

# Madlib's *Sound Ancestors*: A moving musical testimony in the midst of a social crisis

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*Sound Ancestors* is the eleventh full-length studio solo album by hip hop producer Madlib (Otis Jackson, Jr., born 1973 in Oxnard, California). The album was released January 29, 2021 on Jackson's own Madlib Invasion record imprint.

Jackson, a longtime music producer whose career spans nearly 30 years, has undertaken a host of projects across genres as diverse as punk rock, jazz, pop and his own original hip hop scene. In 2018, Madlib's production acquired a higher level of exposure with the song "No More Parties in L.A.," released by Kanye West. He has also worked with music industry mainstays Snoop Dogg and Erykah Badu, among others.

From his origins in the Los Angeles underground rap music scene, Jackson has managed to achieve a degree of success while maintaining a reputation as a serious, even groundbreaking, artist. He was a frequent collaborator of well-known hip hop performers James "J Dilla" Yancey and Daniel "MF DOOM" Dumile, both now deceased.

*Sound Ancestors* is officially credited as a Madlib solo album. However, the 16 full-length tracks were edited, mixed and arranged by electronic instrumentalist Four Tet (Kieran Hebden, born 1977 in London), a longtime friend and associate. According to Hebden-Four Tet in a comment on *NPR*, his lone musical contribution to *Sound Ancestors* was that he "turned the treble up."

Despite Hebden's modesty, *Sound Ancestors* has an unusually and attractively *lush* quality. While Madlib's earlier instrumentals possessed a purposely lo-fi and minimal sound (an approach that has its charms), at times the beats could feel stiff and underwhelming. In particular, Madlib's tendency to rely on understated drums, sometimes completely forgoing drum

programming altogether, occasionally left the listener in anticipation of a groove that never appeared.

By contrast, the full-bodied melodies of the latest album are a pleasant surprise, with Madlib's ever-present gifts for subtle sonic texture, contrast and juxtaposition given more freedom of movement within the mix.

While tracks such as "The Call," featuring a 1960s era rock vocal-electric guitar sample ("Rising to the call! / I'm glad to give my life for it all"), begin the album on a triumphant and energetic note, *Sound Ancestors* also has noticeably somber and downbeat aspects. The moving "Road of the Lonely Ones" is punctuated by a pained and ghostly vocal sample sung by a '60s soul group.

The album's relationship to the social and political moment—the acute levels of misery and death inflicted upon the population by the ruling class response to COVID-19—is indirectly alluded to in various media comments. According to *NPR*, Madlib and Four Tet manage to "[address] the familiar and hidden sound of crate-digging [i.e., rare vinyl record collecting] hip-hop producers," while also "plugging into 2020's emotional weariness, debuting in a psychic public space urgently in need of care."

The article cites Hebden-Four Tet's comment that to "have a big bold record like this, in a time when everything is sort of fragile and rundown, feels like a very good thing to be doing."

While there are certainly "bold" and confident elements present on *Sound Ancestors*, they do not strike a false note or come off as insincere. The album as a whole maintains a cohesiveness and sensitivity as it shifts from one melody to the next. (A review on *Pitchfork* of the song "Hopprock," which describes the latter as "[feeling] like watching a sunrise over a

mountain,” is a fairly accurate description of an “upbeat” melody.)

This is most poignantly felt on the album’s final song, “Duumbiyay,” an understated combination of conga drums, isolated piano keys and a degraded audio recording of a child chanting the song’s title. The music is powerful in its simplicity and unassuming character.

In the combination of resilience and occasional gravity, the producers have managed to put their finger on something important about the present moment and about popular moods in response to the tragedy. *Sound Ancestors*, in its own manner, undermines the false triumphalism of the American ruling class and its effort to “turn the page” on the pandemic and “normalize” the ongoing disaster.



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