

“First black president, and he’s the one who bombed us.”

## ***Sundial*: Rapper Noname shows political commitment and serious confusion**

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Rapper Noname unveiled her much anticipated follow-up album *Sundial* (2023) in August, about five years after her acclaimed debut album was released. The period between these albums witnessed an extraordinary number of global shocks that reflect intensifying economic, political and social crises.

Noname has a reputation for being politically outspoken. But on *Sundial*, she mostly avoids commenting about specific events, preferring to make general statements. Her healthy instincts show in her opposition to militarism and police violence. But the rapper also displays significant disorientation and poor judgment. Overall, *Sundial* has its musical satisfactions, but suffers from some of the same problems that mar much contemporary hip hop.

Noname (born Fatimah Nyeema Warner) grew up in the historically black Bronzeville neighborhood of Chicago and reached adulthood during the first year of Barack Obama’s presidency. Her mother owned Chicago’s Afrocentric Bookstore, but she was raised by her grandparents, who also were business people. Noname cut her teeth competing in poetry slams before she began rapping. She became friends with fellow Chicagoan Chance the Rapper and gained notice for one of her early collaborations with him. Her mixtape *Telefone* (2016) and debut album *Room 25* (2018), which showed greater maturity, were well received.

The rapper also showed an activist side. In 2019, Noname founded a book club with the stated goal of providing a “radical curated book list.” The first title that she chose was Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968), which combines anti-authoritarian rhetoric with bourgeois nationalism and opposition to

the revolutionary mobilization of the working class. Though Noname professes to be a socialist, this choice reflects her orientation toward various forms of petty-bourgeois radicalism.

*Sundial* has a laid-back, jazzy feel. The tempos are moderate to brisk, and the drumming features crisp high-hat patterns and a tight snare. Electric and upright bass keep the brief songs moving, and organs and keyboards are prominent. Sometimes we hear a small gospel choir that sounds like the best singers from the local church. The general lack of reverb gives the album an intimate, late-night atmosphere. In certain ways, the music harks back to the easygoing, thoughtful sound of Digable Planets and like-minded hip hop groups from the early 1990s. Noname raps in a conversational tone with little affectation. Her generally low-key, rather than confrontational, delivery wins the listener’s confidence.

A few songs, such as “Boomboom” and “Toxic,” deal with sex and relationships, although not all that profoundly. More interesting is “Potentially the Interlude,” in which Noname seems to muse about the expectations that she faces as an artist. “People say they love you, but they really love potential. / Not the person that’s in front of them, the person you’ll grow into.”

The general subject of political life comes up early and often. In the opening song, “Black Mirror,” Noname dubs herself “a socialism sister,” but as we’ve seen, this statement needs to be looked at critically. “Gospel” raises other questions. When Noname gives Billy Woods the floor, he uses the occasion to cite Mao’s Little Red Book favorably and romanticize guerrilla warfare. The artists may sincerely intend to be extremely “revolutionary,” but Maoism and

guerrillaism have led to terrible defeats and disasters for masses of people, in China, Latin America and elsewhere. Artists too have the responsibility to know what they're talking about.

"Hold Me Down" is the first of several songs on which Noname decries state violence, albeit only in passing remarks. She refers to "Cop City," the massive compound where Atlanta police will receive militarized training, as "kill-ready." More pointedly, she says, "First black president, and he's the one who bombed us," alluding to the eight years of continuous war that President Barack Obama waged.

On "Namesake," Noname connects police violence at home with war abroad: "The same gun that shot Li'l Terry out west, / The same gun that shot Samir in the West Bank." Then she rightly calls the National Football League a purveyor of "propaganda for the military complex" and blasts Jay-Z for entering into a lucrative partnership with it. In the next breath, she denounces Rihanna, Beyoncé and Kendrick Lamar for helping to "glamorize" the "war machine" by performing at the Super Bowl. Her pointed mockery is absolutely justified (and gratifying), but she blunts its effect somewhat when she goes on to criticize herself for having performed at Coachella. Where are artists supposed to appear?

Her indictment of Obama notwithstanding, Noname exhibits the genuinely malign influence of racist politics. "Support the black business, no compromise," she raps on "Beauty Supply," as though black capitalists were more benign than other capitalists. Elsewhere, she singles out "casual white fans" and likens them to voyeurs. Noname also gives rapper \$ilkMoney space to talk about sending white people back to the Caucasus on "Gospel?" None of this is remotely progressive.

But "Balloons" includes even bigger problems. Noname cedes the last verse to rapper Jay Electronica, who delivers a messianic tirade that announces "the war of Armageddon." He proceeds to promote the Nation of Islam, the reactionary black nationalist organization that not only cultivates religious backwardness, but also has a long record of racism, antisemitism and homophobia. The verse includes a few dog whistles along these lines.

Noname's announcement that she would release this song as a single caused an outcry among fans because

of Electronica's involvement. The rapper canceled the release of the single but kept the song on the album. After *Sundial* was released, Noname publicly denied being an antisemite. "I'm not going to apologize for a verse I didn't write," she posted on Instagram. "I'm not going to apologize for including it on my album." Why not, if she doesn't agree with it and if it's rotten? However she may distance herself from Electronica's bigotry, she nevertheless bears responsibility and deserves blame for giving him a platform to promote it. Antisemitism is a poison, and it is not uncommon in black petty bourgeois nationalist circles.

The best parts of *Sundial* suggest that Noname, who talks about expropriating the rich to benefit the community, is sincere in her desire to fight for justice and equality. But the album also reveals the extent to which she has been bewildered by the racist academics, pseudo-leftists and anti-Marxists of all stripes who have sown ideological confusion for decades, including in popular music. Noname is far from the only victim of these pernicious forces, either in hip hop or in society at large. Whether she can work through these issues remains to be seen.



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