



THE OTHER SIDE OF OPTIMISM



AND A FANTASY
CALLED TRUTH
BY CHRIS MARTINS
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THERE'S THIS SAYING THAT EVERYBODY KNOWS—a trite little tidbit of annoying, not so much sagely advice as it is the *raison d'être* for the soccer mom set. It doesn't bear repeating (not now, not ever), and yet it's prevailed, probably for centuries. It's an adage so blithe and innocuous that to be on the receiving end (as it invariably follows a bout of bad luck) is to immediately wish harm upon the giver. Because, well—and this is always the most infuriating part—that hack philosopher friend of yours (and the soccer moms, God bless 'em) truly knows best: When life hands you a big, heaping bowl of sour lemons...well, you don't fucking sit there and cry about it.

Jamie Meline, aka El-Producto, aka El-P, doesn't *look* like a lemonade person. For starters, he's not a smiler. A smirker, maybe, but that mad rapper scowl is as much a trademark of the Brooklyn producer/emcee as the bright red hair and short-cropped beard to match. In fact, his (other) nickname is Lazerface. Show El some lemons and expect him to stare them down until they blush orange. Furthermore, the man's known for a wild side a bit more downtown than down-home. Brass Monkey might be okay, but Tom Collins...not so much. Finally, and most importantly, there's nothing sunshiny about what El-P, the artist, does. His latest, the politely dubbed *I'll Sleep When You're Dead*, is a five-years-in-the-making opus of dark and dank that aims all manner of psychic and aural weaponry against the drone-like dreamstate of modern city living.

"It's my wartime report to a degree," says El-P, "from the perspective of someone trying to live like everything is going well—and everything clearly isn't. We're walking around trying to pretend all the gears are functioning and that leads to some pretty fucking weird moments. We don't want to know what's really going on. People aren't asking and maybe people are afraid to say, but I'm going to give you those real thoughts. I wanted this to be a real city record. I wanted it to be a winter record. And I wanted this record to feel like more truth than anyone's heard in a long time."

So it's not lemonade like you're used to, but make no mistake: This is the nastiest and most acidic of Michael Bloomberg's New York, of George W. Bush's America, and of Philip K. Dick's dystopic future world distilled into a sickly sweet truth serum. The seven-minute swirl of synth-drenched claustrophobia and deafening doom that is the opener, "Tasmanian Pain Coaster," paints a starkly real Brooklyn scene, El bumping into a local waiting for the A train with blood on his shoelaces:

*Gave him the standard, "Yo what up man, how you landin'?"
And the hypnotized response was no surprise: "I maintain."
"Yeah, we all do, that's the standardized refrain,
But on some really real man, good to see you, what's the dilly deal?"
...He pulled his hoodie off his cabbage, rugged practical,
And began to fancy the words I'd mistakenly jostled loose.
The stogie he brazenly lit where he sit looked legit,
But when the flame touched on the tip I could smell it's of another knit.
He leaned his head back and inhaled the newpie dip and said:
"The whole design got my mind cryin'. If I'm lyin', I'm dyin'...shit."*

It's the opening of Pandora's Box, and as the miseries of humankind fly forth, we enter this character's heady world through his smoke-filled maw (a newpie dip, for the record, is a PCP-soaked cigarette), with two fiery horsemen announcing our arrival (Cedric and Omar from the Mars Volta doing what they do best). To mainline this album is to dive bodily into a world that is our own, already: cut away the willful ignorance, the just trying to get by, the maintaining of the status quo; accentuate the fear, the paranoia, the grit, the desperate things that we do to cope...and welcome to 2007.

The next few songs build the theme: Over cut up air-raid sirens, horn breaks and jarring blurts of sound and scream, "Smithereens" offers up the defeatist query, "Why should I be sober while God is so clearly dusted out of his mind?" "Up All Night" sports aqueous synths and a rolling, roaring drum break while implying that a sea change is coming; and single "Everything Must Go," with its surprisingly minimal, old school cowbell beat, suggests a societal restart, calling upon the imagery of 9/11 and offering to sell listeners a new dream.



EL-P I'VE ALWAYS HAD ONE FOOT IN SELF-DESTRUCTION TO A DEGREE.

