

Lil Baby: Too Hard

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Daniel Bromfield

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There's a moment on Lil Baby's latest tape *Too Hard*, one of the most gobstopping on a rap album this year, where he suddenly and vividly remembers a shootout. Shootouts happen all the time in rap songs, but how often do we get a rapper remembering a specific one that happened some unspecified time in the past? "Remember that shootout we had that one time we thought a kid died?" he reminisces, spilling to an unseen friend. "Only thing I know when we pulled up everybody hopped out firing/ I remember on the way back everybody in the car quiet." The memory sprawls on for the entire verse, until finally he admits: "I'm just glad the kid didn't die."



The overwhelming impression on *Too Hard* is of fatigue. Baby doesn't take the easy way out to depict the psychological torment of violence, rapping about sleepless nights and drowning his demons in drugs or booze. He works relentlessly, ignoring his physical well-being, pursuing his dream, and he's tired. "To the Top" has the boasts about jets and designer clothes you'd expect from a song with that title, but the hook is a cry for help: "Lately I been feeling crazy so I ain't been answering calls," he sighs. When he promises himself "I ain't never gonna fall" a few bars later, it feels like a grim joke given how unsustainable the lifestyle he portrays seems to be.

This is real: Baby recently finished two years in prison on drug charges, and he's on his fourth tape after apparently been rapping for less than a year. On "Money" he admits that he started rapping at least in part because his job prospects as an ex-con are so low. But his music doesn't work because of whatever "authenticity" his backstory imparts but because of how candidly and unadornedly he expresses his thoughts. Rapping, like any songwriting, is easy to be good at if you just say what's on your mind free of affectation. Thoughts seem to go directly from Baby's head to the microphone, and his ease with his own experiences is the core of his effectiveness.

It's not hard to believe Baby's only been rapping for a short time: his music is so affectless, so spartan, that it barely feels like rapping so much as some separate stream-of-consciousness expression, like one of Mark Kozelek's exhaustive rants. (A tweet from rapper Milo comes to mind: "if i rap on a 3 track beat white people will call it 'unfinished sounding' but if mark kozelek sing for 10 hours wit only a 6 string it is Art?") What's a little harder to believe is his overnight

rise. Blame his friend Young Thug for that, and though Baby's concrete confessions couldn't be further from Thugger's batshit glam surrealism, they share a curious little shiver in their voices.

Rising rappers have every right to be resentful, but it's clear Baby's got a natural gift for this stuff (it's also likely a lot of these verses gestated in his head while he was in prison). Though his art's not about bangers, he's great at those too, playing hot-potato with the wonderfully named MoneyBagg Yo on "All of a Sudden." The same goes for punchlines ("*Dog I didn't know that was your sister/ If I knew I still woulda hit her.*") It's hard to say whether or not increased experience or exposure will help or hinder his craft; a more (or less) writerly direction might kill what makes his work distinctive. But it's enough of a revelation just to hear him find his footing in real time.

- Label:
Quality Control/Caroline
- Release Date:
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