

When Smoke Rises: Canadian singer, poet Mustafa's elegies offer hope of renewal

Erik Schreiber
8 June 2021

The ruling elite's disastrous and criminally negligent response to the pandemic has sharply worsened the already existing problems of unemployment, poverty, hunger and homelessness. As new billionaires are minted, millions struggle to obtain the necessities of life. The desperation into which the impoverished are plunged has long contributed to violence.

When Smoke Rises, the debut EP by 24-year-old Canadian singer Mustafa, is a lament for the lives lost to this violence. Its very title is a memorial; it refers to Smoke Dawg, a rapper and close friend of Mustafa who was killed in 2018, and to other contemporaries who have died. As he mourns, the singer places his friends' deaths squarely in the context of his poor neighborhood. But in addition to grieving, Mustafa conveys dignity and offers compassion to others who are struggling with similar challenges.

Mustafa Ahmed was born to Sudanese parents who emigrated to Canada in 1995. He grew up in a Toronto housing project called Regent Park, known for high rates of crime, drug abuse and violence. At the encouragement of his older sister, Mustafa began writing poems as a child. Before he became a teenager, his verse about his neighborhood's social problems earned him the attention of the *Toronto Star*.

He was dubbed Mustafa the Poet and, with time, he became an unofficial mentor, confidant and spokesman for his community. His Instagram posts in support of the Palestinians during Israel's recent attack on Gaza show that his concerns extend beyond his immediate surroundings.

Unlike his friends, Mustafa gravitated not to rap but to singer-songwriters with a background in folk music. Among his influences are Joni Mitchell, Nick Drake and Leonard Cohen. Mustafa also took inspiration from Sufjan Stevens's tribute to his mother on his 2015

album *Carrie & Lowell*.

Mustafa dropped the "Poet" epithet to distinguish the songs that he had begun writing from his verse. Searching for his own voice, Mustafa first collaborated with other artists such as Usher, Camila Cabello and the Weeknd. But soon he felt the need to write about his own experiences. "I couldn't write anything else," he told the *New York Times*. "It was everything I was dealing with. It engulfed me."

When Smoke Rises is unified by its quiet performances and by the similarity of the songs' arrangements. Most of the songs include guitar arpeggios, keyboard or piano and a single tom-tom for percussion. Many also feature samples of Mustafa's friends speaking, including those who have died. Occasional samples of Sudanese and Egyptian music, taken from Smithsonian Folkways anthologies, provide additional texture and anchor Mustafa's music in the social and international context from which it arises. Slight shifts in dynamics, the entrance or muting of given instruments and the interplay between the musicians and the samples deepen the songs' impact.

The EP begins with "Stay Alive," one of its more affecting songs. Mustafa announces himself in a gentle, sometimes androgynous voice. He occasionally uses a rapid vibrato and slips into a falsetto. The song acknowledges daunting social challenges while offering solidarity and moral support. "Just put down that bottle, tell me your sorrows," Mustafa sings. "All of these tribes and all of these street signs, / None of them will be yours or mine. / But I'll be your empire, / Just stay alive." The song establishes a careworn optimism that runs through the EP.

Mustafa's diction usually resembles that of the singer-songwriters he admires, but he switches to street slang on "The Hearse." The opening line sets the scene

over a comparatively quick, tense rhythm: “There’s a war outside, and I can’t lose all my dawgs.” Without singing any more aggressively, he expresses the anger and desire for revenge that gang violence promotes. Addressing a murdered friend, Mustafa sings, “We used to rock the same clothes, / And niggas make me wrap you in a white fold. / They gon’ pay their price in blood, and that’s on everything I know.” The contrast between this threat and the sweet, breathy way in which Mustafa delivers it is conspicuous. The picture soon gains other dimensions. “Swear I wasn’t lookin’ for no beef. / I got a family to feed. / There’s room for everyone to eat. / I was all about the peace.”

“Ali” is a touching message to one of the singer’s fallen friends. Using melisma, Mustafa stretches out the second syllable of his friend’s name, as though unwilling to let go of it. “Ali, you know, our hearts are at their fullest. / Ali, there were no words to stop the bullets.” Mustafa laments his inability to save his friend. “Now it’s only me that needs to save himself.... I need time to mourn you.” Even walking by his friend’s home has become difficult. “I see you on your sister’s shirt, / And it’s hard to mask the hurt.” Though this rhyme may be indifferent, the couplet gains emotional weight from its first image and from Mustafa’s grief.

The closing song, “Come Back,” is like a lullaby. It slowly alternates between two piano chords as though in imitation of human breath. Mustafa seems to describe the loss of innocence or the end of a love affair, yet expresses a flicker of hope. “If she runs her fingers through my past, / she may lose the softness in her hands. / Maybe I can still make it come back,” he sings. “Please come back, at least in my dreams.” Beneath Mustafa’s deliberate vocal technique is genuine warmth and need. In the coda, the high tones of the piano are progressively filtered out, as though one is experiencing hearing loss. The chords quietly sound backwards before falling silent.

When Smoke Rises is a notably assured and artistically successful debut. Mustafa faces the turf wars and drug use of his neighborhood squarely. Although he does not probe their deeper causes, he evokes them vividly and offers compassion and affirmation to those who are struggling. Others in his position might have pursued success in rap, wearing their origins as a badge of honor and pretending to be invincible. Mustafa has taken a much more honest and humane approach.

“I don’t want to write these songs. I don’t like these songs,” he told the *Times*. “I resent everything about them and how they’ve come to be and everything that surrounds them. I hate that I had to make them.” This attitude is encouraging and entirely justified. If Mustafa starts examining everything that surrounds these songs, what will his next songs be like?



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)