

Top Rap Albums of 2015: Review by Ian Sayres

Added by Ian Sayres on January 4, 2016.



15. G-Eazy, *When It's Dark Out*

Here's the thing. 2015 was once again a year of change, from minimalistic and off-kilter, to layered, luxurious, and somber. The release of Eazy's new album just felt redundant, forced, and even uninspired at times. *When It's Dark Out* is a direct continuation of his freshman effort *These Things Happen*, and just like his first album, Eazy is once again trying to find his sound.

The production is consistent and on a few tracks (*Me, Myself & I*, *Of All Things*, and *Some Kind Of Drug*) well-done. Interestingly enough these were also some of the most enjoyable. I feel like the production is supposed to sound menacing sometimes and melancholy at others, which is the problem... Eazy strives to be so dark and so sincere that it comes across as corny. This album is so riddled with conflicting ideas and so dead set on being serious that it's barely enjoyable as a whole, it's also extremely catchy at times and the features keep this thing afloat. But I **love** it.

TRACKS I LOVED:

Me, Myself & I, Of All Things, Calm Down, Everything Will Be Okay

14. Billy Woods, *Today, I Wrote Nothing*

If Billy's previous works are individual essays, then *Today, I Wrote Nothing* is his notebook. It's scattered and confusing, but also precise and well written. His unorthodox style allows

the listener to follow him as he weaves between thoughts, and even though this can be frustrating at times, as a whole it's rewarding.

At 24 tracks long this LP looks intimidating, but Billy chooses his words so carefully that he can paint a vivid picture in around 2 minutes. He mixes up his speed once or twice on the album but mainly sticks to his signature spoken word flow. This combined with his thoughtfully haunting wordplay, and unusual emphasis makes every single bar memorable. The production on this album has a unique feel as every song is its own movie with its own unique soundtrack. Not one beat is coherent with the rest of the album. That being said, I give the producers credit for their creativeness.

I was pleasantly surprised on every single track. The most interesting and surprising being the sample from Mel Stuart's "Willy Wonka & The Chocolate Factory" on *The Big Nothing*. This project feels very ambitious and as a whole is extremely entertaining as each track focuses on one individual idea.

TRACKS I LOVED:

The Big Nothing, Woodhull, Zulu Tolstoy, Poor Company, Rpms, Borrowed Time, Goodnight

13. **Clear Soul Forces, *Fab Five***

The "Clear Soul Forces" love rapping, and it is exceedingly evident on their newest project. Nameless—the recently recruited producer—creates some of the most "boom-bap" influenced beats I've heard in recent years, and the likes of E-Fav, Ilajide, L.A.Z, and Noveliss completely destroy them with some extremely witty punch lines. I mean... These guys are so adept at dissecting beats that they could easily ride any instrumental with great success.

Listening to the first few seconds of *Insane*, I wonder how in the world someone could rhyme right in the pocket of the beat, but they did just that, and they did it well. This is not an album that contains depth within its lyrics, this is a project that showcases potential, skill, and the passion these guys have for what they do. *Fab Five* is fast, fun, and skillfully produced.

TRACKS I LOVED:

Cheese in the Sky, Orange Faygo, 100%, Insane, Kaboom, Opening Theme, Bpswr, Get Down, Blow Ya Mind

12. **The Game, *The Documentary 2 & 2.5***

Between the years 2010 and 2014 Game lost a lot of the respect he had gained through his freshman and sophomore albums (*The Documentary & Doctors Advocate*). The cause of this drop off in sales and hype was caused by Game's lack of effort. He consistently released too many projects and never really showcased the creative, west coast vibes that he was known for. In 2014 he announced the follow up to his debut album.

I'm considering the two projects to be discs one and two of a single album because of the timing of the releases and the contents of the discs. The follow up to Game's debut LP *The Documentary*, this project is an intimidating 38 tracks long over the course of two full discs. A lot of doubt surrounded this release. 38 tracks is a lot of music. How could Game produce quantity and quality? The answer. A lot of help from some legendary people. Production creds to DJ Premier, Alchemist, will.i.am, and verses from Kendrick, Ice Cube, Dr. Dre, Busta Rhymes, Nas, Q-Tip, Drake, and Kanye. The production work is flawless. It embodies everything that old school west coast beats should be. Everything about this album is fantastically west coast. This is Games return to form. And it's glorious.

TRACKS I LOVED: Disc One: *On Me, Step Up, Don't Trip, Standing On Ferraris, Circles, Mula, LA,*

Disc Two: *Magnus Carlsen, Crenshaw/80s and Cocaine, Gang Bang Anyway, Outside, Like Father Like Son*

11. **Ghostface Killah & BADBADNOTGOOD, *SOUR SOUL***

My only reason for being so excited for this release was because of my respect for Ghostface Killah. As a member of Wu-Tang he supplied a lot of personality alongside Ol' Dirty Bastard, and provided some of the most memorable lines from a rap song. His voice and flow is something legendary, it's so catchy and memorable that it has become one of the most imitated in all of hip-hop. BADBADNOTGOOD continues to produce some very jazzy, R&B inspired noir instrumentals.

