

Tyron: Another side of British rapper Slowthai

Erik Schreiber
2 May 2021

British rapper Slowthai's second album *Tyron* (2021) arrived almost exactly two years after his debut album *Nothing Great about Britain* (2019). The intervening period witnessed Slowthai's popular and critical success, as well as a backlash prompted by the rapper's public behavior. More significantly, the period saw the outbreak and intensification of the global pandemic that continues to claim lives.

On *Tyron* (which is Slowthai's real first name), the rapper engages little with social developments, instead taking stock of his own strengths and weaknesses as a step toward personal growth. The album may represent a reflective stage through which Slowthai must pass before he can move on to other things.

Slowthai was born in 1994 to a teenage mother of Barbadian heritage in Northampton, a commuter town 60 miles northwest of London. His mother gave birth to another son, Michael, in 2000, who died in 2001. This tragedy strongly affected Slowthai. After graduating from college, he worked in construction and then in retail before concentrating on music.

After releasing two EPs, the rapper officially announced himself with *Nothing Great about Britain*, which reached number nine on the charts. The title track compares the lives of the members of the royal family with those of working-class youth, in implicit criticism of inequality and hypocritical nationalism. The album's lyrics are often perceptive, if not penetrating. The most affecting song, "Northampton's Child," describes the straitened circumstances of Slowthai's childhood.

Nine months after the album's release, Slowthai was invited to the NME Awards (an annual event founded by *New Musical Express* magazine in the 1950s). When comedienne Katherine Ryan presented him with the Hero of the Year Award, he made lewd comments to

her, provoking jeers from the audience. Slowthai jumped off the stage into the crowd and was quickly escorted from the premises. He later apologized to Ryan on Twitter and asked for his award to be given to her.

Tyron, Slowthai's first release since this incident, has two distinct parts. The first half features the rapper's familiar high-keyed, aggressive sound. The second half is comparatively mellow and introspective. One might assume that Slowthai's self-inflicted embarrassment prompted some soul-searching. In actual fact, several of the reflective songs were recorded before the NME Awards incident, and several of the aggressive songs afterward.

The first song, "45 Smoke," begins with an abrasive sample, followed by the flickering high hat patterns and ultra-low bass characteristic of trap music. Slowthai's somewhat high-pitched voice and working-class inflection recall UK rapper Dizzee Rascal (whom Slowthai admires). "I grew up 'round shottaz [i.e., drug dealers], coppers, alcoholics," he spits. But instead of continuing the observational aspects of his previous album, Slowthai boasts and threatens, posing as an intimidating tough who is out to get rich. These are well-worn and unhealthy (and tedious) "gangsta" clichés.

So-called cancel culture comes in for heavy-handed criticism on "Cancelled." Slowthai cedes much of the song to fellow MC Skepta, whose blunt delivery matches his lyrics. The two squander an opportunity for a pointed critique with their braggadocio and reflexive defiance.

"Mazza," which was inspired by Slowthai's ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), comes on in a long rush, accompanied by a grinding, wavery organ. But the lyrics do not stray far from more gangsta

bragging. “Make the place look like a murder scene. / When I make moves, I’m a money fiend.” Slowthai’s celebrations of violence and greed, of which there are far too many, only encourage backwardness. Absent an attempt to analyze the social conditions that promote this violence, such lyrics do not offer anything positive to the listener.

The slower and more philosophical “Play with Fire” creates a bridge to the second half of the album. “Don’t let your mattress swallow you, wallowing, thinking what you’re going to do or gotta do,” Slowthai advises. He also provides the following glimpse of his inner state: “My heart and mind are at war, and my soul’s out here playing piggy in the middle.”

The second half of the album is noticeably warmer. It favors soul and R&B over trap and grime. Instead of electronic instruments, it incorporates guitars, piano and singing. Despite their limitations, Slowthai’s self-analysis and honest expressions of emotion prove more interesting and easier to relate to than his tough-guy posturing.

“I Tried” startles when a sped-up voice sings, “I tried to die. / I tried to take my life.” His delivery more conversational, Slowthai looks frankly at his flaws and difficulties. “Always wanted muscles. / Lack of strength made me headstrong,” he admits. “I’ve got a sickness and I’m dealin’ with it.”

“Focus” describes Slowthai’s determination to “make it out the rubble” and avoid the cycle of despair, crime and jail in which many of his neighbors were caught. “No one I can lean on, so I’m limping with a walking stick,” he says. This determination to find a better path is far more positive than the thuggish bluster in which he and many other rappers often indulge.

“NHS” is dedicated to the United Kingdom’s National Health Service, which, like health systems around the world, was left unprepared when the pandemic began, resulting in needless deaths and emotional scarring of patients and health care workers. But, strangely, Slowthai does not mention these workers or their experiences, aside from a reference to the applause they have received. Moreover, the lyrics imply that we must accept a certain amount of imperfection in the world. “What’s wealth without the poor?” Slowthai asks. “What you’re given is all you’re needing.” In a pandemic-era song about the NHS, the complacency encouraged by such lines is remarkably

wrongheaded and counterproductive.

The most complex song is the closing “ADHD.” “Tryin’ to pro-tect, so I pro-ject,” Slowthai raps, implying that his bravado is a self-defense mechanism. He admits his bad habits in lines such as “Smoke weed, only way I fall asleep. / Same routine, drink till I can’t speak.” Midway through the song, we hear Slowthai call a man whom he addresses as a brother simply to tell him that he loves him and misses him. This moment of genuine warmth is far more meaningful than the entire first half of the album. Yet immediately afterward, Slowthai strikes his most aggressive tone yet as he grapples with his stress and substance abuse in staccato outbursts. “I got tendencies, psycho tendencies. / Touch me tenderly. Heaven, let me in!”

Tyron documents Slowthai’s uncertain movement toward self-knowledge. The rapper has taken pains to emphasize the thought that went into the album’s conception, but this thought remains largely superficial. Slowthai does not examine the conditions that helped form his perspective and that have produced the tragic number of alcoholics and drug users. Also, the positive aspects of the album’s second half are counterbalanced by the antisocial aspects of its first half. Isn’t Slowthai creative enough not to have to rely on reflexive glorifications of violence and hedonism? Leaving these ugly traditions aside and probing more deeply into personal and social issues would mark a true step forward.



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