

# Nightmares on Wax: Shape the Future

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Nightmares on Wax is one of those “always the same, always different” artists, meaning the minor differences between his albums matter a ton. It also means that *Shape the Future* will go down in history as “the album with all the wook shit.” Like all Nightmares albums, it’s composed mostly of melancholic, compulsively listenable trip-hop. Unlike others, it’s overlaid with pseudoscientific hippie balderdash that’d make Joe Rogan blush.



The album tests the waters with a speech about how the frequencies of our thoughts connect us all, which is doubled by someone speaking Wixárika, the

language of the Wixáratiri people of western Mexico. I’m glad the guy got the job, and maybe this is true to some aspects of Wixárika religion, but it doesn’t go into much detail, and the feature comes across as a little infantilizing—echoes of the belief that Native Americans have some “answer” Western culture doesn’t on how to live in harmony with nature. (The word “love” is treated with echo for emphasis, tying the whole thing back to British hippiedom.)

So we know what we’re getting into, but wait until Andrew Ashong gets going on “Tell My Vision:” “*Some people say the earth is flat/we never went to the moon/weed is a cure cancer/deep inside we all know the answer.*” He says nothing to contradict these things, so he probably believes them, and by the time he says “*we never ever really die,*” he’s stopped making sense. It doesn’t help that what he’s saying sounds no less stupid than his voice; he sounds a bit like Drakken from *Kim Possible* fronting a reggae band.

The beats are as good as anything Nightmares has done. His experiments in ambient (“Tenor Fly,” “The Othership”) are intriguing, their pads snaking across the stereo field. His reliance on digital drums also helps steer his music clear of the rockism that trips up so much trip hop. But you really have to buy into the philosophy espoused here to ever want to listen to it over *Carboot Soul* or the definitive *Smokers Delight*. If you don’t, you’ll find large swaths of the album unlistenable. And if the album convinces you the earth is flat and weed cures cancer, perhaps you shouldn’t be trusted around music at all.

The Trump-Brexit era has led to a resurgence of the sort of noncommittal messianism we saw in the peacenik ‘60s and Live Aid ‘80s, when the belief that music could change the world led to a lot of really misguided music (see N.E.R.D.’s *No One Ever Really Dies* and Miguel’s *War & Leisure* for albums that are political for no reason). The truth is music can’t change the world by itself; it can help people empathize with marginalized groups or change minds on certain

issues, but rarely enough to make a major difference. What music *can* do is raise a lot of money, so if Nightmares on Wax really wants to shape the future, he ought to make a no-bullshit beat tape and give the money to charity.

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Warp
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