Then there are “Drive” and its parallel later in the album, “Flentology.” The former calls upon our most blatant and ironic symbol of personal freedom, the car, as a metaphor for personal godlessness and dependency, while the latter (featuring Trent Reznor’s heathen call)...well, El puts it best:

“I was on a plane when one of the engines exploded,” he says, “and I noticed how funny it is that I’m such a fucking smart-ass—all intellectual and no faith, just generally an atheist—and yet faith leaks into my life at the most convenient time. The day before I was like, ‘Hey God, suck it! Hey, suck my dick, God!’ and the second something went wrong, I turned into Pastor Meline—I’m praying and I don’t even know how to pray. My entire spiritual life exists while on planes. It’s pathetic, but I think a lot of people can relate.”

But it’s the trilogy of songs at *I’ll Sleep When You’re Dead* that permanently sets the listener’s psyche deep within El’s deliciously cracked refraction of reality. “Dear Sirs” is our anti-hero’s response to a draft call, a letter in rhyme that offers a series of increasingly attractive scenarios where Hell’s frozen over (“[If] the coke and crack in the nation is collected in a top hat/And force-fed to the children of every CIA agent...”) culminating in a declaration that his joining the fight is still, “by a large margin,” the least likely thing to happen, ever. Yet in “Run the Numbers,” war comes regardless, and as Aesop Rock runs around shouting, “Find those detonators!” (a *Die Hard* nod that mimics the WMD hysteria of 2002), El speaks of work camps, servitude becoming contagious, and learning to speak Draconian. When next we meet El, on “Habeas Corpses,” the transformation is complete: He and rapper Cage are members of a firing squad on a government prison ship, mundanely debating the merits of their job whilst (ahem) executing it. El’s fallen in love with a dissident scheduled for death and decides to rescue her. Together they escape to the hills—where “when radon levels drop we walk the trails and talk and laugh”—but just as it seems that he’s realized his dream, we hear a metallic voice calling some female prisoner to stand and El is woken from reverie by his commander ordering him to shoot. He does without question.

“That’s my little trilogy,” he says with a touch of pride. “I wanted to make a political record, but I didn’t want to make a record where I was just beating people over the head with bullshit...with my fuckin’ grade-school geopolitical perspective. I don’t think anybody needs to hear about George Bush, or the idea that war is wrong, from El-P. These ideas are wrapped up in the fabric of this record because they’re wrapped up in the fabric of my life. If you’re tuned in and you’re good at translating your mind-state, these things are going to come in; they’re going to be felt. The time is now to make really human records—visceral records, records of the time.”

And on the album’s closing moments, it becomes clear that while *I’ll Sleep When You’re Dead* is, without question, a record that encompasses these times in all their hulking, dizzying, dirty girth, it is very much a record inspired by humans—those around El-P and his own tangible mortality. The paranoia isn’t just for show or didactic indulgence; it’s real. And the five-year gap in El’s career isn’t an accident; he and his friends have fought some heavy battles with addiction and mental health. “League of Extraordinary Nobodies” runs down the cycles of bad habits in very personal terms, and “Poisonville Kids No Win,” featuring an apropos cameo by Chan Marshall, reveals that the title of the album isn’t quite the threat it may seem. In actuality, it’s a cutting rebuke aimed at the mirror: “How dare you assume that I’ll sleep when you’re dead.”

“I am the son of alcoholics and drug addicts,” says El. “I’ve always had one foot in self-destruction to a degree. There was a time when people around me were just dropping like flies, and there was a time that I had to check myself to make sure that wasn’t the road I was going down. Those are the songs that are the scariest to put out; you want to protect yourself. But usually when I’m having those feelings about a song, that’s when I force it out.”

This is hardly a new instinct. In fact, it’s one El first learned 10 years ago as a promising new voice of the groundbreaking crew Company Flow. Near the end of that group’s landmark album, *Funcrusher Plus*, you’ll find a classic little piece of soul-bearing gut-wrench called “Last Good Sleep.” Go back another 10 years, and you’ll find the song’s genesis: a violent night that left El’s mother mangled at the hands of his piece-of-shit stepfather. The bastard left the next day and the locks were changed, but Jamie Meline was racked with vivid nightmares for a decade—until he wrote it all down. “Last Good Sleep” was a defining moment for El: He took a terribly bitter thing and turned it into the fuel for his career. In other words, it was the first time he grabbed life by the lemons and squeezed. To this, he adds a salient final thought: “You don’t have to have a happy ending to a song in order for the song to lead you to a happy ending.”

Spoken like a true soccer mom, El. Who would’ve thought? **F**

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