



In 1999, having just relocated from Brooklyn to Oakland, rapper and academic Tim'm West released an EP called Bayou Sessions, an experimental electronica and hip hop project that dared to bleed boundaries between Hip Hop and his beloved passion for house music—a genre with deep roots in the Black gay community he was seeking to give voice to.

One has to remember that in the '90s there existed this precious notion that queer men didn't (and couldn't) rap. Suspicions about who the then infamous "The Gay Rapper" might be in speculative articles in hip hop magazines like Vibe and The Source stood as evidence that people couldn't wrap their

minds around seeing an openly queer presence in the hip hop landscape (it ended up being a gag invention of hip hop ghost writer Ivan Matias and later publicly foisted upon would-be rapper Caushun, who has long since disappeared from pop culture consciousness). Enter Tim'm West, who was not an invention or a satirical musing, but an authentic rapper with a real message and a previously unheard point of view within this space. The year 1999 was also a time when West and two other Cancerians, Juba Kalamka and Phillip Atiba Goff, dared to bring their own brand of Stanford emcee, counter-hegemonic, no chronic, pro-womanist brand of brohemian flows to the hip hop landscape with the formation of Deep Dickollective (DDC). And, like many rap collectives that amassed nearly a dozen rappers, West would also eventually seek to find the uniqueness of his own voice as a solo artist. A thinking hip hop philosopher known for what some have called a "masculine mystique," West's charm has always been in his capacity to be both an exemplar of masculinity and a betrayer of it. The softness, for those bothering to get past the surface exteriors, is in the song.

His first single, "Red Dirt," is one that appeared both on the "Bayou Sessions" project and later reappeared on the full length Cellular Records supported "Songs From Red Dirt." It begins with the hum and wail of a southern Baptist call. In it, one hears the vulnerability of surrender, of black men kneeling and calling on their Lord for all the worries of the world that racism, poverty, and making do can bring. This humming, on front porches or in churches is the reprise and sunrise of West's journey. Lyrically, he brings with it an edge heavily influenced by Golden Era Hip Hop. In his voice you hear influences spanning from Big Daddy Kane and Heavy D to Fresh Prince or KRS One. That his students in 2003 referred to him as "the other Mr. West" a reference to Kanye's debut, is part of what marks a distinction in purpose (and a dramatic difference in politics). West is an educator, one who dares to sing sometimes with the imperfect cry of a surrender. The depth of this baritone or bass are both the smooth and rough that parallel his life. Cincy born. Arkansas raised. City and Country. Masculine and Soft. West's work has thrived for two decades because few others have created music covering the range of

topics and experiences he has. He was once recalled saying: "There are hundreds of topics that never get broached in hip hop with everyone trying to keep it real for real, but failing in the process." West sings and raps about love and heartbreak as seamlessly as he does Black Pride, freedom, and justice.

Prodigal Son (2018) is a timely project. Given his more recent mark in the world as a Brave Educator, West expected to retire the hip hop making and settle in the very nest where he was born: Cincinnati. And, yet something about the rolling hills, the promise of prosperity in the air in Cincy, the related deprivation and social neglect that comes with gentrification inspired music for him again. A philosopher by training, West has frequently referenced Lyotard's differend as that space where language is doomed to fail but tries anyway. For all the words West can muster to speak truth to power, the most true part of him rests in the hum. "Prodigal Son" takes the listener on a journey through six solo albums; and what some fans might consider a particularly Hip Hop centric exposition of his work. He interestingly didn't include the house music and electronica that defined many of his projects for his insistence on the blend, a project he will perhaps explore later.

On "Prodigal Son," you'll hear the best of "Songs From Red Dirt" (2003), "Blakkboy Blue(s)" (2007), "In Security: The Golden Error" (2009), "Fly Brotha" (2011), "Snapshots" (2013), and "Iconography" (2015). The listener familiar with his body of work will receive three additional treats, including the title track, a song called "Shoes" (which also boasts his first music video in five years), and an epic collaboration with the Cincy standout group TRIIBE. If "Iconography" was a pre-emptive reference to the making of an Icon, then "Prodigal Son" is the project that validates it. You'll listen to this project over and over...and perhaps find the others that made up this project afterward. You'll wonder why Tim'm West hasn't received more play in the mainstream? And, perhaps the answer rests in the reality that he's simply never tried to and just wants to make good music, for good people, keep them moving, hoping, dreaming for the better world he imagines.

-- L. Michael Gipson

released October 5, 2018