

Outkast: a case study in social misleading

By Marc Wells
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The phenomenon of hip-hop and its musical incarnation in rap have had considerable success and reached wide audiences across the world. This has come principally on the basis of a combination of sophisticated rhythm arrangements and the use of words spoken by young and often talented artists generally, but not solely, influenced by a musical tradition that includes funk, rhythm & blues, soul music, jazz, reggae and—often—rock & roll.

Among these various trends and musical creations, the now nine-times-platinum *SpeakerBoxxx/The Love Below* album by the Atlanta hip-hop duo Outkast deserves the attention of social and political observers for various reasons.

In 1994, two talented kids, Big Boi and Dre AKA Andre 3000 (not to be confused with Dr. Dre), were able to score a record deal with LaFace Records as a consequence of the overwhelming success their song “Player’s Ball” obtained that year on LaFace’s Christmas album. Their first album *Southernplayalisticadillacmuzik*, an instant hit (it sold 1 million copies), displayed Outkast’s Southern roots and a solid attachment to 1970s soul and R&B.

The following albums (*ATLiens* [1.5 million copies], *Aquemini* [3 million] and *Stankonia* [4 million]) demonstrated the band’s increasing popular appeal and a stylistic diversification that surely helped widen their audience, incorporating various jazz, reggae and funk elements to hip-hop beats. Like every successful band, a “Greatest Hits” album was inevitable. *Big Boi & Dre Present... Outkast* was released to include many of the popular songs of the past few years, plus a few fresh tracks that showed the band’s interest in exploring and further elaborating the glorious musical styles of the 1970s in a hip-hop musical landscape.

With *Speakerboxxx/The Love Below*, Outkast attained a very prominent position in the hip-hop world, scoring a whopping 9 million copies. The music is diverse in character, and the lyrics deal with various subjects, many of them socially and politically relevant, as we will see below. It’s worth mentioning that numerous well-known artists, even some who don’t traditionally perform in the hip-hop arena, are featured in the two-CD album, including Norah Jones, Ludacris, Jay-Z, Killer Mike, Lil’ Jon & The Eastside Boyz, Kelis and Cee-Lo.

The first element worthy of note is that this double album (one CD by each member of the duo) is a mélange of many styles, often revealing a lack of careful attention to the pursuit of an aesthetic goal or a specific message. Instead, it is a sensationalistic display of various musical influences, none of which is dealt with in an innovative manner.

Big Boi’s *Speakerboxxx* CD is musically less eclectic than Dre’s *The Love Below*; despite a greater participation by guest performers, it remains more conservative and safely tied to an urban funk/R&B tradition. However, Big Boi is a very competent rapper, using intricate verses rich in rhyme schemes, although the content is often incoherent. He seems to be more courageous about exposing social issues, albeit showing a limited political sensibility.

After an eclectic but not significant musical introduction, “GhettoMusick” kicks off the CD in a mainstream hip-hop musical style; it is nonetheless well-produced and interesting in the way it interlaces different tempos and rhythms in a semi-chaotic fashion that reflects

frantic urban life. There are recurring themes of unresolved or unaddressed anger throughout the song alternating with oases of “feel-good” sections.

In “Unhappy”—featuring Sir Lucious, and in the menacing “Bust,” featuring Killer Mike—the artist depicts aspects of urban life such as poverty, social inequality and jail terms. The artist, however, fails to seize the opportunity to analyze them profoundly; instead, he merely feels sorry for himself.

In fact, the best solution for such a condition apparently is to try to survive as an individual against the rest of the world—specifically, arming oneself: this is an antisocial view that can only contribute to further alienating masses of people from one another and that recurs throughout this CD.

Similarly, “Church,” with its apparent Southern Baptist overtones, is a meditation on the difficulties of contemporary urban life encountered by the poor and disadvantaged such as homelessness and lack of financial means of survival—all of these elements leading to the individual living a life of “sin” in order to survive.

