

Eminem's new release, *Encore*: delusions, megalomania and social confusion

By Marc Wells
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Multiple Grammy Award winner Marshall Bruce Mathers III, better known as Eminem (from his initials M&M), is currently one of the top-selling music artists in the world. The rapper's lyrics have been the subject of much controversy and criticism, from right-wing Christian fundamentalist groups as well as the liberal media, and as such they deserve closer attention.

Born in St. Joseph, Missouri, Marshall Mathers spent an itinerant childhood with his mother until the age of 12, when the pair finally settled in the Detroit area. A few years later he dropped out of ninth grade to pursue his interest in rap, joining various bands such as D12, Basement Productions, the New Jacks and Sole Intent.

As a white rapper, he was often criticized or rejected by his peers on the grounds that hip hop and rap were reserved exclusively for black people, a notion he aggressively rejected. Aggression toward real and perceived enemies looms large in his legend. Still today, he prides himself on having numerous "enemies," such as Moby, Everlast, Christina Aguilera, Fred Durst of Limp Bizkit and his wife Kim Mathers (the mother of his child and object of his violent death threats), to name a few.

What many saw as his weakness turned out to be one of his strong marketing points: rap producer and music business mogul Dr. Dre felt that Eminem's "whiteness" in the realm of hip hop and what he considered to be the rapper's talent were the perfect ingredients for an emerging artist who could revive rap music to the levels of mid-1990s' artists like Tupac Shakur and Snoop Doggy Dogg.

Under the experienced business and musical direction of Dr. Dre, Eminem rose to unprecedented levels of success and popularity within the widest demographic range in the US and abroad; his four multi-platinum CDs and his *8 Mile* film soundtrack have sold tens of millions of records worldwide.

He grew up in a socially deprived environment, in which a degraded mass popular culture has such a powerful impact at present, with its worship of individualism, success and celebrity. This backward environment is largely responsible for shaping his artistic expression.

Similarly, his family reflects the malaise of difficult social conditions: his father left him when he was 18 months old; his mother sued him for defamation, emotional distress, damage to her reputation and loss of self-esteem; his uncle Ronnie committed suicide (Eminem himself attempted suicide on at least one reported occasion); his uncle Todd spent eight years in jail for shooting his brother-in-law; his aunt Bettie Renee, who's also Eminem's live-in housekeeper, allegedly attacked his grandmother with mace while she was selling Eminem T-shirts.

His music influences great numbers of teenagers who are responding to a common condition: life in a highly alienating society, where social and political forces tend to exploit or misguide the most genuine aspirations of youth.

For this reason, it would be incorrect to underestimate the seriousness or origins of Eminem's angst. As he declared in a recent interview, he is at the very least aware that a multitude of people share his extreme

frustrations with a society that doesn't take care of its citizens.

There is no doubt that Eminem, as a member of this society and as a product of American reality, expresses many frustrations that are common among young people. They arise in many cases from growing up poor, in extremely disadvantaged social conditions, surrounded by crime, where education, decent housing and health care are luxuries afforded by fewer and fewer people. These are real stories of American life.

Unfortunately, his adaptation (manifested in his music) to this harsh reality is reactionary and misleading: not only does it offer no relief, but it also further contributes to the disorientation and isolation of young audiences. His lyrics have consistently displayed hostility toward women and homosexuals, along with a fixation with offensive, violent and extremely vulgar language. Provocation and shock often become his only tools for connecting to the audience.

A more attentive look at his latest CD *Encore* clarifies some of these points.

There is little doubt that Eminem's linguistic articulation and lyrical acrobatics displayed in this CD are quite impressive. In the early stages of his career, he won several rap contests, which exposed him to people like Dr. Dre, with his incredible speed and yet clarity of enunciation.

Music production in general has been moving away from "music" per se in favor of what is called "production value," a phenomenon that should not be looked on entirely as a degeneration, as it does offer certain new creative possibilities. However, in Eminem's music, this tendency produces primarily exasperation. Melody, counterpoint, harmony, form and rhythm have been replaced by groove (the consistent and sometimes repetitive rhythmic arrangement of instruments such as drums, bass, rhythm guitar, etc.), sound selection and sonic engineering (great care is given to this process: it takes sometimes an hour to find the right kick sound or to dial in the perfect snare), vocal arrangements (the so-called "tightness" or "pocket" refers to the rhythmic accuracy or metric pattern found in the vocal performance) and sample usage (it is customary for rappers to utilize a sample from other artists' recordings and rearrange it in a different musical context).

With that in mind, Eminem's music is generally menacing, with monotonous bass lines and rhythm patterns. These are the almost inevitable stylistic limitations of rap and hip-hop in general, but in the case of this particular artist they become sadly obvious. If one removed the vocal element, one would be left with an excruciatingly boring succession of repetitive one-bar or two-bar rhythmic, non-melodic patterns with very primitive or, at the very least, minimalistic, harmony (often one chord, almost always minor, for the entire song) and lack of contrapuntal motion (counterpoint is the horizontal movement of simultaneous and independent, but related, melodic lines that creates harmonic relationships). The producers and the artist have certainly paid the most rigorous attention to the sonic/engineering element in the CD.

The most salient (but most vacuous) feature of *Encore* is undoubtedly its lyrical content. The subjects range from God to politics to vomiting to

intimate relationships (sometimes related to the act of vomiting) to war. Eminem is certainly not shy about addressing these issues; however, his insight and knowledge are often very limited, resulting in an extremely shallow approach, to put it mildly, to serious questions.

