

MURDER



Brother Ali

Album Reviews 4.07



THE DEVOUT MUSLIM MC'S LATEST QUEST TO ROOT OUT EVIL

BROTHER ALI
THE UNDISPUTED TRUTH
Rhymesayers/US/CD

Brother Ali, Rhymesayers' righteous albino wordsmith, is a powerhouse who spits tricky rhymes with the force and consistency of a steel piston. He reveals in his work and his craft, and it's no coincidence that a few of the blues-based beats he raps over on *The Undisputed Truth*, his second proper album, resemble work songs. A perfectionist obsessed with his own struggle and skills, Ali's favorite subject, as he makes clear on "Take Me Home," is himself.

On *The Undisputed Truth*, Ali delves deeper into the tricky topic of the self, making the physical dressing-down he did on "Forest Whitiker" (from 2004's *Shadows on the Sun*) seem skin-deep by comparison. Considering his battle-rap history, it's not surprising that Ali spends plenty of time verbally assaulting a nameless other, usually a clueless MC or some stylized major-label-created thug. But after hearing his newfound confessional side and workaholic boasts, that "other" could easily be his own reflection, so serious are his drive and standards. Ali never applies criticism he won't direct at himself, and on *The Undisputed Truth*, the title itself a goal. He needs to "Kill the devil where he resides/Even if he's in me/He has to die," he warns on "Freedom Ain't Free."

During the gap between this album and *Shadows*, Ali got divorced and became a single father, and it's clear the process sparked a serious period of self-reflection and recalibration for the devout Minnesota-based Muslim. The track that directly addresses the break-up, a laid-back jam called "Walkin' Away," sounds happy, except for lyrics like "If you didn't try to kill me/I'd have stayed for the kid." Ali still has his pride and puffs his chest a bit, but on "Faheem," where he imparts wisdom to his son, he deflates a bit. ("You have a genuine goodness inside you/Wonder if I was ever like you," he confesses to his boy.) Combine that with the track "Here"—on which Ali turns the process of putting a house up for sale into a clever metaphor about letting another person see his imperfect inner-self—and it's clear he's been processing his pain. But Ali never loses his earnestness, and despite some lyrical bricks and a few weak tracks (like "Listen Up"), he avoids sappy melodrama, instead reflecting a depth of feeling with universal appeal.

Producer Ant is once again at the boards on *Truth*, perhaps a thankless job due to Ali's dominating vocal presence. The tracks strut by without much fanfare, and while the old-school hip-hop samples get old quickly, they help create economical, pre-fab frames ready to be filled with solid lyrics. It's not that Ant

lacks creativity—he just provides lean, muscular beats that do the trick, like the blues march of "Letter From the Government" or the background riff on "Puzzle." Complimenting Ali's style, Ant avoids excessive flash and experimentation, getting maximum return on the small snippets of blues, soul, and reggae he taps for raw material.

Ali isn't strictly focused on himself, though. "Letter From the Government," an anti-war screed told from the perspective of a weary soldier called to duty in the Middle East, skewers without resorting to hyperbolic rallying cries. Addressing his anonymous enemy on the battlefield, he questions, "Putting one in his brain/Like something will change?" That bluntness may be Ali's real strength as an MC, whether it's applied to conflicts overseas or the ones inside his head. *Patrick Sisson*