

Thought Meets Ambition and Old Meets New On Roots' Latest Attempt

By NICK PARKER
Arts & Entertainment Editor

Finally, the Roots' music has caught up with its ideas.

Socially, politically and emotionally charged, the Roots have acted as the most intelligent hip-hop collaboration since their 1994 major-label premiere, *Do You Want More?!!!??!* However, MC Black Thought and crew have garnered only a small mix of die-hard followers and casual fans, never breaking into the highest tier of rap icons.

But then again, that is never what the Roots wanted. Much of Black Thought's lyrics circle around the fallacy of black artists rapping about platinum chains and gold teeth when the majority of their audience still struggles with poverty. Instead, Black Thought chooses to spin rhymes about his friend's struggle with a drug addiction and trying to balance his love life with his life on the road performing.

But before *Phrenology*, the jazzy backbeats, unconventional hip-hop instrumentation and charged lyrics kept the Roots distant, if not elevated, from popular exposure. Even the master of vocal orchestration, the human beat box

Rahzel, could not pull the Roots' albums to the top of the charts.

With the energetic, full-bodied blast of stripped-down hip-hop found in *Phrenology*, much of that has changed. The Roots, however, have not changed. Their work still carries the same weight and awareness that has made the band a welcome refreshment from general hip-hop trends, but their latest attempt is the first time musical prowess has been fused fully with idealistic ambition.

Songs still carry the same swagger and swing, but all the bells and whistles have been torn away. *Phrenology* ends up capturing all of the Roots' on-stage presence and power without losing the refinement and perfection of a studio production.

But that isn't to say that *Phrenology* is just the Roots getting pissed at no one listening to them and then screaming about it. Soulful and smooth tracks still give old fans something to groove to. Singers Jill Scott and Nelly Furtado add a sensuous slant to "Sacrifice" and "Something In The Way Of Things (In Town)" — providing the most familiar

Roots feel and melodic intermissions from the rest of the album.

But raucous and throbbing assaults like "Rock You" and "The Seed (2.0)" keep things interesting. Raw and jagged, the tracks crash through the speakers. The bass doesn't hum, it roars. Black Thought's vocals don't purr, they burst.

The Roots finally have produced an album that lives up to all of their ambitions.

While *Illadelph Halflife* and *Things Fall Apart* share more jazzy mixes and melodic tunes, *Phrenology* is the best mix of the old and the new.

And it is the tracks that show this same blend that stand out. "Pussy Galore" is a balance between funky flow and powerful punch. Smoothed over by female background vocals and vitalized by rough and simple beats, "Pussy Galore" sums up the entire album in one song.

Though the Roots may have deviated from their own roots in eclectic, rolling hip-hop, they nevertheless have tapped into the roots of true hip-hop. Raw, sharp, yet delightfully defined, *Phrenology* is thought finally meeting reality.



album reviews
The Roots
Phrenology
★★★★☆

Common Diversifies; Pumpkins Pry Into Past

Common
Electric Circus
★★★★☆

For better or worse, Detroit-based emcee Common makes a more challenging rap record than 95 percent of his peers with his fifth and latest release, *Electric Circus*.

He also manages to make a better psychedelic rock record than 60 percent of today's bands.

While *Electric Circus* isn't Common's best work, it's certainly his bravest, and it adheres to none of the hedonistic, vacuous sentiments that dominate mainstream hip-hop today.

The logically chosen first single "Come Close" is a lush, ecstatic piece of sonic velvet with Mary J. Blige adding her earthy crooning. Common's accommodating delivery and the Neptunes' Native Tongues-style production make for the album's most inviting track.

The album's instrumental opener "Ferris Wheel" accurately suggests an "electric circus," a cross between P-Funk's psychedelic soul operas and Ray Bradbury's "Something Wicked This Way Comes."

The revelatory "Aquarius" has an ambling feel and a Doors-like sound until the beat literally drops after Common's first few bars. On this track, he reflects on his struggles to remain artistically honest in the ever-shifting climate of today's hip-hop, a recurrent theme on *Electric Circus*.

If "Come Close" was a live marriage proposal, "Star #69 (PS With Love)" is a phone-sex honeymoon. Common's blue call to the object of his desire is couched in a sedate astral plane of analog keyboards and rippling wah-wah guitar, both

contributed by the ingenious Prince.

Electric Circus certainly isn't perfect, as might be expected from a work that straddles genres long considered disparate. Often, Common's flow doesn't sound completely comfortable matched against the eclecticism of the music — or vice versa — which is the case with "Electric Wire Hustle Flower."

Whether intentionally or not, Common teases the listener by wasting a number of maddeningly tantalizing instrumentals as inconsequential interludes between tracks.

Despite the album's excesses, credit must be given to Common for fearlessly bringing elements of everything from Pink Floydian prog rock to Princely glam-funk to a rap record without completely losing the feel of hip-hop.

While the album might not become a hip-hop *Sgt. Pepper's* in terms of immediately accessible experimentation, it never goes too far off the deep end. The album's greatest strength, regardless of whether it completely hits the mark, is in its restless experimentation and its refusal to give into preconceived notions of what hip-hop is, can and should be.

By Tacque Kirksey

The Smashing Pumpkins
Earphoria
★★★★☆

Something happened to rock music during the early '90s — something great.

And even in the midst of rock greats like Nirvana and Pearl Jam, it shouldn't be so easy to forget about the Smashing Pumpkins.

Never fitting cozily into one musical genre, the Pumpkins were equal parts goth rock and trippy romance until their 2000 breakup. But the early '90s were immensely important years for the band, and *Earphoria* serves as a tribute to those years. The album, a reissue of the 1994 soundtrack to their concert video *Vieuphoria*, has a few studio outtakes but mostly is culled from various live performances from 1993-94. These tracks represent an excellent cross section of performances of songs from *Siamese Dream* as well as the band's debut album *Gish* and their EP *Lull*.

As a whole, the album is strong but loses momentum on a few pop tracks that don't match the urgency and anger of the rest. Songs like "Quiet" and "I Am One" couldn't be better — Billy Corgan's voice and the band's signature fuzzy guitars tear through with intensity that never will be replicated.

And a gently swaying acoustic ver-

sion of "Cherub Rock" tones down the guitars but keeps the album going in the right direction.

Earphoria would be better, though, if this intensity wasn't disrupted by studio tracks like "Pulseczar" and "Bugg Superstar." Though good examples of experimentation with dream pop, they break the mood and make the listener yearn for Corgan's blood-curdling screams.

This aside, the album has priceless moments that alone make the album a worthy addition to any rock collection and a must for Pumpkins devotees.

By Caroline Lindsey

Talib Kweli
Quality
★★★★☆

Once upon a time, two of the rising luminaries of the underground rap scene teamed up to create one of the genre's most fulfilling albums of the 1990s.

Mos Def and Talib Kweli's *Black Star* served as a marker for how inspiring, introspective and intelligent hip-hop could be. Kweli followed up his partner's *Black On Both Sides* with *Reflection Eternal* in 2000 — but it wasn't a pure solo debut, as it was a collaborative effort with DJ Hi-Tek.

Quality, however, is all Kweli's show. It's a far cry from the violence and misogyny of G-funk, the emptiness of bling bling, the stark and spare East Coast sound and the fun but forgettable quality of most Southern bounce. Alternately joyful and angry, laid-back and banging, the album is always fresh.

The production by various artists isn't as cutting edge as, say, that by Organized Noize or the Bomb Squad in their heydays. But there's no denying that *Quality* is one of the most musically diverse rap albums to drop in a while.

The first proper track, "Rush," is a hard-hitting, guttural affair sparked by some dirty rock-guitar flourishes. The upbeat "Shock Body" is driven by a celebratory throng of horns. The later songs go from summery funk to passionate R&B.

Kweli matches the music's power with his words and continues to prove that he's no lyrical dope. In "Get By," he delivers such insightful and poetic lines as "We commute to computers/ Spirits stay mute while you eagles spread rumors/ We survivalists turned to consumers" and "The TV got us reachin' for stars/ Not the ones between Venus and Mars, the ones that be readin' for parts."

"The Proud" is another example of b-boy rhymes being used as a forum for insightful commentary. Evoking the Oklahoma City bombing and the 9/11 attacks, Kweli examines America's problems — both external and internal.

A new and fantastic statement from the underground, *Quality* most definitely lives up to its title — it's one of the best hip hop records of recent memory.

By Elliott Dube

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