

Atmosphere's *Southsiders*: New studio album by the Minneapolis hip hop group

Nick Barrickman
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Southsiders is the eighth studio album from rapper Slug (Sean Daley, born 1972) and producer Ant (Anthony Davis) known collectively as the Minneapolis, Minnesota-based hip hop group Atmosphere.

Emerging in the mid-to-late 1990s as part of the underground or independent (“indie”) hip hop scene, the group has acquired an international fan base. Aside from recording as Atmosphere, Slug and Ant have each appeared on numerous side projects with fellow artists on their own independent label, Rhymesayers Entertainment.

Slug, in particular, is capable of combining wit about his own life circumstances with a sort of everyman sensibility. Coming from a working class background in Minneapolis, many of his songs have focused on his problems with substance abuse, the opposite sex and other subjects that speak to a general sense of alienation from society. His rhymes are delivered in a contemplative and impassioned manner, with equal parts self-assuredness and humility.

Producer Ant’s musical strengths are similar to those of the lyricist; his compositions are delivered in the classic hip hop format, but with a variety and liveliness in the choice of melodies. Ant’s musical palette stretches beyond the sampling of late 1960s/early 1970s soul and rhythm and blues, or the use of electronic synthesizers associated with modern hip hop, to include blues, polka, classical music and other genres.

On *Southsiders*, however, the group’s introspective approach and subject matter largely fall flat. One feels that to the duo’s already unhealthy tendency toward navel-gazing has been added a growing complacency.

“I don’t need to defend my defensiveness / I keep to myself, my family, and friendships,” raps Daley in the album’s opening song, “Camera Thief”. This attitude

is reflected elsewhere on the album. On “Fortunate,” in which he attempts to grapple with his own mortality, the artist says that “No amount of time will ever be considered enough / I’m trying to tether it up and live forever through love / We’re not lucky, but we’re fortunate.”

No doubt an intuition of one’s limited time on Earth is felt by every human being. However, one senses Slug is particularly resigned. He appears at times to be in retreat, simply throwing his hands up in frustration at the world. All that’s left, he seems to say, is to accept one’s little lot in life and soldier on as best as one can. This is pretty weak stuff (and pretty widespread in film and music at present).

The element of self-involvement in Atmosphere’s work eventually takes on more troubling forms. “I ain’t trying to sound scummy / But if you lick my wounds it tastes like money,” sings the rapper on the 1980s electro-inspired “Star-Shaped Heart.” Here we encounter, with Daley’s placing special emphasis on the word “money,” a glorification of the most self-seeking, backward individualism.

Many of the album’s leading singles exude varying levels of self-satisfaction, from “Bitter,” which features Daley’s mean-spirited boasting in the face of others’ supposed jealousy, to the provocatively titled “Kanye West.”

Speaking with National Public Radio about the concept for “Kanye West,” Daley stated that West, the platinum-selling rapper and celebrity, is a metaphor for “how passion can sometimes be viewed as this negative thing.” Expanding on this idea, Daley added that “I always find it interesting when people want to criticize somebody for having feelings, because you can’t tell me my feelings are incorrect. I think when you look at a lot of our superstars, a lot of these people are scared to

step on each other's toes. I feel like Kanye's one who's not and I think that we could use more of that.”

Daley places himself in bad company here. It is not enough, after all, to have passion and feeling. The question remains: What is one passionate about? For what does one have feelings? West's most recent musical offering, 2013's *Yeezus*, included (among other things) an attempt to liken his personal difficulties with an ex-girlfriend to South African apartheid and shopping for luxury items to chattel slavery in the American south!

Not all of *Southsiders*, however, is limited to this sort of subjectivity. The musical accompaniment throughout the album, including on many of the songs previously mentioned, is tastefully done. Ant's production consistently exudes a warmth and liveliness in songs such as “Camera Thief” and “Let Me Know That You Know What You Want Now” that help lend weight and complexity to the goings on.

Slug's lyrics are peppered with ironic comments and clever imagery, some carrying vague social criticism. Ultimately, however, the majority of his lyrics merely fall to the level of one-liners, inserted in the songs as a means of keeping a given rhyme pattern moving along.

Daley's gift for honesty in depicting his own difficulties is evident in many earlier works by the duo. On 1997's “God's Bathroom Floor,” a metaphor for Daley's struggles with heroin addiction, the artist rhymes over a somber melody, detailing his relationship with the drug in a manner that conveys genuine regret and inner conflict.

In “Guarantees”, released as a single for the 2008 album *When Life Gives You Lemons, You Paint That Shit Gold*, Daley raps from the point of view of someone whose job consists of “no overtime pay, no holiday” and is “months behind on everything but the lottery.” On this song, Slug's lyrics demonstrate a social focus rarely met with in today's rap music.

One feels, however that Atmosphere has now reached an artistic impasse. There is a somewhat facile pessimism implicit in their new work. They now rap about making do the best one can for oneself and the importance of taking comfort in the smaller, finer things in life until the whole thing falls apart one day. Any number of political and artistic compromises, or worse, can be justified under the cover of such an outlook. Their current work suffers.



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