

Tyler, the Creator's *Wolf*: Hiding from reality behind a mask of cynicism

Nick Barrickman
2 May 2013

Wolf is Tyler, The Creator's third studio album, released on Sony Music Entertainment in April this year.

Tyler, The Creator (born Tyler Gregory Okonma in Ladera Heights, California, in 1991) first became known as one of the lead rappers for the California-based hip-hop collective Odd Future, short for "Odd Future Wolf Gang Kill Them All" (or simply OFWGKTA). Tyler's break-out group also included Earl Sweatshirt (Thebe Neruda Kgositsile, born in 1994), Hodgy Beats (Gerard Damien Long, born in 1990) and others.

Odd Future, who have been criticized for unabashed misogyny and homophobia in their songs, achieved an underground and commercial following. Tyler performed songs on *Late Night with Jimmy Fallon*, as well as at the mtvU Woodie Awards in 2011.

From this new album, Tyler's first to be distributed by a major label, one gets the idea that the artist is a complex and conflicted individual who, unfortunately, is unable to stare either himself or a wider reality squarely in the face.

The difference in approach the artist adopts to his rapping, on the one hand, and musical production, on the other, is especially striking.

The tone of the album is generally of a melodic and sometimes melancholy character, while the vocal performances are delivered in a gruff, intimidating and deadpan style, full of the usual obscenities and epithets. Tyler unquestionably has an ear for production. At times, he favors samples from 1960s rhythm and blues, while on other occasions he employs ambient synthesizers to produce laid-back, quasi-dreamy arrangements. There are noticeable traces of sadness in the music.

The use of choppy, off-kilter drum programming is

vaguely reminiscent of artists such as the Wu-Tang Clan's Rza (Robert Diggs). As is the case with Rza, the appeal of Tyler, The Creator and Odd Future seems to lie in their ability to tap into the angst and aggression felt within layers of the population, combined with a genuine musical proficiency.

The most notable contrast, however, between Odd Future and their musical progenitors or influences is to the degree which cynicism, pessimism and anti-social behavior dominate in the sound and substance of the later group. (It is worth noting that a number of the group members come from middle class, professional family backgrounds.)

The artist, who says he has never met his father, a Nigerian, seems aware of some of the contradictions of his situation. In "Colossus," for example, Tyler mockingly describes an encounter with fans. Later, he speaks in the voice of one of his admirers, "My life is just like yours, no father/ my momma must have forgot to stop with a popped condom/ In school I was the one thinking outside boxes/ so everybody in them would say that I got problems." The hardboiled attitude aside, there is a tinge of empathy in this.

In regard to his family, in "Answer," Tyler vacillates between lamenting and berating his absent father. At one point referring to his Nigerian last name, he asks what "is an Okonma? I'm changin' my shit to 'Haley,' " while alternately ending each verse by adding "but if I call you, I hope you pick up your phone." The artist seems legitimately conflicted about the relationship. Likewise, on this song, the artist's vocals appear to be more animated, adding to its authenticity.

However, songs with even this level of candor are few and far between. In general, the rapper prefers to wallow in his cynicism or surround himself with half a

dozen group members (Odd Future is said to have dozens of affiliates) to assist him in doing so. (It can almost be established as a law that the more artists to a song, the less likely it is to be enjoyable.)

In a comment that is all too typical, group member Hodgy Beats dismissed criticism of Odd Future's lyrics and general attitude in a 2011 interview, asserting that "Nothing is really serious.... It's just like all the things in our music. It's in the atmosphere, it's in the world, and it's in our lyrics." The responsibility of any serious artist is not simply to reproduce the confusion and misery he or she sees in the world, but to make sense of it. In this regard, most of Odd Future's artists fall terribly short.

American "Gangsta Rap," according to its apologists, is a legitimate expression of the social and economic blight prevailing in large portions of the inner cities in the 1980s and beyond. Odd Future originated in Los Angeles, California, where many of the genre's biggest names first gained fame.

No doubt, the music reflects something about poverty and lack of economic opportunity, but it says far more, in an unhealthy and uncritical fashion, about the cutthroat character and atmosphere of American society in the heyday of Reagan-Bush-Clinton "free market" capitalism. The artists did not by-and-large attack this ethos, they embraced it.

In this context, one can grasp the significance of Tyler's brand of nihilism, real or put-on, as well as his melancholy. Choosing to view society as a spectacle of reaction, the artist largely retreats inside himself, not, however, without first taking with him his impressions about his surroundings.

Some in the media have remarked on the references to newfound wealth that make their way into *Wolf* and Tyler's attempts to cope with it. In a review, the *New York Times*'s Jon Caramanica notes that Tyler is "more measured, more reflective and couches even his most volatile thoughts in a layer of reserve," as he raps from an "awe-struck perspective" about his new acquisitions.

In fact, the artist reveals little about his income, most of which commentary he saves for a few moments on the final song "Lone," where it appears in the form of the inevitable and tedious braggadocio. Unhappily, the wealth seems all too fitting a match for the sort of anti-social individualism exhibited throughout the album.

The artist is not entirely unaware of what fame is doing to him. On the aforementioned "Lone," Tyler explains he's "a target for marketing, he's an artist/ Can't even walk into Target without bothering customers bothering," and later comments "God I wanna quit, but I can't/ cause mother and sister can't pay the rent/ four stories with storage, I'm 21 with a mortgage...."

The latter half of the song is devoted to a touching account of his final meeting with a dying relative. The artist seems conscious at times of the various forces pulling at him, but, regrettably, these things are only touched upon too little and too late to salvage the work as a whole.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact