

A CRITIC AT LARGE

# THE WAVES

*The brotherhood of Madlib.*

BY HILTON ALS



*Making the past matter in the present is just one aspect of Madlib's genius.*

I DON'T KNOW why, exactly, but whenever I hear anything by or featuring Madlib, the protean, forty-two-year-old, Los Angeles-based self-described "d.j. first, producer second, and m.c. last," I start thinking about black male fraternity, a subject that Madlib keeps coming back to directly and indirectly in his work, which is jumbled, cinematic, and layered in tone and style. Madlib has some sixty albums

to his credit; in the past five years alone, he's released thirteen and helped produce five. His collaborators on these projects, for the most part, have been men of color who, not unlike Madlib, are serious goofballs or smart knuckleheads, artists who aim to pervert hip-hop's early stance—what Michele Wallace called the myth of "Black Macho"—while embracing their own deep nerdiness. The 2014 Madlib

album "Piñata" (originally titled "Cocaine Piñata"), featuring the vocalist Freddie Gibbs, is a trancelike and jumpy ode to consciousness. On the title track, the rapper Mac Miller outs himself as a bookworm (Madlib is also an inveterate reader), while fronting about the kind of sex you know that dweeb isn't having:

My endorphins are morphin', absorbin'  
energy  
Original copy, A Tale of Two Cities gets  
read to me  
Reading Emerson novels, eating some  
Belgian waffles  
Some powder go up my nostrils, my dick  
going down her tonsils . . .

In January, Kanye West released his first Madlib-produced track, "No More Parties in L.A." (It will be included on his album "Waves," which is set to come out this month.) The song sounds like nothing that West has ever been part of; it has a depth beyond his bombast and a soulful mellowness that dials him down—a bit. Featuring Kendrick Lamar, "No More Parties" samples work by Walter (Junie) Morrison, of the seventies funk band Ohio Players, as well as Ghostface Killah's 2000 track "Mighty Healthy." The intro is courtesy of Johnny (Guitar) Watson's 1977 tune "Give Me My Love," and the bridge comes from Larry Graham's 1980 song "Stand Up and Shout About Love." Making the past matter in the present is just one aspect of Madlib's genius, as is pushing hip-hop's more commercially minded performers to move beyond the fans and the record-company executives and listen to themselves.

BORN OTIS Jackson, Jr., in Oxnard, California, Madlib is the son of musicians: his father was a singer and a jazz and soul session musician; his mother was a songwriter and a piano player. The Jacksons were as interested in the history of black music as they were in performing it; soul music had a lineage, a family—some of whose members turned up in Madlib's own back yard. Jon Faddis, the jazz trumpeter and educator, is Jackson's uncle. "Dizzy Gillespie would come by, eating gumbo," Jackson told Andre Torres, in *Wax Poetics*, in 2013. "It was crazy. My grandparents were friends with all of them. Dee Dee Bridgewater, all of them, they'd come through." Black sounds—the sonic landscape of the African-American diaspora—were

both alive and archival. At home, Jackson immersed himself in his father's record collection, but he had no real desire to make or perform music—at least, not in a traditional way. He'd “fiddle” at the piano and tried to learn to play the drums, but none of it took. What fascinated him was how a record was made.

As the son of a black man who cared—and stayed—Jackson spent his formative years outside the tired Negro narrative of the absent or abusive father. A hallmark of his style as a producer is his incredible, nearly paternal concern for the artists he's showcasing. (He has three children of his own.) When he was invited by Blue Note Records to dig into the company archives for his 2003 remix album, “Shades of Blue,” Madlib paid special homage to Horace Silver’s “Song for My Father,” from 1965, doubling back on certain phrases and elegant riffs without obscuring Silver’s melodic line—or his sentiment.

While Otis, Sr., schooled the future beat master in the music of the past, an older brother, Pete, introduced him to the sounds of the younger generation—early hip-hop. “The first record I heard was ‘Rapper’s Delight,’ sorry to say,” Jackson told Torres. Writing in this magazine in 2004, Sasha Frere-Jones drew a distinction between the shiny sound-booth finish of corporate hip-hop—Kanye, Dr. Dre, and others—and the stubborn individualism of artists like Madlib, who stick to their samples instead of paying musicians to compose for them. (Madlib uses turntables and analog recording devices in an age of digital everything.) “Rapper’s Delight,” with its cheery populism, isn’t something that Madlib would ever sample in his work, except, perhaps, as a joking comment on his past. Still, that song and others alerted him to the world of producers and beat makers, including early greats like Too Short, Roxanne Shanté, and DJ Pooh, who didn’t so much create beats as reimagine or feel them, scratching and rapping lyrics that linked the past to the present.