In the same religious realm, “Reset,” featuring Debra Killings, Khujo and Cee-lo, argues from a biblical perspective that individual violence is not the answer to human struggle. Referring to Ephesians 6:12, the artist affirms that, despite an animalistic instinct that often leads him to want to strangle his individual adversary (in this case a “cracker”), we must be able to recognize that the true enemies are “principalities, powers of this world, rulers of darkness and spiritual wickedness.”

The solution to the human struggle is, therefore, according to the artist, to be found in religious faith, not in any serious making sense of mankind’s history and life. Finally, the artist proclaims that he will bring God to the funfight. This is his premise for raising his “two daughters and a son right.”

However, in “Bowtie,” featuring Sleepy Brown and Jazze Pha—an adequate music track, with a decent but austere horn arrangement and a consistent rhythm section—the artist, forgetting all of a sudden about the hard-knock ghetto life, launches into a rap about some high roller leading a ridiculous lifestyle, bragging about crocodile boots, fur coats, clubs, VIP privileges and alcohol. This apparently reflects the artist’s outlook and desires, too. It is pretty backward stuff.

These themes stand in contrast to “Knowing,” where the artist criticizes a woman living in difficult circumstances for choosing the path of petty crime and prostitution in order to satisfy—not so differently from the artist—her hunger for a conventional lifestyle. The chorus, one must point out, is very hooky.

“The Way You Move” is one of the better songs on the album. The chorus is melodically poignant and harmonically appealing, although derivative of the best R&B from the 1970s and early 1980s. It’s a pity that the lyrical content is vapid and superficial, describing some club or party and viewing the dance floor from a purely hedonistic and sexual perspective.

“Tomb Of The Boom,” featuring Konkrete, Big Gipp and Ludacris, is a mediocre track. The story is a celebration of crime, hatred, acquisition of power, luxury and money, women’s exploitation, self-indulgence and

self-aggrandizement. The skin-crawling “Bamboo” features Big Boi’s little son undergoing his first rap experience. Daddy finds it amusing, especially when the little toddler delivers a big “MoFo” on the microphone. The curse word is not as decisive as the whole dynamic of conditioning taking place. Why should we celebrate a child’s exposure to such empty and backward influences?

“War” is as profound as Outkast ever gets. The artist points to some valid issues and emphasizes—or even encourages the listener to contemplate—the importance of events like September 11 and how that tragedy was used to rob the people of their democratic rights. The artist suggests that the bomb is ticking, referring to the dangers people currently face, a threatening and pessimistic view devoid of any historical insight. The artist is critical of using war as a means of settling disputes; yet, as a solution he offers the moral abstraction that man should not play God.

The artist goes on to indict social inequality that finds expression in the form of lack of health care for the poor, who become more ill as a result, creating a “catch-22” self-perpetuating cycle. He further denounces the presidential elections of 2000 as scandalous, and the complicity of the media in that and many other similar events. Furthermore, the artist criticizes the false pretences used by the Bush administration to initiate the pursuit of Osama bin Laden and launch a war in Afghanistan. Other themes are touched upon, such as the tragic deaths of journalist Daniel Pearl and, decades ago, members of the Black Panthers.

“War” ends on a self-congratulatory note, with the artist explaining how important it is that he raises these questions and offers the listener food for thought. Songs such as this offer the listener a bouquet of half-truths and superficial analyses of truly critical events. The listener is left demoralized without the slightest possibility of changing events.

Andre 3000’s CD *The Love Below* has a consistent cabaret/comedy style. He has a habit of getting away from any serious topic by banalizing its contents and forcing the audience to smile. The lyrical hip-hop style tends to become gimmicky, employing forceful rhymes between unrelated and often elaborate words in a manner that only works a few times before becoming boring and predictable.

The rap style is, however, compelling. The rhythms are engaging and the schemes are diverse, denoting a competent knowledge of the idiom. There is a consistent element of strong and memorable musical phrases retraceable in just about every song. This can be identified as an evolving stage of the traditional idea of motif, although what’s missing in this contemporary style of music is the elaboration and manipulation of such motifs into more evolved sections.

