

“Watch the world go to hell as I’m laughin’, sayin’ it’s perfect”

***Michael*: Rapper Killer Mike releases an unflattering self-portrait**

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Killer Mike, a rapper best known as half of the duo Run the Jewels, has released his first solo album in more than a decade. *Michael* (Loma Vista Recordings), named after its author, was unveiled on the 10th anniversary of the first Run the Jewels album.

During the past ten years, Killer Mike (born Michael Render) has earned a reputation as an outspoken and controversial artist and activist. He has an irreverent streak, which, when paired with the appropriate degree of insight, has struck at certain richly deserving targets. These qualities, along with his swaggering vocal delivery, have won him a sizable fan base. On June 16, the day of *Michael*’s release, the album was number one on the US iTunes hip hop and rap charts.

Yet throughout his career, Render has tended to embrace wrongheaded and even reactionary social and political views. In addition to the unserious, antisocial lyrics that are typical of much popular rap music, Render has increasingly espoused toxic racialist views. On *Michael*, an album that the rapper has primarily devoted to himself, these tendencies have truly “flowered.”

Michael is intended in part to chronicle Mike’s childhood and coming of age in Atlanta. The rapper mentions his relationships with his mother and grandmother, his experience in the Black Southern Christian Church, his first girlfriend and his becoming a father. But he primarily focuses on his financial success.

Render’s exercise is purely individualistic. His is a story of wise and loving family members, salvation through religion and personal triumph. He does not consider any of the social or economic forces that have influenced him so unmistakably. There is a certain provincialism in his frequent invocations of Atlanta.

Musically, the album combines slow trap beats (sometimes using an 808 drum machine) with gospel organs and choirs. The mix is dense; instruments fill the aural space. Mike means to evoke the atmosphere of Atlanta and pay homage

to soul artists such as Curtis Mayfield. On a musical level, *Michael* is a serviceable, if at times overly dramatic, hip-hop album. The more affecting songs express healthier sentiments like love and solidarity.

In “Slummer,” Mike reflects on his teenage girlfriend, with whom he shared a relationship that he later realized was more about possession. Nor could their love “overcome the slum” where they lived. Though his girlfriend became pregnant by another man, Mike remained close to her. He contemplates the frightening challenge that pregnancy poses to young people, especially when they are poor.

Mike acknowledges the deaths of his mother and grandmother in “Motherless.” He misses their guidance and regrets having fought with them over trivialities. More heartfelt than insightful, the song nevertheless strikes a positive chord.

But these better feelings and moods are drowned out by expressions of egoism, money worship, religion and racialist politics. The opening song, “Down by Law,” reflects these problems. After a brief introduction, Mike comes storming in, repeating the N-word ‘umpteenth’ times in his first few seconds of rapping. “None of them crackers ain’t love us,” he spits.

“Nrich” advertises the quest for material success. Mike brags about his lucrative investments, saying, “I real-estated when others hated.” Referring implicitly to black Americans, Mike says, “They used to own us, but now we owners. That’s independence.” His vision of personal achievement is to parade through the Louvre museum in Paris wearing flashy jewelry and garish shirts, carelessly dropping ashes as he goes (an echo of Beyoncé and Jay-Z’s effort in 2018?) What could be interesting about this crass and vulgar money worship as a symbol of “personal success?”

The *World Socialist Web Site* has previously noted Killer Mike’s tendency, as part of his group Run the Jewels, to be “driven back and forth between two poles. On the one hand,

[Run the Jewels] is able to offer moving and thoughtful, even scathing, commentary on specific social ills.” However, “they all too often take the line of least resistance and offer bursts of antisocial braggadocio ... as a substitute for serious thinking and feeling.”

On *Michael*, Render has almost nothing to say about the social reality that millions face. Notably absent from “Nrich” is any criticism of the status quo, any appeal to do away with poverty. Instead, the struggling are offered Render’s tiresome self-aggrandizement and demagogy that seeks to direct animosity toward white people for the plight of the inner-city poor.

“I’m in rooms with politicians, talkin’ business and s__-,” brags Render in “Talk’n That Shit!” He adds cynically: “Here you come with your opinions, I ain’t solicit that s__-.” The rapper has, in fact, established relationships with capitalist politicians, most prominent being former Democratic Party presidential candidate in 2016 and 2020 Bernie Sanders. Sanders and others no doubt see Render as a means of burnishing their own credibility with certain layers of the population.

The opportunist character of these relationships and Render’s own hypocrisy comes across on “Something for Junkies.” Render, who once sold drugs, shows sympathy for addicts and for people “working hard to get paid.” The song includes a recorded admonishment not to laugh at others’ misfortune, but to learn from it. This sentiment, fine on its own, is contradicted by the rest of the album.

More egregiously, “Something for Junkies” uses a recording courtesy of Louis Farrakhan, who provides the song’s “sermon” interlude. Render’s promotion of the raving antisemitic black nationalist leader of the Nation of Islam is bound up with his own demoralization.

In 2014, in response to the police killing of Michael Brown, a black teenager in Ferguson, Missouri, Render argued that “it is not about color; it is about what they killed him for. It is about poverty, it is about greed, it is about a war machine.” In the time since Render said these words, the Democratic Party, of which he is a longtime supporter, has reacted to a growing capitalist crisis and the rise of the far-right with the fervent promoting of racial politics in the national discourse. In this narrative, Trump and just about every other social evil are simply the responsibility of “white people.”

Likewise, the racial demagoguery does a disservice to Render’s own musical work, a good portion of which has met success through his collaboration with white hip hop artists such as El-P (Jamie Meline), his fellow group member in Run the Jewels.

As Render implies in “Talk’n That Shit!,” some have criticized him for these alliances. A recent *New York*

Times article, noting Render’s “chumminess with Georgia’s Republican governor” and “emotional admonishment of protesters after the killing of George Floyd in 2020,” states “In recent years, Killer Mike has become a target for a certain type of leftist criticism, especially from Black activists and anticapitalists.”

Render has replied with his inevitable arrogance. “I’ve been an activist way longer than I’ve been a successful rapper. You’re having arguments and debates that I was having at 16 years old. You’re a child to me.”

The rapper was born in 1975 to youthful parents. His father was a policeman. Mike was partly raised by his grandmother, who emphasized education and religion.

Like everyone else, Render was influenced by the times in which he grew up, generally stagnant and reactionary times, in which individualism, greed and the “virtues” of the market were pressed on the population. “Free enterprise” and “American democracy” were proclaimed the summit of human development. Socialism was pronounced dead, and all manner of subjective philosophy based on race, gender and sexuality were promoted as progressive. This was also the period of the severe degeneration of the civil rights movement, epitomized by Atlanta’s corrupt, cynical Andrew Young. Under the banner of “black capitalism,” an entire affluent social layer came into being, hostile to the working class and egalitarian views.

Gangsta rap became popular in Render’s youth. An antisocial response to the circumstances facing the African American working class, the genre in fact adapted to those conditions as another potentially lucrative route for “black businessmen” looking to “get ahead.”

After he achieved musical success, Mike ventured into business, opening a barbershop in Atlanta in 2011. Mike also helped found Greenwood, an online bank for “Black and Latinx communities and anyone else who wants to support Black-owned businesses.” Render has obviously gone back and forth in his political and social views over the years. The ultimate outcome, however, has been his development into a less successful but foul-mouthed version of the billionaire rapper-businessman Shawn Carter, aka Jay-Z.



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