

“It’s bigger than black and white, it’s a problem with the whole way of life”

Rapper Lil Baby’s new single begins to address “The Bigger Picture”

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Twenty-five-year-old Atlanta rapper Lil Baby (Dominique Armani Jones) released a new song earlier this month entitled “The Bigger Picture” in response to the ongoing wave of protests triggered by the police murder of George Floyd. The song is significant in that it speaks sharply on issues of race and police brutality, while refuting the racial narrative—that the fundamental dividing line in society is race, not class—and connects these social issues to a broader critique of society as a whole.

Lil Baby has been an active and increasingly popular rapper in the trap music genre since 2016. Trap is a slang word for a place to deal drugs. The trap genre originated in the 1990s in the Southern US and often revolved around the life of drug dealing. While lots of trap music today is still associated with illicit drug culture, it has increasingly entered the mainstream in the past decade and its musical elements—rapid bursts of programmed hi-hats, sub-bass kick drum and melancholic melodic content—have had a strong influence on the sound of modern pop music.

Lil Baby’s second and latest full-length album, *My Turn*, was released in February of this year, debuted at number one on the US Billboard 200 album chart and this week returned to number one. After 12 of the songs on the album entered the Billboard Hot 100 chart, Lil Baby’s career total of 47 songs on the Hot 100 chart ties him with Prince and Paul McCartney.

“The Bigger Picture” was released on June 12, along with a music video featuring Lil Baby at the Atlanta protests, spliced together with shots of demonstrations around the country and the violent police response. The

introduction to the song features news report clips on the George Floyd protests followed by the chant, “I can’t breathe.”

In the first verse, Lil Baby speaks about police brutality targeted towards black people:

It’s too many mothers that’s grieving
They killing us for no reason
Been going on for too long to get even
Throw us in cages like dogs and hyenas

He follows this up by stating, “Every colored person ain’t dumb and all whites not racist, I be judging by the mind and heart, I ain’t really into faces,” recalling Martin Luther King Jr.’s quote about judging one not “by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”

The verse concludes with lines:

I can see in your eye that you fed up
Fuck around, got my shot, I won’t let up
They know that we a problem together
They know that we can storm any weather

This acknowledgement that people aren’t inherently racist and that unifying across racial boundaries creates power that strikes fear in the ruling class frames the song.

The chorus elaborates on the issues confronting the general population:

It’s bigger than black and white
It’s a problem with the whole way of life
It can’t change overnight
But we gotta start somewhere
Might as well gon’ ‘head start here
We done had a hell of a year

I'ma make it count while I'm here
God is the only man I fear

Other lines in the song reiterate the need for the masses to unify, rather than divide: “People speaking for the people, I’m proud of them. Stick together, we can get it [power] up out of them.”

The song is also noteworthy because it breaks with and addresses Lil Baby’s past musical trajectory, which has been self-centered and focused around the backward, selfish flaunting of money, drugs, violence, women, jewelry and clothing. The second verse suggests a conscious attempt at this break:

I can't lie like I don't rap about killing and dope, but
I'm telling my youngins to vote
I did what I did 'cause I didn't have no choice or no
hope, I was forced to just jump in and go
This bullshit is all that we know, but it's time for a
change
Got time to be serious, no time for no games
We ain't takin' no more, let us go from them chains

The line, “We just some products of our environment. How the fuck they gon’ blame us?” also appears and relates to the previous stanza.

The song concludes with lyrics that point to the lie that US military intervention abroad is carried out to safeguard democratic rights at home and explains the authoritarian action taken by Donald Trump to threaten the military on the American population.

“Our people died for us to be free”
Fuck do you mean? This was a dream
Now we got the power that we need to have
They don't want us with it and that's why they mad

Since the song’s release, it has been one of the most trending overall videos on YouTube. It is worth noting that the most frequent comments on YouTube to the song, by far, quote the lyric, “Every colored person ain’t dumb and all whites not racist,” often accompanied with hand clapping or raised fist emojis of every skin color.

“The Bigger Picture” is significant and stands out because it strongly rejects the idea employed by identity politics that there is an unbridgeable gap between blacks and whites, it begins to form a critique of capitalism and it shows the development of a popular artist beginning to take the times and his art seriously.

However, the song’s suggestion that voting is the answer to all the great problems is extremely weak.

First of all, it comes in the midst of enormous, multi-racial protests whose objective logic clearly indicates that popular struggle against all the existing institutions is where the way forward lies. Second, the call to “Vote” is most often in entertainment industry circles at the moment virtual short-hand for “Vote Democratic” or “Vote for Anyone but Trump.” It is no accident that Lil Baby recently announced he is working with Democratic Atlanta Mayor Keisha Bottoms—who has openly defended the police after the recent Atlanta police killing of Rayshard Brooks—to put together a police reform plan “for Atlanta to the whole world.”

A comment also needs to be made on the musical content of the song, which is extremely simple, tired and uninspired. While the relatively strong lyrics, which try to reflect objective social and historical conditions, do elevate the lacking instrumental track, they do so only to a certain extent given the limitations of the music. Keeping the lyrical content fettered within a stiflingly narrow musical confine—which plagues much of popular music—is only a detriment to the potential of musical and social expression.

As artists become increasingly conscious of sociopolitical reality and give artistic expression to this, they will have to put forward a social critique and possible ways forward not just in words, but in artistic deeds. In this case, music will have to evolve with the artists’ consciousness for there to be a leap forward necessary for the progression of music.

But the development of artistic consciousness necessary for this progress is ultimately dependent upon the development of the political, that is, the class consciousness of the working class—the only revolutionary social force capable of overseeing the progressive transformation of society and all of its products, including music.



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