The styles of BBNG and Ghostface mesh fantastically, the low growl of Killah's voice blends into each instrumental as if they were meant to be together. He has long favored this type of production and it's evident that he was pleased with the beats that the canadian rock band created for him. *SOUR SOUL* is the soundtrack to an old school detective film, and Ghostface Killah is the main protagonist.

TRACKS I LOVED: *Sour Soul, Six Degrees, Gunshowers, Starks Reality, Ray Gun*

10. **Jay Rock, *90059***

Before *90059* I had only heard Jay Rock on guest verses... Which he murdered. He continues to do that to his verses on his sophomore album. Rock's story is still being told on this album and even though it has been told by plenty of rappers before him, he finds a way to keep it interesting.

On *90059* the rapper expands as an artist and shows off some incredible craftiness. He paints some vivid pictures of a few of his life experiences, some of would be enough to make a man cringe, but Rock's knack for metaphors saves us from that and even comes across as comical at times. His charismatic flow and deep grumbling voice is somewhat unique and often helps the rapper out when his rhymes are less than captivating.

All in all this album is a new direction for Rock, and it shows how much chemistry there is between him and the producers over at TDE. This album is a sign pointing towards the good things to come from the promising young emcee.

TRACKS I LOVED: *Necessary, Easy Bake, Gumbo, 90059, Vice City*

9. **Joey Badass, *B4. DA. \$\$.***

B4. DA. \$\$. was released right at the start of 2016, a relative underground artist dropping an album around the same time as Lupe, Kendrick, Drake, and Big Sean meant getting overlooked for a good part of the year. A late listen, Joey may have released a higher quality album than some of the other joints that were in the rotation at the time.

He takes his positive outlook and soulful style and creates a street rap epic that is extremely creative. Overcoming the death of a close friend, and a lot of adversity Joey focuses on his music and shows off some interesting flows and instrumentals. This album is a tribute to the 90's.

TRACKS I LOVED: *Save the Children, Paper Trail\$, Big Dusty, Like Me, No. 99, Christ Conscious, O.C.B.*

8. **Logic, *The Incredible True Story***

Back to back year in which Logic released his promising debut album with Def Jam, and his genre bending sophomore album. *The Incredible True Story* is completely different from *Under Pressure*, yet it's still exactly the same.

Logic seems to have decided on his formula for the future. He enlists some grade-A producers to craft some cinematic beats and interludes, and he oversees the whole process to make sure that everything sounds as cohesive and atmospheric as Young Sinatra's *Space*

Odyssey. The choice to create something that is centered around such a specific story line is a risky idea in hip-hop, but Logic is so passionate about this idea that it works out well despite the weak dialogues and poor concepts. The tracks themselves carry the album and stand alone well without all of the poorly rehearsed skits throughout. Logic has some big ideas that don't workout as planned but the fantastic production and impressive flows make this album stand out all the same.

TRACKS I LOVED: *Fade Away, I Am The Greatest, The Cube, Lord Willin', City Of Stars, Stainless, Never Been*

7. Oddisee, *The Good Fight*

Oddisee has been D.C.'s heralded figurehead for years now and because of his eclectic and tasteful style, it's extremely hard to see anyone taking his throne any time soon. On his most recent album he rockets himself right up the list of greatest rapper producers of all time.

The Good Fight is easily his smoothest and most creative project yet, this album shows off a strong sense of artistic freedom and blends sounds from a lot of different genres into the tracks. Oddisee's rhymes are increasingly poetic and his flow is as polished as ever. The way his voice washes over each instrumental is really something to behold. He has a gem in this LP, one that will undoubtedly be the benchmark for other up and coming rappers in the D.C. area.

TRACKS I LOVED: *That's Love, Want Something Done, Contradictions Maze, Counter-Clockwise, First Choice, Belong to the World, A List of Withouts, Book Covers, What They'll Say, Worse Before Better*

6. Pusha T, *Darkest Before Dawn*

Just before the release of Darkest Before Dawn Kanye West announced that the new president of his label G.O.O.D. Music would be Pusha T, to which King Push responded "You'll be seeing [My Album] very shortly." Within a month he had already released 3 singles and hinted at the release of a prelude to his King Push album. DBD was unplanned, Push claimed that he had so many different ideas and so much great unused material that he felt the need to reward his fans with a taste of what's coming on his originally announced album.

At only 10 tracks long with no fillers, this project is short and to the point. He returns to his acclaimed "Clipse" style and absolutely kills it both on the production and lyrics. Darkest Before Dawn is a sign of new music to come from Pusha T and it's amazing.

