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Apollo Brown's and Che' Noir's Songs of Hope, Songs of Endurance

John Amen · Wednesday, July 15th, 2020

As God Intended, the new album from Apollo Brown and Che' Noir, opens with a clip from James Baldwin: "It seems to me that God is our responsibility. God's only hope is us. If we don't make it, he ain't gonna make it either." A few tracks later, Brown says, "You tell me what I'm supposed to do with all this ambition I've got." These stances, one oriented toward an anthropopathic spirituality, the other toward worldly success, and the overlaps and interplays between them, are the guiding inspirations for the project. The album's production brings to mind 90's prototypes, eloquent lyricism wrapped in dream-pop, CA-infused trip-hop, and synth-y experimentalism.

"Anti-Social" opens with an R&B croon courtesy of Blakk Soul & Ghostface Killah before segueing into Noir's rap, a volatile vacillation between gangsta posturing and social commentary. On "Money-Orientated," Noir offers, "Look, you say in God we trust / but I've seen God's people sell their souls for you / good girls turned into strippers on poles for you / you're a poor man's dream but they tire you to evil." Her hard-edged manifesto is framed by Brown's shimmering synths and low-key grooves reminiscent of early Dre, Biggie, and Snoop Dogg. "12 Hours" is a riveting narrative wrapped in static and resonant yet minimal beats and drones.

On “Daddy’s Girl,” Noir laments the absence of her father and how a lack of male guidance impacted her ability to navigate inner doubts and the outer world. “The Apple” is a vivid tribute to (black) women and their unique challenges. With “Freedom,” the listener is torn between the directness of Brown’s intro and interlude (“America is at war with the black man”) and Noir’s rhythmic phrasing (“You get free and they make it hard just to earn up a wage / you either return to the cage or get murdered in graves / that’s the power, how racist judges could turn us to slaves”). With “Live by the Code,” Noir offers insights into success and failure, gravitating toward a streetwise optimism without losing sight of the realities inherent to a system founded on racial hierarchies.

Much of the best contemporary hip-hop, including work by Kendrick Lamar, Frank Ocean, Little Simz, and Saba, balances the aggressiveness of perennial gangster-ism with melancholy reflectiveness, historical interpretations, and spontaneous expressions of vulnerability. *As God Intended* follows that template, Che’ addressing themes related to childhood, lack of mentors, black and female oppression, and “making it” in the hardboiled world of hip-hop. Apollo Brown’s adept treatments and laid-back sonics are the ideal complement.

8.2/10

(Photo Credit: TrilogyBeats)

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