

Red Pill's *Look What This World Did To Us*: The “everyman mentality,” its strengths and weaknesses

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20 November 2015

Look What This World Did To Us (April 2015, Mello Music Group) is the third full-length studio album from Detroit-area rapper/producer Red Pill (born Chris Orrick, 1987).

Orrick/Red Pill first emerged as a member of the Michigan-based hip hop collective BLAT! Pack. His 2010 and 2013 releases (*Please Tip Your Driver* and *The Kick*) are refreshing in their efforts to convey the frustration at the lack of opportunities felt by working class youth. Particularly notable are songs that detail the experiences of young workers toiling in dead-end jobs in the low wage economy, a primary feature of the so-called “economic recovery” endlessly proclaimed by the Obama administration.

Red Pill's *Look What This World Did To Us* is one of a number released on the independent music label Mello Music Group (or MMG), which bills itself as the promoter of “intelligent hip hop.” Through a number of releases, including Oddisee's *The Good Fight*, the label has established itself as home to some of 2015's more interesting works within the hip hop genre.

“You're already aware of the echo, the generational discontent and alienation, the whispered and denied calls for absolution. No need to look around, just check your bank account and sigh,” reads the album's liner notes on Red Pill's website. Even in their titles, a number of songs on *Look...* convey a sense of angst, loss of hope and bitterness at the lack of prospects for the younger generation in the “new normal” of American society.

With real sincerity Orrick addresses the conditions facing multitudes of people in America—joblessness or bleak employment prospects, low wages, crushing debt.

The discontent is captured on “Meh,” the album's opening song. Over a weepy guitar and melancholy vibraphones, Orrick declares “Really I'm still a kid at 26

/ Who thinks the world is full of d---s / With the job he wants to quit.” The song's theme is summed up by the chorus: “I guess I'm just bored/ I guess I'm just ‘meh’ / I guess I want more/ I guess I'm just ‘bleh.’”

Red Pill's vocal style suggests a mixture of various hip hop influences. His lyrics are often laced with compound rhyme schemes reminiscent of fellow Detroit-rapper Eminem (Marshall Mathers), but Orrick's down-to-earth vocal presence and lyrical content are far more reminiscent of the “everyman” rhyme style of Slug (Sean Daley) of the Minneapolis-based rap group Atmosphere. The production throughout the album, handled by North Carolina producer L'Orange, various BLAT!Pack affiliates and Red Pill himself, maintains a cohesively downbeat, overcast atmosphere.

This is noticeable on “That's Okay,” where the rapper intones:

“I hit the drive thru and I order fries
A burger and I watch the server pour the ice
Gotta imagine she's as poor as I
I know she wonders if there's more to life
She thinks about the future and she's mortified
Tells herself tonight she's getting organized”

The sampled piano, provided by L'Orange, has a melancholy and despondent sound; the perfect soundtrack to accompany a rainy day.

On “Rum & Coke,” while confronting the prospect of living a life in debt, the rapper says: “What's a credit score to God / It's been seven years, and they're still bill collecting on my mom,” only to suggest that the only outlet is to “Take every dollar that you made / And every dollar that you saved / And spend that s---t, spend it on the weekend / Spend it on your girlfriend / Cause when the world ends / Goes off the deep end...”

Finally, on “10 Year Party,” whose sampled Spanish

guitar instrumental seems to conjure up an image of waking up to the consequences of one of Orrick's suggested nights of reckless abandon, the rapper listlessly speaks of "Living unhappily / I live in malady / In a menagerie / Originality, Technicality / You don't believe me? Check my gallery."

Orrick grew up in Redford, Michigan, a working class/lower-middle class suburb just west of Detroit. His father had a small business, which was not successful. His mother, according to the rapper, was an alcoholic. As a youth, Orrick struggled with depression.

While attending Michigan State University he became politicized. In an interview with hiphopdx.com, Orrick explains that he was in "a class one day and we were talking about wealth and equality throughout the world but specifically in the United States. He [a teaching assistant] really said that this is going to be an important thing coming up. He had kind of foreshadowed that it was going to be a big issue, that wealth and equality, the growing wealth gap in the country, was something that was going to be a hot topic."

Orrick explained in another interview, with everydejavu.com, that he has an "everyman mentality that pushes me to create music inspired by every day people and experiences. I can't say that I Detroit (*sic*) or Michigan in general directly inspired my new album, but it created the kind of economic environment that became the inspiration for the album. When I graduated from Michigan State University, I ended up at a small machine shop working while I was pursuing music. ... I found myself depressed, drinking a lot, living check to check. From that I found inspiration for the album."

In 2013, he told an interviewer (from *Rap-N-Blues*), "I'm working at an independent axle manufacturing plant, but in all honesty the pay just isn't good enough. And this is a similar story for a lot of people I know, whether they've graduated from college or not, most people I know cannot find decent paying work in Detroit or the state as a whole, most of us feel stuck."

How typical is all of this? Orrick's life story speaks to the circumstances of so many members of his generation, especially in the Midwest, in an American economy on an endless downward spiral.

The listener can sympathize deeply with Orrick's trials and tribulations ... but still wish that the music and lyrics went deeper and farther.

The first responsibility of an artist is to be truthful about his life and times. Red Pill-Orrick is trying to do that, to deal straightforwardly with the conditions he sees and

feels. However, the truly important artist does more than simply reflect conditions and pass along, in Orrick's case, the general demoralization and even despondency he experiences around him. He or she digs into the present state of things and brings out its more profound truth. That inevitably involves studying history and determining how the present "depression" (economic and psychological) came about, and also what might blow apart those immediately existing circumstances.

There is a certain passivity and resignation in Red Pill's music, which is its weakest aspect. That is not his fault, it is a generalized state, but it remains a weakness. Contact with the political forces that led the Occupy Wall Street movement in 2011 cannot have helped matters. This movement, while preaching "no politics," invariably sought to channel broad social opposition along a path acceptable to the political establishment, the 2012 Obama campaign and the Democratic Party in particular. It is possible that the disappointment and frustration engendered by the experience of this protest movement make their presence felt in Red Pill's music.

The artist cannot be obliged to see what he or she does not yet see. However, any objective reading of the present situation points in the direction of enormous struggles looming on the horizon. What does Orrick make, for example, of the current struggle of autoworkers against the companies and the UAW, which is nothing but an extension of management?

In the final analysis, artists like Orrick will have to decide in which direction to orient themselves: toward somewhat gloomy, self-absorbed sentiments or toward making sense of a rapidly changing, intensely complex social situation in which, for sure, "the growing wealth gap" is the "big issue."



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