

ALBUMS

# ***At What Cost***

GoldLink

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7.5

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**GENRE:** Rap

**LABEL:** Squaaash Club / RCA

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The D.C. rapper's major label debut is made of loose, richly textured hip-hop that weaves a colorful tapestry from his city's musical history featuring Wale, the Internet, and Kaytranada.

In recent years, Washington, D.C. has become an unlikely incubator for worldly, adventurous dance music: the mutant grooves of Future Times, the Ethiopian house of 1432 R, Peoples Potential Unlimited's retro-futuristic funk. More than any of his

contemporaries, DMV rapper GoldLink has drawn up these sounds like a sponge. On mixtapes like *The God Complex* and last year's collection of *And After That, We Didn't Talk* remixes, he presented an aesthetic he called "future bounce": a fluorescent, kinetic sound that's as indebted to house music as to hip-hop. For his major label debut, *At What Cost*, GoldLink digs deeper into his city's musical history, pushing the elastic rhythms of go-go and funk to the fore while keeping a foot firmly planted in the current moment. It helps that he's found a few kindred spirits to help him refine his sound, postmodern traditionalists like Montreal producer Kaytranada and Matt Martians and Steve Lacy of *the Internet*. Still, the sound of *At What Cost* is quintessentially that of GoldLink's hometown: loose, organic, as humid as a D.C. summer.

The album's opening third establishes a strong sense of place. "Hands on Your Knees" is a straight-up go-go number produced by Kaytranada; rather than rapping, the track is overlaid with D.C. lifer Kokayi emceeing a party over crowd noise. The end result is a song that captures the *atmosphere* of a go-go as much as the music. "Have You Seen That Girl?" sputters like a jalopy crawling down U Street on a hot day, its Casiotone beat just barely pushing the song forward. On "Meditation," Kaytranada builds an entire track around the closing minute of his own "TRACK UNO": decaying synths, a four-on-the-floor beat, a bassline that's almost dubstep-sized. "Shake, shake, shake/Shake the nerves off/In the name of dancehall, shake the nerves off," Jazmine Sullivan instructs on the hook. The song ends with the sound of gunfire erupting outside of a party, a not unfamiliar scene in the world of go-go.

Elsewhere, *At What Cost* looks outward, drawing in sounds from far outside of the District. "Herside Story," a remix of Irish group Hare Squead's song of the same title, feels almost impossibly buoyant, Jessy Rose's braying hook floating atop the track's harp melody like Kirby in Dreamland. The way he makes the word "down" vibrate in his throat is near magical. GoldLink wrestles the soaring track back down to earth: "Pop a nigga like we pop a wheelie, niggas going crazy in the city." Lead single "Crew" stands out for its gleaming, Atlanta sound, but it's also just a straight-up stunning rap song. Baltimore

crooner Brent Faiyaz lays down a silky hook that's confident yet conflicted, while fellow Washingtonian Shy Glizzy contributes a verse that practically leaps out of the speakers (one particularly acrobatic stretch: "Stop that madness, I'm a savage, in traffic with MAC 11's/Baddest bitch and she Spanish, I fly her to Calabasas"). GoldLink, meanwhile, remains characteristically collected, even as he races to cram every last syllable into his bars. Just like on the rest of these tracks, he sounds right at home.

In its attempt to deliver a promising D.C. rapper onto the national stage, *At What Cost* recalls the last great major label rap debut to come out of the city: Wale's *Attention Deficit*. Like that record, *At What Cost* is ambitious, slickly-produced, and relies a great deal on live instrumentation. However, where *Attention Deficit's* jumbled tracklist smacked of design-by-committee compromise, *At What Cost* is clearly guided by GoldLink's vision from start to finish. He's leveraging the music that shaped him, working with producers with whom he has real chemistry, and putting on as many DMV artists as he can, ranging from the unknown (Ciscero) to the obligatory (Wale) to the surprising (where *has* Mýa been, anyway?). In its ability to move fluidly between artists, styles, and ideas, *At What Cost* also recalls a more recent hip-hop album: Drake's "playlist" *More Life*. Though while Drake restlessly roams the globe in search of new sounds, GoldLink is largely content to bask in the richness of his hometown's music. It's for this reason that *At What Cost* feels like an album that only GoldLink could make, one that's forward-looking yet firmly rooted in D.C. tradition.