More specifically, *The Love Below* sounds like the parody of a jazz tune, with overly dramatic piano licks and strings suggestive of an old over-the-top romantic movie soundtrack. The lyrics are merely picturesque and somewhat reminiscent and suggestive of far-away places. Similarly, with a title like “Good Day Good Sir,” one could almost expect a Fiddler on the Roof “tribute,” as the artist derogatorily announces a fiddle in the background—if this tongue-in-cheek less-than-comedic “Who’s on first?”-style banal sketch can be described in polite terms.

“Love Hater” incorporates rock elements into an urban cacophony over a jazz groove. The melody is catchy, the groove thriving, sufficiently well played, although not innovative in the realm of jazz, but certainly interesting in the pop and urban arena. The lyrics, again, possess a certain sentimental nostalgic value, slightly suggestive of the “inevitable” loneliness of human condition, alternating melancholic phrases with banal or unrelated ones.

“Take Off Your Cool” features Norah Jones. The multiple-platinum star is extremely disappointing in her contribution to what would be a very short song if not for the uninteresting and unnecessarily long guitar solo. The R&B-based “Love In War” is redundant and simplistic harmonically and rhythmically, a case of superficial pacifistic dreaming in the guise of “make love, not war,” not for a minute implying anything concrete. The

song is filled with self-proclaimed clichés about loneliness and an apocalyptic view of the world.

“Hey Ya” is undoubtedly the most infectious tune on the album. The vocal production is loose and sloppy in an earthy manner, not at all unpleasant. The groove is consistent and engaging. The lyrics are an incitement to the kind of “free love” that emphasizes physical attributes and aims at sexual satisfaction. There is not one trace of intimate depth in this otherwise memorable song.

One of the more interesting tracks musically is certainly “She’s Alive.” Dark harmonically and orchestrally, unfortunately it fails to develop a good musical idea into a more evolved work. The lyrics deal with the difficult circumstances of a single mother. The song was a great opportunity to explore the social conditions that force so many women into this situation. The best the artist can do is include some supposedly candid comments of a single mother over the telephone.

Giving credit where credit is due, the artist is very inventive in creating narratives that allow him to express his contempt for (and complete disconnect from) women. Obsessed by this fantasized “hyper-reality” in which women are no good and men deserve more, the artist in “Behold A Lady” fails to observe that he, like the women he addresses, is part of the same world, therefore further alienating himself from it. In fact, he praises an imaginary lady on the basis of how well she serves his purposes.

In “Spread,” the artist’s references to nature as the origin of a man’s sexual desires without making reference to any social conditioning are trivial and vulgar at best. “Where Are My Panties” is a portrait of a typical “morning-after” scenario done in a predictable and conformist fashion. The song ends up illustrating a man and a woman’s equally backward roles, where the use of pseudo-romantic comedic phrases only helps make time go faster. In “Roses,” the artist takes the opportunity to unleash a whole new vocabulary of demeaning and abusive terms, instead of critically confronting interpersonal issues.

Finally, the presence of Rogers and Hammerstein’s “My Favorite Things” (from Broadway’s *The Sound of Music* presented in 1959) on this album is quite surprising. The rendition is not particularly original and lacks any remarkable qualities (not to mention the fact that the B section of the original song has been omitted), although it is played fairly well over a trip-hop beat.

John Coltrane’s version of this song made waves in 1960 as one of the “giant steps” taken by the innovative jazz artist. Although this is not the appropriate place to elaborate further on Coltrane and his life, it is worth citing one of his comments—if only to illustrate how hip-hop, which supposedly has similar cultural and social origins to jazz, has taken a very different and often degraded path. Coltrane declared:

“My goal is to uplift people as much as I can—to inspire them to realize more and more of their capacities for living more meaningful lives—because there is certainly meaning to life.”

At the very least, Outkast fails to uplift people. The group may entertain the public with its hokey ideas, lyrical gimmicks, linguistic acrobatics and catchy melodies, but in the end the artists do not advance the cause of human emancipation as they claim or even promise to do; on the contrary, they mislead and demoralize the listener, leaving him or her in an emotional and intellectual vacuum without any concrete answers.

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