

The Good Fight: the latest from Washington DC-based hip hop artist Oddisee

By Nick Barrickman
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The Good Fight (released May 2015 on Mello Music Group) is the latest full-length studio album from Washington DC-based rapper/producer Oddisee (Amir Mohamed el Khalifa, born in 1985 to a Sudanese father and African-American mother). Khalifa has produced music for a number of hip hop and R&B acts, as well as releasing his own instrumental and traditional rap albums as a solo artist.

Khalifa's music is noteworthy for its vibrant instrumental backdrops, which feature elements of jazz, funk, electronic and soul music. His programmed drum sounds complement rather than intrude upon the layers of melodic instruments, preserving a feeling of spontaneity in the proceedings.

Khalifa is influenced by the early 1990s hip hop collective Native Tongues, which consisted of "conscious rap" groups like A Tribe Called Quest, Brand Nubian, Black Sheep and others. These groups sought to incorporate more socially critical themes into their music. Khalifa does not come from the gangster rap school of hip hop.

The Good Fight features a free-wheeling jazz element. Especially memorable is the arresting use of horn and brass arrangements, which seem to communicate a resilience in the face of the difficult hardships about which Khalifa sometimes raps.

"My mother worked the register all the way through her pregnancy/ Less than a week from getting me she was working to better me/ Pops selling coke out on Lanny Park in the 70s/ He hustled for the struggle to stop the troubles ahead of me," raps Oddisee over an infectious bass instrumental on "A List of Withouts." The song demonstrates both the strengths and weaknesses of Khalifa's music: there is a confidence and a sense of persevering in the face of difficult odds, but at times the rapper crosses a line in the direction of

arrogant boasting.

The album's best songs have momentum. The honesty of Oddisee's lyrics and exuberant production pack a punch. They are free of pretentiousness and self-promotion while communicating with verve the rapper's appreciation for the others in his life. There is something endearing about Khalifa's enthusiasm and concern for others when considered alongside the sea of cynicism and self-absorption that dominates a large portion of the entertainment industry.

This is captured best on the album's first song, "That's Love," in which Khalifa speaks of his relationships with people who have remained supportive of him throughout his life. "When you told me the truth, even if it really hurt/ 'Cuz you knew a lie was worse (that's love)," Oddisee rhymes over a frenzied brass and organ-laden instrumental. He later finishes his verse by rapping "When stakes weigh you down, and they stay around/ And pick up the pieces, and you off the ground/ That's love."

While less distinguished as a vocalist or lyricist than as a producer, in most instances Oddisee's vocal presence and fluid delivery are able to effectively complement his multi-layered production.

The liner notes of the album, published on the artist's web site, state that *The Good Fight* is intended to depict "living fully as a musician without succumbing to the traps of hedonism, avarice, and materialism" while also being a "meditation on our capacity to love and the bonds binding us together." Oddisee elaborated on this theme in a May interview on Hot 97's *Real Late* radio program, in which he stated "I don't have smoking culture; I don't have tattoo culture; I don't have stripper culture; I don't have party culture; I don't have drinking culture, I don't have a lot of the devices that a lot of the rappers who don't actually live real

life... have...to lean on. I just have reality, and that form of reality isn't necessarily the most popular way of making a living in the music industry."

However, while avoiding many of the more overt expressions of self-absorption and social backwardness, many of the rapper's attempts to reflect reality tend to remain purely on an individual and superficial plane, avoiding more complicated issues and drifting into banal territory.

This becomes clear on "Want Something Done," the album's closest attempt at an explicit political statement. "Imagine me in pageanties, we branded as awards/ What's the difference 'tween them auction blocks and cooning for applause?" the rapper asks rhetorically while lamenting the state of the music industry. Unable or unwilling to draw any broader social conclusions from the artistically deadening effect of the entertainment business, Oddisee finds himself resigned to individual solutions, declaring on the song's chorus: "I guess I got to do it all myself/ It's not a problem, no/ I'm prolly better off without you though."

In addition, Oddisee is inclined to reflect more noxious social elements, adopting the standard line put forward by purveyors of identity politics. Viewed solely as a matter of race, the problems of the music industry are blamed on an attempt to "keep black music's soul weeping." The problem with today's music, according to such arguments, is the co-opting of hip hop by white musicians and white business owners. The need for more black-owned businesses is the standard reply. But more "self-made" black business owners in the music industry, or in any other industry, while enriching a narrow layer of would-be moguls, would not lessen the brutal social conditions faced by the vast majority of working people and would not guarantee more meaningful works of art.

In reviewing the artist's 2010 instrumental album *Traveling' Man*, the WSWS noted that "Oddisee's family background, travel and interests bear witness to the unprecedented level of global integration in cultural life." On that album, whose songs bear the names of various cities the artist has visited, Oddisee manages to capture something both evocative and truthful on tracks such as "Detroit," whose instrumental conveys a sense of both majesty and sorrow. It brings to mind the thriving cultural life that existed in the city in an earlier

period along with its subsequent decay.

Similarly, Oddisee's 2012 rendition of "Ain't that Peculiar" was a powerful update to the 1965 Marvin Gaye original.

Whatever Oddisee's strengths, one should be careful not to settle for too little. Oddisee's latest offering is a welcome and interesting work, if not entirely satisfying. *The Good Fight* features an artist who shows some signs of life, but something more is required; Khalifa must commit himself to a much deeper exploration of social life, beginning with the understanding that class and not race is the most fundamental social divide.

The Good Fight can be heard in its entirety and purchased from the artist's Bandcamp web site.

The author also recommends:

Oddisee's *Traveling Man: Globalized society through the lens of a hip hop artist*

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