

# Eminem's *The Marshall Mathers LP 2*: Unfortunately, a return to more of the same

Nick Barrickman  
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*The Marshall Mathers LP 2* (released November 5, 2013, on Interscope/Aftermath Entertainment/Shady Records) is the eighth full-length studio solo album from American rap artist Eminem.

Born Marshall Bruce Mathers III in St. Joseph, Missouri, in 1972, Eminem is one of the top-selling recording artists of all time. Since the success of his 1999 major label release *The Slim Shady LP*, he has sold more than 220 million records worldwide, according to Nielson Soundscan. The artist has had 10 albums and 13 individual singles chart at No.1 on Billboard sales charts. Three of the artist's albums placed within the top 40 in Billboard magazine's top-selling albums of the 2000-2009 decade. His net worth is estimated at more than \$140 million.

An obvious element of Mathers' appeal is his working class background and the struggles and difficulties his music and lyrics speak to. Raised in Warren, Michigan, a suburb of Detroit, Mathers has been able to tap into some of the anger and frustration that working class youth feel toward a social system that offers them nothing. However, as soon as one says that, the remark has to be qualified. Anger and frustration, yes. Social clarity, coherence or understanding, no. And his work hovers in that general territory, without any signs of progress.

Eminem demonstrated his sympathy for working people in the Detroit area in 2009, when, in the midst of the auto industry bankruptcy crisis, he invited 200 laid-off workers onto the set of the *Jimmy Kimmel Live* talk show to emphasize the human suffering that event was causing. However, he disappointed or even disgusted many, and revealed his severe limitations, when he featured prominently in a 2011 Chrysler commercial, championing the "return" of Detroit's auto industry, in the wake of the slashing of wages and benefits for

thousands of new hires.

On his latest offering, *The Marshall Mathers LP 2*, small and symbolic references aside, the conditions of life facing millions of people are largely absent. Instead, much of the album is self-referential and self-involved, dominated by themes and an approach long associated with Eminem—intense and somewhat pointless aggression, posturing and "shock value" imagery. As long as rap artists concern themselves with showing off, instead of honestly looking at the world, it is hard to make much progress.

Much of the new album focuses on personal issues and experiences, which at this point have become staples of the Eminem/Slim Shady repertoire. When this is not the case, the artist veers into quasi-violent, anti-social lyrics and other forms of unhealthy behavior.

A fleeting glimpse of Mathers' views on society is given on "Asshole" (featuring Skylar Grey). "This whole world is a mess / Got to have a goddamn a vest on your chest / And a Glock [pistol] just to go watch Batman [referring to the mass shooting at a movie theater in Aurora, Colorado, in July 2012]," he says. This is no more profound than the everyday banalities of mainstream media pundits.

The album, in general, represents a return to Mathers' misogynistic/foul-mouthed Slim Shady alter ego and something of a regression from the slightly more measured approach he took on *Recovery* (2010).

The instrumental for "Asshole," for example, reflects this unpleasant quality of the album, with its drum-heavy approach creating an oppressive atmosphere in which both the music and lyrics berate the listener. Guest vocalist Skylar Grey's singing on the chorus provides a melodic element that simply feels out of place amid the chaos.

Eminem's mastery of the technical aspects of rapping is genuine. Unquestionably, he possesses an impressive sense of rhythm and timing, as well as a gift for formulating rhyme patterns, the result of many hours of well-documented practice and preparation. However, technical-verbal prowess does not guarantee that an artist can make a serious contribution. One has to see something important and have something important to say. All the vocal pyrotechnics in the world cannot cover up the puerility of many of Eminem's "shock lyrics."

Certain mainstream critics have commented on this aspect of the album. Jon Caramanica of the *New York Times*, for example, writes that "Eminem is still rapping from deep inside his cave, as if he's had no new experiences to draw from," only then to excuse this as "just a form of self-protection" after a career of "putting himself in the spotlight." Paul MacInnes of the *Guardian* uncritically insists that the rapper's approach exudes "confidence," exclaiming that Mathers "has engaged with his age and others' skepticism, decided he doesn't give a f--- and asserted himself again."

Again, there is a difference between a performer proclaiming his contempt for the industry and the establishment, on the one hand, and expressing his lack of interest about the broader reality facing millions, on the other. Telling people who are suffering to go to hell, which seems to be the case here, is not admirable and, in fact, fits in all too neatly with the outlook and methods of that same establishment.

This complacency and social indifference are captured on the Rick Rubin-produced "So Far..." when Eminem declares "The shit I complain about/ It's like there ain't a cloud in the sky and it's raining out/ Kool Aid stain on the couch, I'd never get it out/ Bitch, I got an elevator in my house...I'm living the dream." It does not occur to the artist to mention that his house is located in or near a city (Detroit) in which the level of unemployment is nearly 50 percent and rising.

Eminem has proven capable in the past of creating genuinely engaging work. "Stan," a song from the original *The Marshall Mathers LP* (2000, Interscope Records), depicted the plight of an obsessed fan, named in the title, who writes the artist a number of fan letters (portrayed in verse format by Eminem)—only to become deranged when Mathers fails to reply.

Although "Stan" does feature rapping about violent

acts, those are not glorified by Mathers, and one gets the sense that the character's mental breakdown is the product of a harsh, unforgiving social environment.

This broader, more sympathetic approach is gone from the current release, demonstrating how essentially shallow and socially uninformed Eminem's views remain.

Driving home the point, a recent *Billboard.com* interview with Eminem's manager, Paul Rosenberg, discussed the marketing formula for *MMLP 2*. The interview discussed a "video release during a college football game, their lucrative deal with Activision's 'Call of Duty' video game series, [and] partnering with Beats for a [Video Music Awards] boost." In regard to the usage of the ultra-violent *Call of Duty* series to promote Eminem's products, Rosenberg stated "the tone of those games and the aggression of them and how passionate people are about them is something that we like being associated with."



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