himself and make a decent living within a rapidly changing, globalized market may result in fewer opportunities to reflect thoughtfully on things. Some of these difficulties might be reflected in the current state of Oddisee’s own music.

In the period since *Traveling Man* was released in January 2010, Oddisee has participated in projects involving live instrumentation as well as remixing versions of classic soul and rhythm and blues hits. At the same time, more lucrative conventional channels have opened up for him, with his music being featured, for example, on the ESPN sports network and in clothing commercials.

The artist may be drawn to these venues, or, at any rate, may see no alternate outlets or relationship to the public—which, again, is not his individual problem. In any case, one hopes that the tide of events and the emergence of a mass oppositional mood may widen his vision so that his most humane and endearing qualities win out.



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