

ALBUMS

who told you to think??!!?!?!?!?

miLO

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miLO is a sharp-tongued rapper whose wordplay rewards close listening. On his third and best LP, the Maine emcee carries the flag for the underground rap scene that birthed him.

It's easy to appreciate why the term "underground hip-hop" doesn't get tossed around so much these days. Taking an oppositional stance toward the mainstream, the so-called underground artists of the 1990s and 2000s defined themselves by the qualities they

found lacking in popular rap: independence, experimentation, political awareness, artistry over marketability. Today, that same ethos permeates hip-hop at even the highest levels of the pop charts. Kanye dabbles in industrial noise, Chance doesn't need a label, and Beyoncé's videos double as political statements. You could say that the underground won the battle, but that's not how Portland, Maine, rapper miló sees it. "Why's your favorite rapper always babbling about his brand again?" he asks on his third full-length, *who told you to think?!!?!?!?!?*, adding, "This the last call for those real MCs/Your voice is needed."

Bars like these might scan as little more than the grouching of a salty traditionalist, but miló is hardly an armchair scholar. On *who told you to think?!!?!?!?!?*, he crafts richly layered rap songs using outmoded tools like sample-based beats, dense wordplay, and unapologetically nerdy references. He's as earnest as his most confessional forbears—alt-rap sadboys like Atmosphere's Slug and WHY?'s Yoni Wolf—though far less prone to navel-gazing. Where other rappers might bemoan their status as smart outsiders, miló flexes. "Spit it like Zadie Smith with a Jay-Z lisp/Or like J.Z. Smith, you could take your pick/The point is, my vocabulary pays my rent," he raps on the aptly-titled "the young man has a point (nurture)."

Throughout *who told you to think?!!?!?!?!?*, miló remains blissfully unconcerned with current rap trends, aiming instead for a sound that recalls underground rap's high-water marks without feeling dated. He produced the bulk of the record himself under his Scallops Hotel alter ego, and the results demonstrate that he's become nearly as good at beatmaking as he is at rapping. Tracks like "paging mr. bill nunn," "rapper," and "pablum // CELESKINGIII" crackle with the lived-in charm of classic Madlib instrumentals. "note to mrs" is a tone poem bathed in the gentle glow of morning light. "magician (suture)" evokes the loose, jazzy feel of the Roots, a touchstone (in fact, the title's punctuation is meant as a nod to that band's *Do You Want More?!!?!?!?*).

The rapping on the album is even more impressive. miló displays his mastery of a variety of flows, furiously stacking syllables one minute and lagging lazily behind the beat the

next. Like many DOOM acolytes, he's long employed a scattershot referentiality and here, he kicks it into overdrive; nods to Aristotle and Nabokov sit alongside references to Insane Clown Posse and Dungeons & Dragons. Almost every guest meets the high bar set by their host. Brooklyn's ELUCID offers up plainspoken profundity ("I love wild things wildly/I love quiet things quietly"), underground stalwart Busdriver plays an unhinged foil to an exacting milo, and Milwaukee upstart Lorde Fredd33 steals the show on posse cut "yet another."

With *who told you to think??!!?!?!?*, milo both asserts his place within the lineage of underground hip-hop and argues for its continued relevance. He's hardly alone in this endeavor: His Hellfyre Club compatriots (Open Mike Eagle, Busdriver, and Nocando) and kindred spirits like Chester Watson and Earl Sweatshirt have been making stuff like this for years. What sets his record apart is how forcefully milo makes his argument and how high he makes the stakes feel. He opens the album with a recording of James Baldwin discussing the poet's role in society ("I want to suggest that the poets are, finally, the only people, who know the truth about us") and claims that mantle for himself without even a hint of reservation. But he's not just advocating on his own behalf: Like so many underground rappers of the past, milo sees himself as a part of a larger cultural movement: "Shocking moment as the pupil thought/Me and my niggas is a school of thought."

CORRECTION: The original version of this story incorrectly quoted a lyric in "the young man has a point (nurture)."