

The death of rapper-producer Alias and the fate of “avant-garde” hip hop

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On Friday, March 30, influential alternative rapper-producer Brendon “Alias” Whitney died from a heart attack at age 41. Whitney, born in the Portland, Maine suburb of Hollis, was a founding member of the experimental hip hop/electronic music label known as Anticon.

The Anticon (i.e., “Anti-Icon”) label and the artistic collective with which it is affiliated is best known for the string of underground “indie” hip hop releases that gained a degree of popularity in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Founded in 1998 in East Oakland, California, the label came to be linked with the subgenre loosely referred to as “avant-garde hip hop,” which at the height of its influence challenged many of the popular conventions of rap music; preferring abstruse, introspective and free-associative lyrics over the more self-centered and formulaic braggadocio prominent at the time.

Whitney was a talented and somewhat distinct producer in the genre. At his best, he could be exciting, musically thoughtful, and captured something of the anger of the period. His earliest performances were punctuated by an introspective approach to lyrics. His beatmaking was haunting and intense, employing down-pitched samples from obscure sources. Later, fusions of keyboards and ambient synthesizers, scattershot drum patterns, low fidelity sampled and live instruments would come to dominate his compositions. Indeed, the genre-bending electronica-rap hybrid hip hop and pop music today owes a debt to the work of artists such as Alias.

However, like many others in the experimental hip hop genre, Whitney also struggled with the moods of the period and could lean much too heavily on inward reflection and demoralized themes. The downbeat, melancholy topics he chose to explore as Alias often

gave the music a depressing quality. “I’ve sought the answer and I’ve found hate is stronger than love / I love to hate you, I hate to love you, hate always ends up above,” raps Whitney on the 1999 song “The Scarecrow Speaks.”

Nonetheless, the driving urge for *something* more and a disgust with the mundane and empty boasting that had come to characterize much of popular culture and art in the US certainly struck a chord. Artists in Whitney’s milieu tried to connect with audiences on a level that acknowledged things were not well.

Many of the artists with whom Whitney collaborated were also affected by this general social and musical malaise. Referring in 2014 to rapper Sage Francis (Paul Francis), a frequent collaborator of Whitney’s, the WSWs remarked that the music “is interesting, sometimes highly evocative and poetic, but uneven ... [Francis] often berates people for their perceived willingness to knuckle under to the authorities that oppress them. This sentiment leads the artist to retreat inward at certain points, focusing on his personal affairs and difficulties with those closest to him.”

Decades of suppressed class struggle, owing in particular to the role of the Democratic Party and the trade unions in the US, left a mark on the social and political consciousness of millions who came of age in the period following the dissolution of the USSR (“the end of history,” as it was said to be).

Though not inclined to overt political messages in his music, Whitney’s music criticized the intellectually stunting and divisive role of organized religion (on 1999’s “Divine Disappointment”), as well as the US government’s militarism on 2003’s “Eyes Closed,” which includes news clips mentioning the imperialist war drive in Afghanistan and Iraq. Alias’s album art for his 2004 EP *Unseen Things* calls for the

impeachment of George W. Bush, among other things.

The general stagnation and reaction, in which official society and culture (including hip hop) praised nothing so much as money-making, hedonism and celebrity, affected more sensitive artists such as Whitney, who were essentially cut off from any larger picture or explanation of the difficult and often dispiriting conditions. The rottenness of the “cultural left,” infected with racial and gender politics and postmodern charlatanry, did not help matters either. The disappearance of the antiwar movement, or its transformation into a “pro-war,” pro-Obama camp, further added to the confusion. Alias and others often turned inward, focusing on themselves to a disconcerting degree while adopting an ambivalent attitude toward the population more generally.

Song titles such as the aforementioned “Divine Disappointment,” “Inspiration’s Passing” and “Caged In, Wasting Away” give one a sense of Whitney’s general attitude during this period. With this in mind, one can’t help but see Whitney’s drift away from vocal-based music—occurring as opposition to the Bush administration’s multiple wars and domestic policies ebbed and enthusiasm for Obama grew in the upper middle class especially—as something of a retreat, perhaps into the realm of sound and audio engineering and away from explicit lyricism.

Similarly, the often purposefully obscure character of many Anticon rappers’ lyrics, the arbitrary experimentation with form—rhyming off-beat, or the avoidance of rhyme structures altogether—also limited the quality of many works.

Be that as it may, Alias’s later instrumental work did possess undeniable strengths as he began exploring the fusion of multiple musical genres. On 2005’s *Lillian* (recorded with brother Ehren Whitney, a jazz saxophonist), Whitney’s ambient production effortlessly moves between different types of electronic music, fusing traditional hip hop drum work, keyboards and live instruments. The musical structure of this album tends to become increasingly chaotic as each song develops, as Alias’s beats take on varied shapes and forms, surrounding Ehren’s calming saxophone.

Leaving aside some of the more self-consciously affected features of the subgenre, Whitney’s contributions are valuable and deserve a hearing.

A sampling of recommended songs from Brendon

“Alias” Whitney:

Alias – “Watching Water“

Alias - “Eyes Closed“

Alias & Ehren – “Eman Ruosis Iht“



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