Which direction next? New albums from Khruangbin—*Mordechai*—and Sault—*Untitled (Black Is)*

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Two interesting music groups in the recent period have been the rock and funk trio Khruangbin out of Houston and the British soul and funk collective known as Sault.

Each band's previous albums possessed genuinely inventive and at times invigorating songs and musical expression, with evident skill and talent. For different reasons, there was a degree of anticipation in advance of the albums the two groups released this past summer, and curiosity as to which musical direction each would take.

Khruangbin's *Mordechai*

The band Khruangbin (which roughly means "big airplane" in Thai) is a trio out of Houston comprised of guitarist Mark Speer, bassist Laura Lee Ochoa and drummer Donald "DJ" Johnson. Though they play what might broadly be considered funk or "psychedelic" rhythm and blues, much of their previous effort on albums *Con Todo El Mundo* (2018), *Texas Sun EP* (2019) and *The Universe Smiles Upon You* (2015) eludes easy classification.

The band has thus far made ambitious attempts to feature a broad palette of musical traditions, including Thai "shadow" funk, Persian folk, Latin bolero, Malian desert blues, Ghanaian "highlife" dance music, French jazz, soul from the US, Jamaican dub music and perhaps a dozen other global styles and modes.

The openness and convincing reinterpretation of these varying sounds, without succumbing to mere imitation or eclecticism, has generally made Khruangbin's approach appealing. Very little else sounds like Khruangbin at the moment. One gets a sense that the band, at its best, is seeking to explore what is universal in the different sounds and cultures, in varying emotions and tones.

On the new album *Mordechai*, there is some continuation of this process. In its strongest moments, the band is expanding further into more soulful dance music. Songs such as the disco-themed "Time (You and I)," with lyrics and grooves that underscore the innocence and excitement of love, is a highlight. The same could be said for the Afro-Caribbean influenced "Pelota," or to a lesser extent the Taureg-guitar influenced R&B song "So We Won't Forget." Speer's guitar playing is particularly skilled and enveloping, and these stronger songs are an intriguing addition to their existing body of work. They express an optimism generally missing from popular music.

However, the album leans a bit too much on more contemplative and deliberate sounds, which taken as a whole become somewhat tedious. Slower songs like the opening "First Class," with echoes of 1970s experimental soul in the Roy Ayers strand, and the African-style funk song "Connaissais de Face" have their moments of intrigue musically, with creative rhythm-driven shifts and vocal interplay.

But the rest of the album, about half of the remaining songs, are bogged down in somewhat tired, dub-influenced "tone poems," which move in the opposite direction. Songs such as "Father Bird, Mother Bird," "One to Remember" and "Shida" are examples in this regard, which never really go anywhere.

And other than on "Time (You and I)," the lyrics on much of the album feel more like placeholders rather than something substantive, with a wandering and sometimes slight quality that don't make much or any impact.

But, all told, there is still something worth engaging with on this album, to the extent that it expresses an eagerness to "open up the world" musically in search of common feeling and thought.

While promoting *Mordechai* in the music press, the band—to its credit—continues to reject attempts to portray their approach as "cultural appropriation" of music styles. They frequently point out how deeply interconnected the world has become, particularly in the last 50 years, with the advance of new technology and the shared experiences of masses of people.

Indeed, the penetration of nearly every corner of the globe by countless musical genres and approaches, and their relentless and thoroughly progressive "cross-pollination," has made it extremely difficult today to isolate any form of popular music

and identify it with a single area or group of people.

In an interview with the Broken Records podcast, drummer DJ Johnson remarked that "the thing that people can hear in [our music] is the heart of the people playing the music through the music. This is [what's important]." And commenting on having frequently to discuss the allegedly "unusual" ethnic makeup of the band (Johnson is black, Speer is white and Ochoa is Hispanic), Johnson pointed out that the band reflects the actual experience and composition of the working class in Houston: "This happens all the time in Houston, it's a multicultural, multi-racial city. It is a common experience. Things blend."

Sault's *Untitled (Black Is)*

Sault is an enigmatic soul and R&B group out of the London area, with little to no information released on its personnel by the record label Forever Living Originals. The group has released four albums over the past two years.

One of the albums, entitled *5* (2019), was particularly refreshing in its creative and dance floor-driven approach to soul, R&B and funk music, with elements of African polyrhythms and up-tempo vocal interplay. It was a breath of fresh air. Songs such as "Up All Night" and "Why Why Why Why" were notably exciting, with primal and inventive qualities sorely lacking in much of contemporary popular R&B music.

On their new album *Untitled (Black Is)*, which is being widely praised in the music press, the collective are attempting to give expression to the popular anger and anxiety about the conditions and lives of black people—but more specifically the anti-scientific concept of "blackness."

As the title might indicate, it is a largely confused and muddled effort, weighed down by the "murky backwash of black cultural nationalism" expressed by figures such as Ta-Nehisi Coates. The lyrics and interludes also rely far too heavily on identity politics conceptions ("the magic of blackness," "black is," etc.) to give moving or pointed expression to what can only be historically concrete, class-shaped experiences.

There is no single "black experience" in any socially meaningful sense, and the experience of black workers has far more in common with the experience of white workers than it does with that of the black petty bourgeoisie, including in the entertainment industry, much less the rapidly growing layer of black multi-millionaires.

The album strikes an immediately stale note when it opens with the Black Panther protest chant "Out The Lies" (the title of the opening song), followed by a woman reciting empty and rather pretentious aphorisms ("Black is safety … Black is benevolence … Black is a lifeboat after an SOS," etc.). These "poetic"-style readings recur intermittently throughout the album.

Often the talented and creative musicianship—particularly a strong rhythm section and a generally inventive approach to song structure—are at severe odds with the lyrics. A song like " Wildfires," with its sharp and moody bass lines, for example, is performed along racialist lines centering on the supposedly ubiquitous "crimes" of "whiteness" ("White lives, Spreading lies, You should be ashamed, The bloodshed on your hands.")

The inventive rhythm and electro-organ interplay on a song like "Monsters" runs into the same hollow and generally unmoving declarations, aimed at everyone and no one in particular ("Pray, pray, pray, indigo child / Just so you know, they call us monsters 'cause they're in denial.") Some songs like "Bow" and "Don't Shoot Guns Down" are more stripped down and less problematic in this regard, but still not terribly affecting.

Upper middle class identity politics has had an unfortunate impact on Sault's most recent album. The songs attempt to wall off the experiences of black workers and youth from those of their class brothers and sisters of other skin colors and nationalities precisely at the moment when immense crises—a deadly pandemic, unprecedented social inequality, the near total breakdown of democracy, endless and bloody imperialist wars, ecological disaster and more—are throwing great numbers of workers and young people—and, increasingly, artists—of every race and ethnicity into shared, life-and-death struggles.

This harsh reality and the failure of Sault's new album to reflect it in any significant way—in fact, to be blunt, the latter's political backwardness and parochialism—help explain why the overall emotional and intellectual content of the album, despite the abilities and perhaps in part the intentions of the artists themselves, ring so hollow.