

King's Disease: Beware the nostrums of Nas

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The new album *King's Disease* shows that Nas remains a skilled and engaging rapper driven by a need to express himself. Unfortunately, the veteran MC's contradictions and confusion also remain intact.

Encouraged by his own success, Nas beckons from an unhealthy summit (seven of his twelve studio albums released since 1994 have been certified platinum or multi-platinum in the US). His racist perspective leads him to promote various political blind alleys. Oddly, he even offers dubious medical advice. In short, *King's Disease* shows that time has not diminished Nas's talents, but neither has it deepened his understanding or dispelled his illusions.

Nasir bin Olu Dara Jones was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1973. His father, Olu Dara (born Charles Jones III in Natchez, Mississippi, in 1941), is a well-known jazz musician and his late mother was a postal worker.

When Nas was a child, his family moved to the Queensbridge housing project (the largest public housing complex in the Western Hemisphere) in the Long Island City neighborhood of Queens, New York, where his new neighbor Willy "Ill Will" Graham played him hip-hop records. After eighth grade, Nas dropped out of school and began studying the teachings of the Five Percent Nation (an offshoot of the Nation of Islam) and the Nuwaubian Nation, two groups that espoused a mixture of black nationalism and religion.

Many critics consider Nas's debut album *Illmatic* (1994) one of the most influential hip-hop albums ever released. Despite its limitations, the album established Nas's reputation and strongly influenced hip hop in the 1990s. Nas later created a brutish, retrogressive "Escobar" persona seemingly inspired by the movie *Scarface* (Brian De Palma, 1983). Along the way, Nas has taken flak from Democratic politician Jesse Jackson and Fox News commentator Bill O'Reilly. To Jackson he responded, "You ain't helping nobody in the 'hood, and that's the bottom line." Of O'Reilly he said, "I

don't take him serious."

The rapper has used his wealth to create an investment firm called Queensbridge Venture Partners, which funds technology startups such as PillPack. When Amazon bought the latter company, Nas received \$40 million. Nas also is associate publisher of *Mass Appeal* magazine and has a partnership with Cognac brand Hennessy.

The title track opens *King's Disease* with a keening falsetto, an organ and a small gospel chorus. It is as though the listener has pushed aside a curtain and entered an upscale R&B club. Much of the album maintains this tone. "I'm gracefully aging," Nas says, which is a commendable enough sentiment. But soon he brags, "I made more paper to play with." Then comes the claim that "Africa produced blacks that started algebra." The credit for that actually goes to the ancient Babylonians. Here in a nutshell are the healthy impulses, retrograde attitudes and racist confusion that characterize Nas.

"Car #85" begins with simple, sustained piano chords and soulful, wordless singing. The rhythm is a seductive strut. Nas looks back on his teenage years as a carefree time when he nevertheless felt the need to define himself. "The whole hood was trying to call car 85," he says, which he liked for its smooth ride and good stereo. Nas reminisces vividly about "White Castles at midnight, fish sandwiches, 40-ounces and fistfights." Petty crime also was part of the picture, as indicated by the command, "Grab the duffle and run out." The nostalgia underscores the fact that Nas clearly lives in a different world now.

A high-pitched keyboard that evokes '70s funk or '80s pop adorns "Ultra Black." Nas' staccato rhythm becomes hypnotic in spondees such as "Grace Jones skin tone" and "cornrows, afros." He offers the double assonance of "African black soap caress the flesh." Nas's focus on race is not surprising, but it is

extremely unhealthy. Along the way, in “Ultra Black,” he can’t help himself: “God bless success.”

The musical highlight of the album is “All Bad,” which begins with live drums, rather than a sample. The rapid high-hat pattern, the snare flams and the bass drum’s thud give the song immediacy. As on several other of the album’s songs, an unhurried piano with a rich, low timbre plays a progression of sustained chords. Nas’s rap stands out with particular vigor against this accompaniment. His lyrics about a failed romance end with an image of Nas scrolling through a feed to see the affectionate things that the now-estranged woman once said to him.

Throughout the song, singer Anderson .Paak contributes restrained backing vocals. When Nas allows him the spotlight, he steals the song. Compared with his smooth soul backing vocals, .Paak’s lead vocal is thin and occasionally gritty. His confession of pain and longing seems sincere. “Man, I hate to take a loss,” he sings with palpable regret. On Nas’s lips, this line would sound much more literal and leave a sour taste.

Nas gets political on “The Definition.” “Taped telephone conversations! / What kind of nation got 300 million people they investigatin’?” His outrage about illegal blanket surveillance is entirely justified, yet he does not mention Democratic President Barack Obama, who expanded the surveillance program that he inherited from Republican President George W. Bush. This omission is unsurprising, given that Nas anticipated and celebrated Obama’s victory on his untitled 2008 album.

Soon he raps, “Shirley Chisholm wouldn’t play the victim.” Chisholm represented New York’s 12th Congressional district (Brooklyn) as a Democrat in the 1970s. Nas the venture capitalist holds her up as a model not only because she was black, but also because her reformism represents no threat to his business interests nor it does come anywhere near to addressing the underlying cause of the ills it identifies.

The most bizarre moment of “The Definition” comes after he explains that “king’s disease” refers to gout, for which he then offers home remedies. This aside illustrates Nas’ tendency to rely on impressions and folklore rather than careful observation and critical thought. This tendency has a negative influence on his approach to history, politics and daily life.

King’s Disease also provides unintentional humor.

Referring to the Internal Revenue Service on “Blue Benz,” the financier gripes, “People I ain’t even met take it out my check. / They the biggest gangstas.” Of note, the IRS sought to garnish Nas’s wages to settle a delinquent tax bill that exceeded \$6.4 million as of early 2011. On “10 Points,” as though demanding a medal for his charitable works, Nas shouts, “Named my venture fund after the land I came from. / That’s unheard of!”

Among the many guests who rap on the album, Big Sean impresses with his strikingly conversational style. Syllables tumble out of his mouth in his seemingly artless delivery. Sean charms with tongue-in-cheek boasts such as “I’m not your ex, I’m your ecstasy,” and “That kid all right, but I’m a kryptonite.”

Other guests deserve sharp criticism, including Foxy Brown, who briefly rapped with Nas in an ill-received “supergroup” called the Firm in 1997. Every other word of her bluster is a vulgarity. The equally reprehensible Fivio Foreign oozes arrogance and misogyny.

Overall, Nas’s energy and presence are undiminished, but he has not grown intellectually. He remains mired in identity politics and, even worse, in the celebration of opulence as an end in itself. Whatever his intentions, he offers his listeners nothing progressive. Spreading misinformation and political illusions, Nas “ain’t helping nobody in the ’hood.”



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