

Holy Hell! The Element of Surprise Turns 20

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E-40 considers *The Element of Surprise* his best album. Danny Brown, a rapper of erudite taste, cites it as one of his favorite albums. The consensus among E-40 fans is that... it's long, which seems strange for a few reasons. First, we're talking about '90s rap, and at 108 minutes *The Element of Surprise* is shorter than, say, Biggie's *Life After Death* or 2Pac's *All Eyez On Me*. Secondly, we're talking about E-40, who releases music with the abandon of a man who loves his art as much as life itself. His *Block Brochure* series totaled about six and a half hours, and he hasn't made an album since 2008 that didn't come with a sequel/sister album/what have you.

But *The Element of Surprise* has the aura of a statement rather than a mere creative dump. For one, its regional focus is airtight. He'd open up to collaborating with rappers from the South and elsewhere on subsequent albums—his follow-up *Charlie Hustle: Blueprint of a Self-Made Millionaire* featured a young Lil Wayne—but his cast of collaborators here is mostly cherry-picked from the vicinity of his native Vallejo. Secondly, this album is so dense with language it feels like a tome whose pages are black with text. Its scale is staggering, and at times it sounds like he's trying to fit in as much as possible. It's like James Michener's *Vallejo*.

The skill and scale of his writing is astounding. He's at ease on story-songs like "Hope I Don't Go Back," whose escape route from the cops is so precise you can trace it on Google Maps. He's also good at cold threats ("Mayhem"), gaudy materialism ("Trump Change"), and absurd comedy ("Flashin'," whose structure predicts the Lonely Island's "Jizz in my Pants"). His eye for detail is less like that of a documentarian than a cartoonist. He won't just pull up on you; he'll split your house in half while wearing a dreadlocked wig. Even on the tearjerking poverty narrative "Zoom" he drops this: "*My crackhead cousin spent the night/now we have roaches!*"

E-40's flow itself seems designed to accommodate maximum verbiage. He's long been one of the most expressive of the great rappers, contracting and releasing volleys of words at will like rocks in a slingshot. But as "The Element of Surprise" begins it's disarming how his voice almost seems to climb over its own back like the chipmunks in *Snow White*, pretzeling itself into gravity-defying knots of strange Seussian architecture. This is a dimension where the lyric "*he kinda tight too/remind me of the Click crew*" takes the same amount of time to say as "*because they were spitting high-powered Godzilla ballin guru ass type shit you can relate to*."

He doesn't rap fast to show off the way a post-Eminem meathead like Machine Gun Kelly might. Instead, he uses his delivery as an instrument of texture, elevating beats we might not blink at in the hands of a more restrained rapper like Too \$hort into fractal, gravity-defying sound castles. When he's politely explaining things he sounds like an infomercial spokesman; in horrorcore mode his voice sharpens to a feline growl. That's not even mentioning the ad-libs, especially the infamous "*beeaatch*" that turns into something hellish when held long enough. This is one of the most psychedelic rap records ever recorded, and it's nearly all from his voice.

As opposed to the slobber-dog gregariousness of *Hall of Game* or the classic-album concision of *In A Major Way*, *The Element of Surprise* is foreboding from its opening notes, played in that lowest and most unholy range of the piano. Even the ballad "Hope I Don't Back" feels miasmatic, and an anecdote about swallowing crack rock is a little more lurid than anything on, say, "Juicy." The album's Stygian in the way it deepens and sprawls, like getting lost in the gritty depths of Gotham City. It doesn't have an arc, really, and it plays fine on shuffle, but the volume of demented, great rap here is formidable no matter how you listen to it.

If the marathon length of this album is exhausting, at least it contributes to the impression of a deep rabbit hole at the center of E-40's discography, something to be stumbled upon rather than voraciously recommended by critics or even fellow fans. A lot of its nuances are probably best-appreciated by rappers, and its creator is surely the only person who fully understands it. It's pure-heroin E-40, and it's rewarding chiefly to those who appreciate the essential nature of his work—which includes long-windedness. Newbies should stick to *In A Major Way* or *My Ghetto Report Card*. But don't be alarmed if the gravity of this black hole starts to suck you in.