Hip-hop grew out of an independent spirit and a love of community. On the East Coast, in the seventies and early eighties, block parties were a form of social entertainment, an alternative to the dominant genres of disco and stadium rock. You didn’t need a building to house rap; it could be produced outdoors, and feed off the energy of the crowd. Drum

machines, samplers, and so on were no longer the province of studio engineers; they were now mass-produced and could be bought on the cheap. Plus, you didn’t need a trained voice or show-biz glitz to perform a rap song. The lyrics weren’t restricted, as popular music has always been, to stories of love or fun. Most of the rappers Madlib admired when he was growing up sang about black male alienation and life inside or outside “the system”—but what if you didn’t feel doomed by your blackness or your masculinity or your dreams? The hip-hop producer and sample czar Prince Paul, a native of Long Island who is best known for his work with De La Soul and RZA, put forth a story that was about black manhood, too, but one that stressed the humor and the ridiculousness of it. (Think early Ishmael Reed, with a beat.) Madlib, who is six years younger than Paul, has always got off on the absurdity of being a walking target, but to that he adds an understanding of the gamble that is black life, in which expectations are dashed—or repressed.

In elementary school, Jackson hooked up with his classmates Jack Brown (the future Wildchild) and Romeo Jimenez (now DJ Romes) to form a pop-locking group. In high school, in the late eighties, the three became Lootpack, and Jackson soon took on the stage name Madlib. Lootpack’s version of West Coast rap—with mental gunplay in place of firearms—went nowhere fast; they couldn’t get record companies interested. (In



1995, Jackson’s father financed Lootpack’s first EP, “Psyche Move.”) Eventually, the band caught the attention of the L.A. producer and d.j. Peanut Butter Wolf, who ran the Stones Throw label, and in 1999 he put out their first studio album, “The Anthem.” On it, Madlib not only scratches and samples other vocalists and sounds; he also gives us a jazz flutist playing a mellow tune—a nod, no doubt, to the legend Bobbi Humphrey. The sound isn’t smooth. The samples

bump up against the rap, and each communicates a distinct message: Lootpack would not be bought or sold. On the album’s title cut, Madlib raps:

Most people nowadays talk about representin'  
They strictly smokin' Phillies, actin' ill,  
gettin' bent, and  
The ways of the industry mad shady  
tinted . . .

Whether you in Texas, L.A., or Trenton  
Alaska, Nebraska, Japan ya have ta  
Know the difference from a fake m.c. to  
a real m.c.

**I**T WAS as Quasimoto, a “fake,” or invented, m.c., that Madlib started to attract a wider audience, at least among the hip-hop cognoscenti. In 2000, Stones Throw released “The Unseen,” Madlib’s jazzy, spaced-out, and on-point evocation of his alter ego’s inner life. Quasimoto, who sounded as if he’d inhaled a healthy dose of helium, was amped up in a way that Madlib was not. Madlib has said that he developed the voice because, at that point in his career, he didn’t like rapping as himself; his voice was too deep and he sounded tired. “When it comes to my own lyrics, I have to think about it more than Quas does,” he explained in a 2005 interview. “He brings ideas, and then I come with it.”

The record starts with what sounds like a public-service announcement, or a warning. “Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to violence,” a man says, his voice pinched and reserved. He continues, as sampled sinuous rhythms gather behind his speech like snakes, “While violence cloaks itself in a plethora of disguises, its favorite mantle remains sex.” That’s when dirty-minded Quasimoto steps in; right away we know, from his delightful creepiness and need, that he’s an id, ready to force his message down our throats with a laugh.

Quasimoto is not unlike the characters Prince Paul created in his amazing 1999 hip-hopera, “A Prince Among Thieves.” In a 2014 interview, Madlib pointed to the influence that another Prince Paul-produced album—De La Soul’s prickly, hippie “3 Feet High and Rising” (1989)—had on him. “That’s kind of where my whole style for Quasimoto came from,” he said. But Quasimoto isn’t a crew, like De La Soul. A latter-day Ignatz, he revels in life’s jokes, getting blunted or twisted by bad vibes, and unwinding through wit. (Madlib

said, probably jokingly, that Quasimoto is the only guy he doesn't get along with.)