The CD has a tendency to lose momentum as it progresses. "Best songs first" has become a tiresome axiom in the record industry. That being said, Eminem's delusions of grandeur are reflected right from the start of the CD when a fake audience welcomes him with cheers onto a fictitious stage from which, during the grand finale, he eventually shoots the spectators and finally himself. The inside booklet reveals these horrific images with realistic pictures, giving no hint or explanation for this pointless fictional exercise.

God is his first subject. The artist's religious hypocrisy reveals itself immediately in "Evil Deeds" and "Never Enough" in which the rapper thanks God for his talent and tries to justify his previous wrongdoings with the explanation that he didn't know God in his earlier life.

He declares that his wealth and success haven't made his fatherless life any easier. Growing up in a broken family is a problem for many young listeners, and Eminem puts himself forward as their spokesman.

It is true that money and fame don't fill the emotional void, but in this class-divided society they definitely change a person's social status and perspective. In fact, after the initial self-pity, Eminem veers away from his original subject and displays a pathological fascination with personal confrontation (he calls it "beef," a current term in the hip-hop glossary) and the need to dominate. This characteristic must be tied to his new economic status, which he absorbs from a culture that worships competition and success at whatever cost.

A segment follows, in this saga of self-centered observations, that attempts a more serious approach to politics, but fails totally. "Yellow Brick Road" begins with a quote from the infamous Spiro Agnew, Richard Nixon's vice president, from a speech given May 22, 1970 ("We seem to be approaching an age of the gross").

Here's a great opportunity to explore the life and career of a corrupt politician, who was forced out of the second-highest office in the country for taking kickbacks from contractors and who smeared antiwar protesters and critics of the Vietnam War and Nixon White House. Instead, the artist deviates from this important subject right after the initial Agnew quote to talk (once again) about problems with girl friends and racism in the past. Why raise something of this relevance and then not follow through with it?

In "Mosh," Eminem anoints himself the leader his listeners must follow ("Come along follow me as I lead through the darkness.") He encourages people to come together behind him against Bush. He opposes the war in Iraq: "Let the president answer a higher anarchy/ Strap him with an AK-47, let him go fight his own war/ Let him impress daddy that way/ No more blood for oil, we got our own battles to fight on our own soil." This has some significance. It reflects a widespread view, which goes unreported in the media, that the war in Iraq is a criminal operation. The lyrics are overblown and self-promoting, but they obviously strike a chord: "Let us beg to differ/ As we set aside our differences/ And assemble our own army/ To disarm this Weapon of Mass Destruction/ That we call our President."

But such insights are rare. If the youth were to follow Eminem, who and what would they be following? Certainly not someone who has any grasp of the causes of the war, lying in a crisis-ridden, decaying social system. No connection is made in "Mosh" between the conditions in the US and the drive to war. We are merely left with Bush's personal rottenness and vindictiveness.

So his listeners are to follow blindly someone who, in "Like Toy Soldiers," advocates a Mafia-style gang system: "We still have soldiers that's on the front line/ That's willing to die for us as soon as we give the orders." The bullying and the posturing simply become tedious: "I'm

supposed to be the soldier who never blows his composure/ Even though I hold the weight of the whole world on my shoulders." Eminem presents a false image of his own superiority founded on the questionable claim that he "says it as it is."

A preposterous assertion is made in reference to Bush's 2000 election. According to this artist, God told him that the American people were responsible for Bush being appointed president. ("Someone's tryin' to tell us something./ Maybe this is God just sayin' we're responsible/ For this monster, this coward./ That we have empowered.") In reality, it was the US Supreme Court, not God, which carried out this deeply anti-democratic action. Presumably, the American people are now only getting what they deserve.

It is worth mentioning Eminem's take on his relationship with his daughter in "Mockingbird." He blames his ex-wife (to whom he dedicates the song "Puke," conveying his innermost feelings for her) for the current situation that weighs on the little girl, thereby exempting himself from any parental responsibility. His take on fatherhood doesn't go beyond putting food on the table and avoids any reference to education or anything else. One wonders what the artist expects his daughter (or, for that matter, anyone's daughter or son) to learn from a man who manifests the most backward attitudes toward women.

"We As Americans" addresses the issue of lack of security in a society that has become increasingly dangerous, but Eminem's interpretation suggests an unthinking and essentially reactionary method of addressing it: we need to protect ourselves with arms and violence. ("They took away my right to bear arms/ What I'm posed to fight with—bare palms?/ Yeah right/ They coming with bombs, I'm comin' with flare-guns/ We as Americans.") It's unclear from whom we should protect ourselves, and many other questions remain. What causes crime? What is the foundation of our social fabric and what makes it so fragile in today's world? And, most importantly, who are the real criminals in our society?

The rest of the CD is a display of self-promotion, self-fulfilling prophecies about rap bridging gaps between people across races, more prejudice against homosexuals, abuse of women (in "Love You More" such abuse is considered the legitimate way of expressing love for someone), and admiration for characters like O.J. Simpson and his late lawyer Johnnie Cochran (he compares himself to the former and his producer Dr. Dre to the latter).

Eminem is not a success story; instead, as a phenomenon he represents an indictment of a society that glorifies successful individuals and crucifies the rest as "losers." He has "made it," but what about the rest of the population? They're supposed to follow him, take his banal advice and keep their mouths shut. Nothing is explained, no one is enlightened about much of anything, and the artist grows richer. *Encore* celebrates backwardness, even in its criticisms and complaints. Eminem is the product of a culture that stubbornly pursues illusions and delusions with the complicity of a large section of the media and the entertainment industry, an industry interested solely in maintaining its privileges at the expense of progress towards a more egalitarian world.

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