

Common's *Nobody's Smiling*: A murky offering by the Chicago rapper

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Nobody's Smiling, released July 2014 on ARTium Records/Def Jam Recordings, is the tenth full-length studio album from the Chicago-based rapper Common (Lonnie Rashid Lynn, Jr., b. March 22, 1972). Long-associated with the hip hop subgenre known as “conscious rap,” Common has won numerous awards, including several Grammys, as well as having appeared in a number of Hollywood films and network television roles.

As a musician he has collaborated with well-known hip hop and R&B artists, including The Roots, Kanye West, J Dilla, Mos Def, Talib Kweli, Q-Tip (of A Tribe Called Quest), De La Soul, Erykah Badu and many others.

Emerging in the early 1990s, Common (then known as “Common Sense”) belonged to a more politicized group of hip hop musicians who sought to distance themselves from some of the anti-social trends that had come to dominate the music at the time. Common was able to distinguish himself from the latter with his playful and witty lyrical style, best-captured on the 1994 song “I Used to Love H.E.R.,” in which Lynn raps in extended metaphor casting hip hop music as a woman with whom he has had a long and difficult relationship.

From the jazz-influenced production, courtesy of longtime collaborator No I.D. (Ernest Dion Wilson), to Lynn’s playful lyrics, the song captures many of the subgenre’s strengths as well as some of its weaknesses; much of Common’s music bears the mark of identity politics and suffers from an overly self-conscious approach.

Lynn described the concept for *Nobody's Smiling* as being inspired by the rash of gun violence in the city of Chicago. Speaking to *Revolt TV*, Lynn stated that “[w]e came up with this concept ‘nobody’s smiling.’ It was

really a thought that came about because of all the violence in Chicago... It happens in Chicago, but it’s happening around the world in many ways.” Lynn said that the album was “really a call to action.”

Gone from the current album are many of the more thoughtful and measured elements found in Common’s earlier works. The musical backdrops—produced entirely by No I.D. and in contrast to his earlier work—are dark and murky, with bass-heavy, scattershot percussion replete throughout the album. The lyrics, while perhaps still possessing a semblance of the wit Lynn is known for, are pervaded by references to Chicago street life, hustling and other backward sentiments. In short, the music on *Nobody's Smiling* is *bleak* sounding.

After a short introduction in which a sample of Curtis Mayfield’s 1970 song “Other Side of Town” croons: “I’m from the other side of town/Out of bounds to anybody who don’t live around/I never learned to share or how to care/I never had no teachings about being fair,” the album’s first song “The Neighborhood” begins.

“Have you ever heard of Black Stone around Black Stones?/And Four CHs, Vice Lords, Stony Island on Aces/The concrete matrix, street organizations,” raps Lynn, naming various Chicago gangs. Guest rapper Lil Herb rhymes “Can’t nobody stop the violence, why my city keep lyin’?/N-ggas throw up peace signs but everybody keep dying/Used to post up on that strip, I look like a street sign/I’ve been out there three days and I got shot at three times.”

Lynn has stated in interviews on *The Combat Jack Show* that the many guest rappers who appear on *Nobody's Smiling* are his attempt “to give back” to the Chicago community and music scene. Whatever his intentions, the form this approach takes is not healthy;

the numerous artists depicting bloodstained images of Chicago street life more often than not appear to adapt themselves to the same social backwardness they profess to be arguing against.

On the album single “Speak My Piece,” over an instrumental which makes use of a vocal snippet taken from the late rapper Notorious B.I.G., Lynn rhymes “I’m iller than most, sick with it, feeling the dose/In a butter soft leather but I’m still with the toast,” (a reference to carrying a gun).

The song is problematic on a number of levels. While perhaps a creative idea, the attempt at sampling another rapper’s voice as a musical instrument manages to become a distraction. More seriously, the vocal snippet itself features Wallace’s own glorification of violence and backwardness and sets the tone for the entire song.

Lynn’s attempts to identify himself with the “street mentality” depicted throughout the album leave a foul taste in one’s mouth. Is this intended to be a “satire” of life on the streets, meant to show the essentially bankrupt lifestyle promoted by gangsta rap artists? Where is the critical distance between the artist and his subject?

One gets the sense that Lynn finds this sort of behavior worth glorifying on some level.

Many songs, including “Hustle Harder,” pay tribute to the hustler’s mentality and lifestyle. “Tryin to get it every way, every day,” declares the refrain on “Diamonds.”

For all his talk of “revolution,” Common is really an advocate of “self-empowerment” and “black capitalism.” This is partly why he brings up his own success so often on the new album; he is presenting himself as an example to be followed.

While it is perhaps not surprising that Lynn would be a supporter of the Obama administration, one is struck by some comments the rapper has made recently.

In an interview last year with *Hiphopdx.com*, Lynn offered fulsome praise to the president, saying, “I feel like Barack Obama is an incredible human being that wants the best for a lot of people in this world.”

“[Obama] strives to do his best within the political structure. Once you get into politics, it’s always gonna be difficult to get your truest agenda there. It’s like us in the business sometimes... You gotta network and deal with this... I think the president has done a great job, and I feel like his heart and his mind is in a place to do the

best for the world and the people of America. I’m gonna always support him,” stated Lynn, before adding, “We can’t expect perfection from no human being on this earth, but we can say this man, his actions and his intentions are in the right place.”

If that is Lynn’s attitude—and his starting point—then how much can his art really show us about the world? Lynn’s sympathy for the plight of young people trapped in a cycle of poverty, drugs and crime may very well be sincere, but his refusal to break with the most obvious lies and falsifications prevent him from understanding the social crisis in Chicago and working it through truthfully or movingly in his art.

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