

ALBUMS

Godfather

Wiley

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The godfather of grime's back-to-basics swan song isn't just a celebration of his 20 year career—it's a victory lap for grime at large.

To the casual listener, grime might seem like a once-dormant genre in the midst of a revival. But truth be told, the hybrid of hip-hop and UK garage never went anywhere—the only thing that changed was the genre's visibility. Ever since grime's emergence on British pirate radio at the turn of the millennium, the UK mainstream (not to mention American

listeners) has tended to pay attention to the genre only when it produces a charismatic star. Wiley knows this better than most. He was a chief architect of grime's early sound (his tracks were among the first to be labeled "grime"), assembled the seminal Roll Deep crew, helped his protégé Dizzee Rascal become grime's first breakout artist and later, pushed the genre even deeper into the mainstream with a string of successful club-pop singles. He's somehow managed to weather the interest of a fickle public for two full decades, though he has plenty of scars to show for it. In response to allegations of selling out, he's spent a good deal of his career apologizing for and actively disowning any attempts he's made to court a wider audience, though his frequent course-corrections have sometimes felt more like self-sabotage. He's a survivor, if not a particularly triumphant one.

Given this history, you'd think Wiley would be frustrated to find that the latest wave of grime artists have arrived at success far more easily and on their own terms: for today's emcees, staying true to grime's sound and topping the charts are hardly mutually exclusive. Instead, Wiley seems reinvigorated by his peers' achievements, especially those of Skepta, the latest of his mentees to follow in Dizzee's footsteps, Mercury Prize and all. Supposedly his parting gift to the culture he helped birth, *Godfather* finds Wiley attempting to pull off the same trick that Skepta did with Konnichiwa: a lifer goes back to his roots and channels the energy of a hungry upstart. It's a tall order for a rapper pushing 40 but *Godfather* largely delivers, feeling at once like a return to form for Wiley and a celebration of grime's foundational sound.

Part of the album's success stems from its single-minded focus. Unlike many of Wiley's albums, *Godfather* tends to cut to the chase, that being manic, double-time rapping over chirpy 140 bpm beats. Production has always been Wiley's primary strength but on *Godfather*, he mostly absolves himself of those duties, turning over the boards to young upstarts like Preditah and Swifta Beater, as well as seasoned vets like Rude Kid. Still, each of these collaborators works in service of the overarching mission: songs that update Wiley's blocky "eskibeat" sound using modern production techniques.

Wiley has never been a *great* rapper per se, but on every song here he shows up with a surplus of energy, confidence and charisma. On the frantic “Bait Face,” he goes bar-for-bar with his old crewmate Scratchy without breaking a sweat. He sounds right at home on the torch-passing posse cut “Name Brand,” which brings together Roll Deep member J2K with Jme and Frisco from Boy Better Know. On tracks like “Birds N Bars” and “Can’t Go Wrong,” he borrows Skepta’s breathless flow but cuts it with a halting, staccato delivery. There are, of course, a few corny one-liners scattered throughout the record (“I stand out like one break light,” “Fresh out the oven like a Sunday roast,” “You’re plain, I’m the loaded nachos”) and even an entire song dedicated to his MacBook Pro (“Laptop”). However, at this point in Wiley’s career, it’s hard for this stuff to read as anything but endearingly goofy, more like dad jokes than genuine missteps.

Ultimately, *Godfather* is a thoroughly enjoyable record, one that manages to leverage grime’s elemental sounds in a way that feels vital and forward-looking. Sure, its peaks might not be quite as high as those of *Konnichiwa*, the record that it’s bound to be measured against (Skepta’s mastery of the massive, shout-along hook continues to give him an edge). But for anyone who’s ever rooted for Wiley, it’s a deeply satisfying listen. After all, until recently, Wiley disowned not just the “godfather of grime” nickname but the term “grime” altogether. And here he is, unapologetically owning his influence, toasting to his peers’ successes and claiming his rightful place as grime’s elder statesman. Who knows if *Godfather* is actually Wiley’s final solo album—we’ve certainly heard that one from him before. But if it is, he can step away knowing that his legacy has been secured.