

Brother Ali's *Mourning in America and Dreaming in Color* and social reality in the US

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The experience of four years of the Obama administration has produced a certain divide in the US, between artists more or less content with the social order and those seeking, with varying degrees of confusion, to make sense of this harsh experience and express it artistically.

Mourning in America and Dreaming in Color, released on Rhymesayers Entertainment in September 2012, is the fifth studio album put out by American rapper Brother Ali (born Jason Newman in Madison, Wisconsin, in 1977).

Ali, a practicing Muslim for two decades, is best known for his impassioned delivery, which evokes the style of a southern Baptist minister, and songs that offer vivid, unglamorous pictures of American life.

The artist brings a degree of honesty and energy to his music that manages both to capture the attention of the listener and to elevate the emotional impact his songs have.

His own evolution has some significance. In the wake of Barack Obama's election in November 2008, Ali, like many others, indicated his sympathy for identity politics and illusions in the Democratic Party. The elation of such circles at the election of an African American president found an echo in the artist's own music. However imperfect or incomplete the artist's trajectory has been since then, he has drawn certain conclusions: gone from his new album are any odes to Obama.

The title song ("Mourning in America"), sporting a chaotic and energy-driven instrumental, is commendable for its attempt to connect the so-called war on terror with the dire conditions faced by the population at home: "Overseas we can mutilate and mangle/And to give you an example what our troops are coming back to/Cold cities where the youth are

getting strangled," sings the artist. In another verse, Ali refers to the official hypocrisy with which foreign wars are conducted: "Warfare's the terrorism of the rich." The urgent and impassioned quality of the artist's voice introduces an element of conscience and deliberation to the hectic atmosphere.

Many of the instrumentals, drawing from classic rhythm and blues samples, as well as synthetic creations, possess a slickness and sheen that give the album a certain "brightness." This, in turn, infuses the music with a sense of "persevering" through difficult circumstances. When considered in combination with Ali's rhymes, these qualities seem to match the title of the album.

The single "Only Life I Know" takes on the miserable living situation confronting millions in America. "Tell me what's moral about these conditions?" says the rapper, who later talks about the prevalence of dead-end jobs ("You die just as poor as you was when you started") and the general destruction of social life: "Who decided you ain't got enough to teach the children?/Stay spending billions on stadiums and prisons." Several songs on the album explore this theme.

Also notable is the song's video, which contains images of working class life in both urban and rural settings, seeming to denote the common conditions facing broad sections of the population.

In describing the album and explaining its title, Ali indicated that he wanted to depict what he saw as "a lot of darkness and pain" in people's lives around him. At the same time, drawing from the recent experiences in the Middle East and the so-called Arab Spring, the songs express optimism about the times.

In reference to the Arab Spring, the song "Gather Round" tries to depict the moment at which a people's

pain and suffering becomes too great and erupts into a mass upheaval. The attempt to express such a condition is admirable, and Ali's passionate delivery manages to rise to the occasion; however, various confused notions appear in the song's lyrical content.

"Freedom is between the mind and the soul/It's between the lock and the load," goes guest MC Amir Sulaiman. Brother Ali's portion of the song, although less crass, still carries elements of trite bravado.

Moreover, the artist displays his political naïveté—or more serious disorientation—when, in speaking of the song's inspiration, he refers to Syria and Libya. The NATO-led wars in those countries (as well as the newly installed puppet governments in Tunisia and Egypt) are not expressions of popular will, but a bulwark against it. The lack of clarity and a fascination with violence lands the artist, though sincere, in very backward and wrongheaded territory.

"Sometimes the revolution just needs a break" goes the introduction to "Just Fine," in which the artist raps about taking a break from politics (or work) and the necessity of enjoying life. After an album's worth of social commentary, "Just Fine" does have a certain appeal. The scenes depicted (cooking for his family, walking alone on a sidewalk listening to Bob Marley) are done thoughtfully. Ali has a gift for rendering everyday existence and its goings-on with verve.

The presence on the album of Cornel West, one of the gurus of middle class radical politics firmly in the orbit of the Democratic Party, is an indication of the deep confusion that remains. Although there is no direct homage to Obama, racial and identity politics make themselves felt.

"And if we say it how it really is/We know our lily skin still gives us privilege" raps Ali early in the album ("Letter to my Countrymen," featuring West). This flies in the face of the depiction of American society presented elsewhere on the album, which strongly suggests that all sections of the working population and the poor are suffering. What privilege does "lily skin" offer the millions of white workers losing their jobs and houses and seeing their conditions of life relentlessly attacked?

The financial crisis of 2008 and its aftermath have brought home with great force—from Wisconsin to Egypt—that the central axis in society is class, not race. The experience with the Obama administration, a

predatory defender of Wall Street, has reinforced this reality, for those who have eyes to see it.

In light of this, it is telling that nowhere in Ali's "political" songs do we find a direct repudiation of Obama and the Democrats, although many of the artist's lyrics condemn individual policies pursued by the current administration. One gets the sense that the artist is searching, but, ultimately, is unwilling or unable to draw the sharpest conclusions. We shall watch his future development with interest.



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