One guy Madlib more than got along with was the late beat master, rapper, and remixer James Dewitt Yancey, or J Dilla. Born in Detroit in 1974, J Dilla, like Madlib, formed a band in high school—Slum Village—that was committed to exploring hip-hop's roots while addressing contemporary matters. The group developed a following in Detroit's underground hip-hop scene. Dilla also became sought after as a remixer and a producer, working with artists like Janet Jackson, Common, Busta Rhymes, and the Roots, whom he made sound both different and like themselves. In 2001, Peanut Butter Wolf put Madlib and Dilla together; it didn't take Madlib long to realize that Dilla—the son of an opera singer and a jazz bassist—was a kind of brother in music. "Dilla was a John Coltrane-type dude," Madlib told an interviewer in 2010. "He was always on a higher level. He inspired my music to become looser and more soulful."

Erykah Badu, who has made some of her best work with Madlib, described the way the two artists worked: "They're so serious about what they are doing. They make beats all day long. That's what they do. All. Day. Long. Don't even save them, just put them onto a CD. They give out these CDs, volume No. 1 to No. 5, up to No. 121." In 2003, the duo released their first album, "Champion Sound," on which half the songs were produced by Madlib and half by J Dilla; each artist raps, but only on tracks produced by the other. There's a great warmth to the record, and Madlib's work has a new kind of interiority—less sonic thicket and more sunlight. Plus, there's a more professional sheen; J Dilla's product had the kind of high finish that Madlib can rarely be bothered with.

After "Champion Sound" came out, J Dilla moved to L.A. and he and Madlib began performing together. But J Dilla died, of a rare blood disease, in 2006, three days after Stones Throw released "Donuts," his masterpiece. Reviewing the record on Pitchfork when it was reissued, several years ago, Nate Patrin wrote:

As an album, it just gets deeper the longer you live with it, front-to-back listens revealing emotions and moods that get pulled in every direction: mournful nostalgia, absurd comedy, raucous joy, sinister intensity.

Madlib's 2006 release "Beat Konducta Vol. 1-2: Movie Scenes," which samples dialogue from films and from artists such as Richard Pryor—Madlib has said that the album is a soundtrack to the movie in his head—shares that intensity and has a similar sense of fun, as if the sonic world were being remade not according to or in reaction against hip-hop but according to Madlib. "Beat Konducta Vol. 3-4: Beat Konducta in India" came out in 2007, and fuses Bollywood music and dialogue with hip-hop beats to create a deliciously mad score for a movie you definitely want to see. In 2009, Madlib released "Beat Konducta Vol. 5-6: A Tribute to . . .," an epic composed of dense miniatures, his response to the loss of Dilla.

YOUNG BLACK masculinity finds its elders—if they want to be found. As Quasimoto, Madlib rapped about "listening to Sun Ra / Early George Benson on down to Hampton Hawes." In 2000, he started his own jazz group, Yesterdays New Quintet, for which he is the producer, arranger, and engineer. (Rumor has it that all the members of the group are actually Madlib playing under various aliases.) To listen to albums such as the powerful, eclectic "Slave Riot," from 2010, is to hear the artists that Madlib grew up on, including the legendary jazz bandleader Weldon Irvine. (Irvine wrote the lyrics for the seminal song "To Be Young, Gifted and Black," in 1969, and lived long enough to be part of Mos Def's solo début, "Black on Both Sides," in 1999. Two years after Irvine's suicide, in 2002, Madlib released the album "A Tribute to Brother Weldon.")

One also hears Irvine's voice, asking not to be forgotten, on "Madvillainy," Madlib's justly celebrated 2004 collaboration with the London-born rapper MF Doom. The record's phantasmagoria underlines Doom's metaphor-laden examination of the black male body as target and familiar unfamiliar. But the low-tech nature of the sound and the style are Madlib's. As Madlib says, "The equipment doesn't matter, it's the vibe you put into it. If the music sounds good, music sounds good." When Madlib talks about hip-hop and its myriad forms within the form, he's usually also talking about himself. "I'm with the times," he has said, "but I want to have the past in my shit, too. Past, present, and future is where I'm at." ♦



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