

... *And Then You Shoot Your Cousin*: The Roots satirize the hip hop world

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Veteran hip hop group The Roots have returned with their eleventh studio album, ... *And Then You Shoot Your Cousin*.

While only recently gaining wider recognition for their nightly performances on the *Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon*, the band has a long history. Formed in 1987 in Philadelphia, The Roots have produced some of the more interesting and oppositional music in hip hop. Their output has largely avoided the more aggressive and antisocial impulses, real or feigned, of many rap groups over the last 25 years. Their material often focuses, with varying degrees of sensitivity and success, on the plight of inner city youth.

Describing the group's latest effort to *XXL Magazine*, lead rapper Black Thought (Tariq Trotter) said, "We create quite a few different characters in this record. It's satire, but in that satire it's an analysis of some of the stereotypes perpetuated in not only the Hip Hop community, but in the community." This seems like a legitimate undertaking.

Complementing the lyrics is strong production throughout the album, featuring evocative sample-work and skillful drumming by the group's co-leader, Ahmir "Questlove" Thompson.

The album's unusual title was inspired by a quote from rapper KRS-One, whose 1997 single "Step Into a World (Rapture's Delight)" contained these lyrics:

"MCs more worried about their financial backin'
Steady packin' a gat as if something's gonna happen
But it doesn't, they wind up shootin' they cousin,
they buggin'"

The portrait painted by KRS-One of a self-important, self-destructive and deluded rapper losing himself--or posturing--behind a gangster persona hints at what The Roots are attempting to explore in their latest work.

The theme of ... *And Then You Shoot Your Cousin* is

perhaps most clearly expressed on the song "Never." The sweetly sung chorus (courtesy of Patty Crash), repeating the phrase "Street dreams, close your eyes/Say goodbye to my memory," suggests the dead-end that a life of crime, or its glorification, leads to. "I look down, all I see is never," says the chorus as it trails off.

Rapping in character as a gun-slinging hood trapped in a nightmare, Black Thought further elaborates this as he says "I'm stuck here, can't take a vacation/ So f*** it, this s*** is damnation/This is reality, mane/Ain't no surprise I've been bangin' without any, mane." He adds, "Life is a bitch and then you live/Until one day by death you're found." The accompanying instrumental track, which is composed of a bleak, bare-bones drumbeat and other dissonant percussive sounds, gives the song an additional feeling of decline.

"When the People Cheer" seeks to delve deeper into this mentality. Over a sorrowful piano melody, guest lyricist Greg Porn raps "I don't give a f***, now maybe that's abstinence/Or the arrogance of someone who ain't got s***/ That think money over bitches is a stock tip."

The approach taken by The Roots, however, while well-intentioned, only tends to go so far. In their parody of some of the more absurd characters in hip hop today, as well as some of the more disturbed, The Roots provide certain insights. Still, one is left wanting more. They never entirely "put flesh" on what they are depicting. The album remains largely a glancing blow, so to speak.

How did things get like this? In its own way, the group is simply shaking its fist at this rather regrettable social condition. Not enough is explored or understood. Their focus is too narrowly directed on hip hop itself, and they too rarely turn their attention away from race

to consider broader social and class questions.

Occasional one-liners on songs like “The Dark (Trinity),” where guest rapper Dice Raw states “How did I end up where I’m at? It’s kind of hard to explain, yo/ I remember all I wanted was a gold chain and a Kangol,” are interesting, but don’t go far enough in helping one to make sense of anything.

The dark mood of the album abruptly about-faces on the final song, “Tomorrow,” which features the crooning of R&B singer Raheem DeVaughn. “Send a message to God in Heaven/ I’m thankful to be alive/Cause you sleep from 11 to 7/And work hard from 9 to 5,” sings DeVaughn over an upbeat piano instrumental. The song evokes the quality of perseverance through a long and difficult struggle.

Though perhaps never quite going deep enough in their approach, with ... *And Then You Shoot Your Cousin* and other recent albums The Roots have shown themselves to be one of the few hip hop groups working today who are making a real attempt to come to grips with the social crisis unfolding around them. In their efforts to satirize the problems of today’s hip hop music, one feels certain the group had a wealth of worthy targets at their disposal.



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