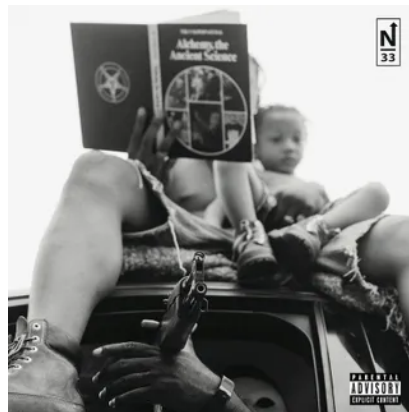


ALBUMS

NORF: The Legend of Hotboy Ronald

Lorde Fredd33

2018



7.5

By Mehan Jayasuriya

GENRE: Rap

LABEL: NewAgeNarcissism

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On his debut album, the Milwaukee rapper Lorde Fredd33 emerges fully-formed. He is charismatic and nuanced, painting a complex, deeply-personal portrait of black life in America's rust belt.

The photograph on the cover here is grim. It features a man sitting on the roof of a car, reading *Alchemy, the Ancient Science*, a 1970s British tome cataloging medieval attempts

to transform everyday materials into gold. A young child is perched on the reader's lap, staring absently towards the ground. Underneath this pair, a masked figure points a rifle out of the window. Lorde Fredd33's worldview isn't easy to neatly summarize but this image manages to capture many of his preoccupations. On *NORF*, he looks out wearily over a broken city, wrestles with fatherhood, unpacks his own childhood and works furiously to spin his struggles into flaxen gold. He is, at once, all three of the figures in the photograph.

Fredd33 has been kicking around the Milwaukee rap scene for a few years; since 2015, he has more or less worked exclusively with Q the Sun, a local producer who's landed beats for rap blog mainstays like milo and Webster X. Q the Sun's production, which has one foot in the jazzy, sample-based sound of rap's past and one in the electronic sounds of today, is compelling if unobtrusive, the perfect springboard for a rapper as charismatic as Fredd33. On *NORF*, Fredd33 demonstrates an acrobatic command of his craft, switching up flows, mimicking other rappers' cadences, and contorting his voice into a variety of shapes. Using this vivid palette of colors, he paints a portrait of an artist and the city that shaped him. Kendrick Lamar is an obvious touchstone (particularly, *Good Kid, m.A.A.d City*), though Fredd33 is far more insular: he is usually the sole subject in his songs.

Milwaukee's North Side, where Fredd33 was raised, is home to the vast majority of the city's black residents. In the summer of 2016, the North Side erupted in protest after the killing of a black man by police officers, though the community's frustration had deeper roots. Consider the statistics: Wisconsin has both the highest black unemployment rate and the highest rate of incarceration for black men, while Milwaukee is the country's most segregated city. On *NORF*, Fredd33 shines a light on this divide, drawing correlations between the numbers in the headlines and life at street-level. "50 percent unemployment, that's just for black men?/No wonder we trapping, wasn't we born trapped, then?," he asks on "Reflections." But later in the song, he admits that some progress has been made, while punching up at a beleaguered icon in the process: "We the 'New Slaves'? That's a damn lie/Just rocking Yeezys instead of shackles, damn right."

Throughout *NORF*, these same tensions play out on a smaller, more personal scale as well. Fredd33 repeatedly complains about having to pay child support but when we hear a recording of him speaking with his son at the tail end of “Free (Type Shit),” the rapper sounds warm and attentive. “I can’t wait to see you tomorrow, you little peanut head,” he says before signing off. On the following song, he lists, “Have my son draped in gold,” as one of his “Goals.” These are complex—and at times ugly—feelings and Fredd33 gives them voice without judgement. The difficult task of reconciling the rapper’s love for his child with his resentment over the cost of raising him is left to sit with the listener.

Ultimately, Lorde Fredd33 offers up few conclusions on *NORF*; his Milwaukee is a place of ambiguity, not of moral absolutes. Most complicated of all is our narrator: an artist and father but also, the guy who “might aim at your head” or the miscreant on “9th North sipping lean.” On the album’s final song, “Reflections,” Fredd33 traces his inner conflict back to its origins. “I grew up playing violins, around sirens and violence,” he sighs, reminding us that he is a product of his environment, for better or worse. *NORF* artfully illustrates the ways that structural racism shapes people, families, and communities. In so doing, Lorde Fredd33 pulls off a remarkable feat of alchemy, transforming pain, struggle, frustration, and love into his debut album.