

Run the Jewels 2 from rappers Killer Mike and El-P

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Run The Jewels 2 (Mass Appeal, Sony RED) is the second full-length studio effort from the hip hop duo Run the Jewels, consisting of rapper Killer Mike (Michael Render, born 1975 in Atlanta) and rapper-producer El-P (Jaime Meline, born 1975 in Brooklyn, the son of a jazz pianist).

Meline and Render had each met with considerable success in independent and mainstream music circles before coming together to form RtJ in 2013. Both are talented vocalists, with “Killer Mike” Render (a play on the expression “killing the microphone”) providing the more accessible “everyman” complement to Meline’s verbose and scattered rhyming style. Taken together, the artists have been associated with some of the more interesting hip hop music in the last decade and a half.

However, *Run the Jewels 2* (slang for robbing someone of his or her valuables) is a highly uneven effort. Like a number of the more intriguing hip hop artists, Meline and Render seem driven back and forth between two poles. On the one hand, they are able to offer moving and thoughtful, even scathing, commentary on specific social ills; on the other, they all too often take the line of least resistance and offer bursts of anti-social braggadocio (much of which is too offensive—and inane—to be cited in this review) as a substitute for serious thinking and feeling.

With notable and significant exceptions, unfortunately, much of the album dwells in the most backward territory. One is confronted with glaring contradictions in artistic quality and style, often almost side by side. The album’s most sensitive work (“Crown”), for example, is preceded by its most vulgar and reprehensible (“Love Again”).

“I’m a little black spot on a sun of lies/ But I’m not too high to say I’m the truth/ I line the booth to catch

blood like a Bateman/ Nothing sacred I’ll mace a play pen,” raps Meline on “Lie, Cheat, Steal.” The same song contains these lines as well: “‘Cause death by electrocution’s like life in New York, isn’t it?/ Shoulda been a dentist, mom said it/ Pain’s the way that my craft expresses/ Born in a little shop of horrors that I can’t even afford to rent in/ Where’s the exit?”

This is expressive and means something, but in addition to their foul-mouthed antics, the rappers often appear out of their social and artistic depth, with Meline in particular struggling to make any notable contribution as the songs begin sinking toward the lowest common denominator.

Then, again, their sneering at official institutions is entirely understandable and commendable. In “Angel Duster,” the album’s final song, Meline raps, “You say you wanna be my leader/ I think you wanna be my God/ You say you on the side of the righteous/ I say I’m gonna hang with the wrong,” over a menacing, self-produced instrumental. Meanwhile, Render tells his listeners: “A pope is a fraud/ A church is a lie/ A queen is the same damn thing/ You should pray to your fake god that she die” and “I kill my masters/ I mentor none/ That means when I die that’s it/ My style is gone, I’m a one of one.”

Elaborating on the group’s disavowal of institutions, the aforementioned “Crown” is notable for Meline’s criticism of the US military’s “warrior” rhetoric and culture. Over a chorus that repeats the phrase “Can’t pick up no crown/ Holding what’s holding you down,” Meline raps (speaking in the voice of the authorities), “You’ll become death/ You will take breath/ This is for everything you’ve ever loved/ Use all the pain that you’ve felt in your life as the currency, go out and trade it for blood.” One wonders why Meline’s other offerings on *Run the Jewels 2* couldn’t be more along

these lines?

The instrumentation on “Crown” is also the album’s strongest; with an atmospheric ensemble of vocals, piano keys and synthesizers underlined by a pulsing bass line that seems to urge the listener onward.

When able to restrain the more gratuitously aggressive aspects of his production, Meline is capable of creating evocative and haunting melodies, often including numerous sampled and live sources, deconstructed and re-arranged from across the musical spectrum. Never quite resting easily next to one another, the various dissonant sounds comprising an ELP production somehow cohere into a logical whole.

Render’s ability to create affecting imagery is on display on “Early,” which speaks to the epidemic of police violence sweeping working class communities worldwide. “It be feelin’ like the life that I’m livin’ man, I don’t control/ Like every day I’m in a fight for my soul/ Could it be that my medicine’s the evidence/ For pigs to stop and frisk me when they rollin’ round on patrol?,” he raps, before depicting a harrowing encounter that he and his family have with law enforcement. The chorus of the song simply repeats “Feeling this way, feeling this way/ Feeling this too early.”

Render, an African American, is an outspoken critic of certain aspects of American society. Visibly shaken by the shooting death of Michael Brown, Render can be seen giving an impassioned speech to an audience in St. Louis the night of the grand jury’s decision not to indict police officer Darren Wilson. “It is not about race, it is not about class, it is not about color; it is about what they killed him for. It is about poverty, it is about greed, it is about a war machine...,” says Render. Contradictions notwithstanding, Render is capable of pointing to certain key features of American society.

He has also been publicly critical of the Obama administration. On the 2013 song Reagan, in which Render raps about the policies of the 40th US president, he says, “Ronald Reagan was an actor, not at all a factor/ Just an employee of the country’s real masters/ Just like the Bushes, Clinton and Obama/ Just another talking head telling lies on teleprompters,” later asking “Why did Reagan and Obama both go after Qaddafi?/ We invaded sovereign soil, going after oil,” in reference to the 2011 US-led bombing campaign of Libya.

The most frustrating element of that despite the group’s evident preoccupation with pressing social questions, the two artists were not able to come together to create a more consistently serious and compelling work.

One can feel the impact here of several decades of political reaction and the absence of a broad-based and socially progressive movement. Run the Jewels’ members are genuinely vulnerable to various influences, including anti-social and lumpen ones. The majority of humanity, i.e. the working population, does not appear on the group’s radar as a means of combating the myriad injustices the duo sees.

The artists, who are certainly thinking (or are capable of thinking) about present-day life, will need to draw inspiration for a more honest and thorough depiction of social life from the immense struggles that lie ahead in defense of democratic rights, living standards and other such vital necessities. Such struggles, to an increasing degree, are already peeking out at us from over the horizon.

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