

# *RTJ4*: Run the Jewels melds “rebellion” with reaction

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The release of the new album *RTJ4* breaks the silence that rap duo Run the Jewels had maintained since shortly before the inauguration of Donald Trump. This silence is noteworthy, considering the group’s reputation for being outspoken and political. While the comparative uniformity of tempo and tone made the previous album (*Run the Jewels 3*, 2016) feel stuffy, the group has opened a window on *RTJ4* and let in some fresh air, at least in a musical sense.

However, rather than offering any social insight or clarity, the group’s lyrics demonstrate a good deal of confusion. Members Killer Mike and El-P match every healthy statement with several backward ones. The group’s form of rebellion is not always left-wing, and they adapt themselves comfortably to the violence, misogyny and money-grubbing much of hip hop celebrates.

The jackhammer beat of the album’s opener, “Yankee and the Brave,” is typical of the group’s sound. But El-P, an established producer, has introduced more color to this album than he did to the last one. The most striking example is “The Ground Below,” which samples “Ether,” a song by British post-punk group Gang of Four. The chorus that El-P applies to the beginning of the song is the audio version of an iris wipe. The pounding overdubbed drums smooth out but complement the sample’s herky-jerk rhythm.

More color comes from the sampled female vocal harmony that brightens “Out of Sight.” Legendary producer DJ Premier graces “Ooh La La” (which needs his help) with an off-kilter piano sample and siren. The finale, “A Few Words for the Firing Squad (Radiation),” employs saxophone and synthesized strings effectively in a slow crescendo.

Guest appearances yield mixed results. Rapper 2 Chainz brings a joke, but little else, to “Out of Sight.”

It might have been better for rhythm-and-blues great Mavis Staples to decline the invitation to sing on this album; her voice gives out several times during her few lines on “Pulling the Pin.” But Zach de la Rocha, former vocalist and lyricist of Rage Against the Machine, steals the whole album when he raps at the end of “JU\$T.” His quick and effortless shifts in rhythm, tempo and intonation put Killer Mike and El-P to shame.

El-P does not vary his staccato cadence much. His flat timbre recalls a hectoring gym teacher or rookie cop. Nor are his lyrics particularly memorable, largely because he prefers generality over specificity. Killer Mike’s technical range is broader than his partner’s, and his sometimes-nasal drawl is distinctive. He also uses concrete images and occasionally makes explicit political statements. But what kind of statements does he make?

Killer Mike’s rebellious lyrics are tonic, but superficial. He hurls an expletive at “the king and queen” and sneers at “people with an attitude of Beverly Hills.” He refers to a “country ran by a casino owner.” These jabs hit their targets, but do not transcend the obvious.

Religion also clouds Killer Mike’s vision. “Never forget, in the story of Jesus, the hero was killed by the state,” he scolds. The identification of the state as the enemy and the implicit rejection of anti-Semitism are positive, but choosing Jesus as a hero is not much of a help in 2020. In fact, he rejects “the political” and declares, “The mission is spiritual.” Not only is this a retreat, most of his other lyrics contradict it. In fact, Killer Mike has become a spokesman for or identified himself with various sections of the Democratic Party, Bernie Sanders in 2016 and 2020, and more recently, Atlanta mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms, a possible

choice for Joe Biden's running mate.

Killer Mike celebrates violence, seemingly for its own sake. On the opening song, he thunders, "I got one round left, 100 cops outside. / I could shoot at them or put one between my eyes." It is hardly necessary to point out that nothing progressive can come of this. Other examples abound. He calls himself "the Mike Meyers murder-rapper for hire" and brags that his "Uzi weighs a ton." As an infant, he "musta suckled up crime."

"Opinion don't matter, stick to your plan," Killer Mike urges. But the plan merely seems to be "make money!" Looking back on his career, Killer Mike boasts, "Made dollar, made cent, made money, money, money. / Got a wife built like a Playboy bunny." He gloats about his "big ol' house" and "big ol' car." How does he square this with his supposed scorn for the wealthy? Why does his professed respect for his late mother not extend to other women?

In the context of protests involving monuments to the American Revolution, the album's most memorable lyric is "Look at all these slave masters posing on your dollar." This line promotes a racist and ignorant view of history. It aligns perfectly with the campaign to obscure and even reject the democratic and egalitarian principles of the Declaration of Independence.

*RTJ4* also must be seen in the context of the George Floyd protests. In Atlanta, Killer Mike's hometown, outraged protesters fought with police, broke windows and vandalized CNN headquarters. Days before the album's release, a visibly upset Killer Mike appeared at a press conference alongside Mayor Bottoms. When he was given the floor, he first expressed his "love and respect for the police officers," including his father and two cousins. "It is your duty not to burn your own house down for anger with an enemy," he said, while framing police violence in purely racial terms.

While he spoke with legitimate anger and passion about Floyd's brutal killing, Killer Mike's political message, and here he was addressing a mass audience, was weak and empty. Where was the "socialism" now? He urged protesters not to burn down Atlanta because "this city's cut different." By that he presumably meant Atlanta has been run by African-American politicians for years. He went on, "In this city, you can find over 50 restaurants owned by black women," as though that did anything for the mass of the working

class and the poor.

In the end, Killer Mike had only miserable advice for the great numbers of young people hoping for some radical ideas. He proposed that people fill out their Census forms and vote in November and that the Atlanta police department bring back "the community review board." He concluded by praising the police chief and mayor.

The speech exposed Killer Mike's previous rebellious statements as largely a sham or only going an inch deep. On *Run the Jewels 3*, he rapped approvingly about "People yellin', screamin' at polices. / Burnin', lootin', shootin', takin', thievin'." His judgment was that "You can burn this system and start again." The song in question sampled Martin Luther King, Jr.'s statement that "a riot is the language of the unheard." Another song on that album derided "the evening news giving you views, telling you to pick your master for president."

Although these lyrics lacked coherent political perspective and provided only an initial response to social reality, they expressed justified opposition to the powers that be. But as an advocate of black capitalism, which the television show *Trigger Warning with Killer Mike* reveals its star to be, he increasingly needs the authorities to protect his financial interests. Hence, when the chips are down, Killer Mike finds common cause with the police and the parties of the rich and powerful.



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