

Akala Biography

DoubleThink. It's a shock to the system - a sonic kick to the groin delivered with force and precision by someone trained in music's equivalent of deadly martial arts. It's not often that an album comes along that shares debts to Radiohead, Aphex Twin and Depeche Mode as strongly as to Public Enemy, the Wu-Tang Clan and Rakim, but the 26-year-old rapper, label-owner, and educator Kingslee Daley has made it his life's work to challenge preconceptions and buck prevailing trends; and he isn't the sort to allow himself to be fitted into any kind of mould. Breaking down the culture of cliché and stereotype that smothers the genre he loves is a major part of the mission he's taken on, and gives impetus to this third album of pointed, perceptive hip hop music from the convention-defying emcee.

At first glance, Akala is someone straight outta hip hop central casting. The often angry child of a broken home, his schooling was punctuated by rows with teachers. After teenage years spent playing football (he was on the schoolboy books of both West Ham United and Wimbledon), he dropped out of college. Aged 12 he saw his best friend's brother get a meat cleaver in the back of the head while sitting in the chair in a barber's shop, a tale touched on in the DoubleThink track Find No Enemy. "What interests me, looking back now, is that nobody stopped cutting hair," he says. "Even though I hadn't seen that before, I just accepted. I'd heard so much and knew so many people who'd been shot or stabbed that it was just a part of life."

So far, so rapper-backstory-clichéd. But it's in the gaps between these de rigueur hip hop CV bullet-points that the real Akala can be found. His step-father, a stage manager at London's Hackney Empire, would sometimes take the pre-teen Akala with him to work: so the wide-eyed kid got to stand in the wings, soaking up Sarafina! and Shakespeare. Despite being put in a special-needs class at six years old - he still doesn't know why - he fed a ferocious intellect with self-taught history and philosophy. His response, at 13, to racist remarks by a teacher was to write to the headmaster and governors to complain.

DoubleThink is partly a concept album inspired by the three classic novels of dystopian fiction: George Orwell's 1984, Aldous Huxley's Brave New World and Yevgeny Zamyatin's We, "with a little bit of The Matrix in there too." The record takes its overall tone - the edgy paranoia, the sizzling menace, the spine-tingling tension - from these literary classics and transmutes their atmospheres into musical form. From Welcome to Dystopia's static-laden distortion to Peace's simple, sparse piano accompaniment, via the electro-funk keyboards and metal guitar riffs of Faceless People, the breadth of musical ambition is matched by the rich variety of topics Daley addresses.

"The only way we can ever change anything Is to look in the mirror and to find no enemy"

Courtesy of AnnieReedMusic.com

Race, politics, self-deception and social conditioning are among the recurring themes on a record that presents its concerns as barbed comedic satire. But in tackling those topics Daley finds himself confronting the issue that defined his MOBO Award-winning debut, *It's Not a Rumour* and the acclaimed follow-up, *Freedom Lasso*: lamenting the decline of hip hop as a social and political force, angrily restating the genre's credentials as the best, most powerful means of delivering what KRS-ONE called Edutainment.

Edutainment is something Daley knows more about than most. As well as releasing music on his own Illa State record label, Akala (the name means "immovable") is a teacher himself. He recently set up the Hip Hop Shakespeare Company, running successful Bardic workshops in schools. His prowess at communicating effectively with young people has won recognition in unlikely circles: among recent clients for his consultancy work has been the organising committee of the 2012 London Olympics.

His music has always reflected Akala's personal struggles - against ignorance, against racism's divide-and-conquer imprimatur, and against the dumbing-down of the musical form that helped provide him with the answers he needed. "I remember when Wu-Tang Forever came out," he says, casting his mind back to 1998, and the second LP from the Staten Island collective. "And I remember going to buy books because of references I heard on there. I literally studied that album and went away and learned because of it. They weren't some obscure, underground rap group - that was the first rap album to go to Number One in the UK. What made hip hop powerful was its education, its culture, its musicality and its intelligence. Yet immediately after that, it went from being about history and philosophy and culture to being - literally - money, cash, and hoes."

Indeed, Akala's refusal and inability to conform to prevailing stereotypes means that his records are largely ignored by the sections of the media that proclaim to speak authentically of the "urban experience": in that regard, he stands shoulder-to-shoulder with the likes of Saul Williams and Gil Scott Heron, artists who he considers inspirations as well as heroes. But while the message is vital, Akala knows that it has to be delivered wittily and attractively, too: edutainment is mostly entertainment, after all.

So DoubleThink distils these messages in cogent and weighty blasts of musically fierce, lyrically adroit hip hop, but it's also an excitable, effervescent listen. There are, of course, some harrowing moments: in *Yours and My Children*, a track reflecting three months Daley spent in Brazil, he talks about favela children being killed by police; and that meat cleaver to the head in *Find No Enemy* isn't the only violent image on a record that refuses to pull any punches. But Akala's unquenchable appetite for intricate wordplay and his teacher's instinctive awareness that heavy topics need to be got across lightly mean that, despite the often serious points, the record is an affirmative and often explosively joyful experience.

Courtesy of AnnieReedMusic.com

There's XXL, which relentlessly chips away at the clichés but has some fun with them at the same time; Peace, a collaboration with the classical pianist Paul Gladstone Reid, MBE, which provides musical and atmospheric contrast to the juddering electro-rooted rap that sits either side of it; and, right at the end - the thought Akala wants you to take away from the album - there's Not That Serious, a jaunty slice of popped-up '80s-style buzz, poking fun at Akala's furrowed-brow reputation without suggesting you shouldn't care about the issues he wants you to consider. At the risk of descending into another one of those pesky clichés, there really is something here for everyone.

Akala touches on race, class, sexism, history, war, hip-hop culture and what it is to live in a world one knows to be inherently unequal, yet rounds it all off not with accusations or anger but inward self-analysis.

"My mum's a white Scottish woman and my dad's a black Jamaican, so for my life not to be about bringing people together would almost be a contradiction in terms," he says. "I want to reach everybody but do it truthfully and honestly. That's got to be your ultimate aim as an artist - that's what the best artists do. I'm not saying I'm there yet, but that's what I aspire to."