TRACKS I LOVED: *Intro, Untouchable, M.F.T.R., Crutches Crosses Caskets, M.P.A., Got Em Covered, F.I.F.A., Sunshine*

5. Earl Sweatshirt, *I Don't Like Shit, I Don't Go Outside*

Earl Sweatshirt has always been... An interesting artist. Always dissecting his thoughts and questioning himself within his music, he has seemed uncomfortable within his music. *I Don't Like Shit, I Don't Go Outside* is Earl finally accepting himself as who he is, but still making his psyche the focal point of his music. He continually delves into the problem he's having, and this time he sounds deadly serious, his unstable mind on full display as he sways back and forth between full blown introspection and self consciously distant.

The production is very minimalistic and foggy, Earl turns out the lights and guides us through the album with his voice. The production is so hollow and so somber that you barely need lyrics to understand the ideas of the album. This LP is a dark journey through murky instrumentals and self-effacing lyrics, it's an audible representation of who Earl is.

TRACKS I LOVED: *Huey, Faucet, Grief, Off Top, AM// Radio, Inside, DNA, Wool*

4. L'Orange & Jeremiah Jae, *The Night Took Us In Like Family*

This album marks the birth of a new genre within hip-hop... Rap-Noir. L'Orange & Jeremiah Jae let their love for film noir bleed into their music on this album. The production is gritty, jazzy, and sprinkled with samples from detective movies. Jeremiah Jae hints at an era of hip hop not seen in history, pre Scarface gangster rap. The production is near flawless and undoubtedly sets the tone for the entire album. The duo turn their love for film and detective fiction into a masterpiece on *The Night Took Us In Like Family*.

TRACKS I LOVED: *Do My Best to Carry On, Underworld, All I Need, Part Two: God Complex, The Concrete Some Call Home, Ignore the Man to Your Right, Taken by the Night, The Lineup, Part Four: Revenge & Escape, I Was Invisible Nothing*

3. Vince Staples, *Summertime '06*

Vince Staples begins his journey to relevance with this album. It is a shockingly real depiction of life in the unforgiving streets of Long Beach California. *Summertime '06* is the coldest, darkest, most menacing album released this year.

Vince spits his verses with such conviction, and emotion that it's hard not to hang on every word that spews from his lips. He is incredibly gifted in the art of imagery, and storytelling.

Vince could very well be the second coming of Kendrick Lamar. The production really just creates the backdrop which makes the lyrics sound even darker. If that's even possible.

Everything about this album screams hardship. The pain is audible through Staples' voice, every line drips with resentment, anger, and sadness. Vince has ambition and he shows it on Summertime '06.

TRACKS I LOVED: Disc One: *Ramona Park Legend Pt. 1, Lift Me Up, Norf Norf, Loca, Señorita*

Disc Two: *Ramona Park Legend Pt. 2, Might Be Wrong, C.N.B., Like It Is*

2. Lupe Fiasco, *Tetsuo & Youth*

It's the return of "The Cool" on *Tetsuo & Youth* Lupe proves his critics wrong and draws attention to his biggest strength. Lyricism reigns supreme on all of his previous efforts, and everything else is just the icing on the cake. This time is no different. Lupe really dives deep into his bag and comes up with some of the deepest most thoughtful lyrics I've heard on a hip-hop album in years.

Lupe really drives home the idea that he has been holding back for his past few albums, detailing his struggle with his former record label in multiple interviews leading up to and after the release of *Tetsuo*. The opening track (*Mural*) kicks off the album with a bang and made me wonder how the rest of the album could maintain the level of lyricism and creativity that this track brought to the table. It is 8 and a half minutes of straight bars... No hooks... just 64 bars, 1377 words, lyricism... The rest of the album just continues the trend of ambitious, lyrically driven surprises that Lupe was praised for in his early career.

TRACKS I LOVED: *Mural, Dots & Lines, Prisoner 1 & 2, Body of Work, Little Death, Chopper, Deliver, Adoration of the Magi*

1. Kendrick Lamar, *To Pimp A Butterfly*

The most hyped album of the year was *TPAB*, and it wasn't even close. There was little question of whether or not the album would be great, the real question was whether or not Kendrick would be able to match or better his performance on *Good Kid, M.A.A.D City*. Is such a thing even possible?

On his breakthrough LP Kendrick highlighted some incredible storytelling skills, fantastic lyricism, and a versatile flow that could scare legends like MF DOOM, 3-Stacks, or even Biggie. How could he improve on an album that was so incredible that it instantly launched him into the world's spotlight? The answer, insane production, abrasive and often

controversial lyrics, and insane wordplay. Kendrick continues to tell us his story, but also chooses to be a voice for the black community in a time when a voice was needed.

This album is bigger than music, and it's been treated as such. An album with such a social and political impact, while also being critically acclaimed for its sound is without a doubt an instant classic. All Hail the King Kendrick.

TRACKS I LOVED: *Wesley's Theory, King Kunta, These Walls, u, Alright, How Much A Dollar Cost, The Blacker The Berry, i*