

“Tryin’ hard to separate the facts from the tinfoil”

Lupe Fiasco, Chief Keef and Previous Industries: A cross section of current hip-hop

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Hip-hop, which turned 50 last year, is the most popular musical genre in the US. In the first half of 2024, hip-hop accounted for one-third of all songs in *Billboard*’s top 10, which is more than the share for any other musical style. Developments in hip-hop may thus shed a certain amount of light on the state of popular music, and of popular culture in general.

The following brief reviews will examine three hip-hop albums that were released in the past few months and received critical notice. The sample is not authoritative, much less scientific; by coincidence, the artists we’ll discuss all hail from Chicago. But these snapshots will contribute to a larger picture of where hip-hop stands today.

Samurai

Lupe Fiasco’s ninth album, *Samurai* (2024), was inspired by a documentary about the late singer Amy Winehouse. In the film, Winehouse mentions having spontaneously written rap lyrics, and Fiasco wondered what she would have been like as a rapper. From this starting point, *Samurai* evolved into a reflection on the struggles that artists face within the entertainment industry, Fiasco told *Rolling Stone*.

Muted trumpet, vibraphone, soprano sax and upright bass provide mildly jazzy accompaniment, and the moderate, mostly upbeat tempos establish a thoughtful mood. Throughout, Fiasco demonstrates his knack for creative images, wordplay and rapid-fire rhymes.

“Samurai” opens with a refrain based on Winehouse’s comment about her rap lyrics. The song describes a talented woman singing outside an opera house as wealthy patrons pass by, quietly laughing to themselves about her. This sympathetic vignette evokes artists’ struggle for recognition while hinting at social

struggles.

On the amusing “Mumble Rap,” Fiasco likens creativity to a sort of benign possession. He begins “Cake” by acknowledging that he and his fans have stimulated and enriched each other. Elsewhere, Fiasco muses about what makes good lyrics and admits to second-guessing himself on stage. On the ruminative “Palaces,” the rapper advises emerging artists that adversity can strengthen them: “You gotta march forth over your art and for your fans.”

These sentiments are decent enough but do not get us very far. Examining art in isolation from the social and economic relationships in which it is entwined prevents Fiasco from drawing substantive conclusions. We’re left with an enjoyable album that doesn’t help us see these questions afresh.

Almighty So 2

The latest album by Chief Keef embodies the ugliest, most vulgar, most antisocial tendencies in hip-hop. From start to finish, *Almighty So 2* (2024) is a blast of egotism, money worship, misogyny, violence and gratuitous sex. It also continues the crass trend of “sequels” to hip-hop releases: in this case, the rapper’s *Almighty So* (2013) mixtape.

In his early life, Keef, *né* Keith Farrelle Cozart, endured the neglect suffered by those for whom capitalism has no use. He was born to a teenage mother and grew up in one of Chicago’s most violent areas. He dropped out of high school, joined the Black Disciples gang, became a father at age 16 and has been arrested many times. To paraphrase Marx, Keef reflects the accumulation of ignorance, brutality and mental degradation that capitalism produces at one pole, while fostering the accumulation of wealth at the opposite

pole.

The album's doomy accompaniment, overseen by Keef himself, includes tubular bells, strings and choruses of women or children. There are also the low-pitched electronic bass drum and high-pitched high-hat patterns typical of the drill subgenre of hip-hop. Keef's rapping technique is notably crude, his lyrics unimaginative, his jokes dumb. At worst, he shouts threateningly, full of anger and entitlement.

Rapper Sexy Red, who is currently selling her own shades of lip gloss with disgusting names, contributes her profanity and juvenile self-satisfaction to "Grape Trees." Surprisingly, the talented, imaginative Tierra Whack appears on "Banded Up," rapping rings around Keef. What is she doing in such debased company?

Almighty So 2 has value as a sociological and cultural document, but not as an artistic statement. It is a message sent from a decaying social order.

Service Merchandise

Previous Industries is a new group featuring Open Mike Eagle, Video Dave and STILL RIFT. Though these under-the-radar rappers have known each other for years, *Service Merchandise* (2024) is their first collaboration, and it feels natural and felicitous.

The album is named after a long-defunct retail catalog that sold toys, jewelry and electronics. Many of the songs are named after stores that have gone out of business (e.g., "Roebuck," "Montgomery Ward" and "Fotomat"). Nostalgia, obviously, is the theme of these fortysomething rappers. They look back on their adolescence in the 1980s and '90s with warmth and humor.

Soul and R&B samples set the tone with mellow organ, guitar and piano. The atmosphere evokes '90s hip-hop groups like De La Soul and the Jungle Brothers. There is no real interplay between the rappers. Rather, each passes the mic when he has said his piece. Much of the rapping has the feel of freestyling (i.e., spontaneous improvisation) on the themes of nostalgia and aging. The rappers, particularly Video Dave, establish a friendly, good-natured vibe.

Scattered among references to cartoons and television shows are a few clever and funny comments. Video Dave is "Tryin' hard to separate the facts from the tinfoil." Elsewhere, "I threw my caution to the wind, and it came right back." Open Mike states bluntly, "Indie rappers deserve government subsidies."

But as winsome as the album is, it is also lightweight. It provides a wealth of period detail but no coherent picture. The rappers don't attempt to understand the period or compare it with today. In fact, they seldom refer to current reality. The resulting time capsule may thus have a limited audience.

Three artistic responses

This sample of recent albums, though small, nevertheless reflects certain trends in hip-hop. Chief Keef's album shows not only the social and cultural devastation that capitalism wreaks on the most exploited sections of the working class, but also the music industry's willingness to promote backwardness for profit. *Service Merchandise* reflects the forms of escapism into which some intelligent artists, faced with a world in crisis, retreat. Other talented rappers like Lupe Fiasco make positive statements but, lacking a conscious historical or political perspective, fail to grasp social reality adequately or point the way forward. Overcoming these problems will require a re-engagement with the working class among artists and a revival of socialist culture among workers.



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