

Lil Baby: Street Gossip

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"I ain't never popped no Xan, I sip sizzurp" raps Lil Baby on "Pure Cocaine," the second track on his new tape *Street Gossip*. It's not exactly a show of moral superiority, but has an Atlanta rapper ever shot such an explicitly get-off-my-lawn barb the way of the young SoundCloud-rap generation? Sometime between Young Thug's *Slime Language* and Quavo's *Quavo Huncho* it became clear that Atlanta is no longer the epicenter of rap innovation, its stars content to chase streams rather than expand their sound, but not many rappers seem aware of it. Leave it to Baby, who just turned 24 but sounds as fatigued as label-hell Lil Wayne, to play the old man.

Baby's absurdly fast rise is well-known: he spent two years in prison for marijuana possession and upon getting out used his Young Thug connection to launch a rap career off verses that must have gestated in his head behind bars. It's easy to be cynical, but his talent is obvious—he's not an eccentric like Thug but a workmanlike rapper and very good writer. All of his music is informed by his relief at being able to not just be a star but to have a *job* out of jail. On *Too Hard* from last year, he acknowledged he started rapping in part because his prospects as an ex-con are so low. Even when he lapses into empty materialism his brags feel like unburdening.

This is a stopgap tape, easy to miss with his Gunna collab *Drip Harder* fresh in our minds, but it's a good one: 13 songs, 41 minutes, no real clunkers. Opener "Global" sets us up for a victory lap. "We global now," he sighs—thank God. So many of the lyrics here are about how happy he is to have made it, how he's left the projects behind but still stays true to where he comes from. His voice is a raspy sigh, and he lets his words curl off into poignant silences and tired whispers. He sounds like anything but a baby, but it's funny how his personal beatmaker Quay Global ("chop that shit up, Quay!") engulfs him with bells and music boxes, as if he were.

Lil Baby's an interesting fellow to be trapped in a room with, but he works well with guests. "Ready" shows his chemistry with Gunna to still be formidable. "Realist in It" is a fine posse cut with Gucci Mane and Offset, who seem like royalty at this point. The guest who steals the show is Thug, who shows up on "Section 8" to do no less than declare war on Donald Trump. It's easy to wonder how Baby's music might improve if he painted outside the lines from time to time, like his mentor. But it's telling that, in a scene whose best music has forced listeners to examine what they want from rap, one of Atlanta's most exciting new talents is so traditionally good. Look elsewhere for innovation, but there's still great music coming from rap's epicenter.



<https://youtu.be/JJQkP4bqbyg>