

Run the Jewels and the burden of prophecy

What counts as truth in a post-truth world? *Run the Jewels 3* makes the case that truth sounds like rap music.

by [Adam Hearlson](#) in the [March 15, 2017](#) issue



Killer Mike (left) and El-P of Run the Jewels. Photo by Tom Spray

At the start of Jehoiakim's reign, the prophet Jeremiah lumbered into the temple square and issued a blistering prophecy about God's coming justice. God had instructed him to "not hold back a word," and Jeremiah obeyed. "Repent or be destroyed!" he cried.

His speech came at a price. He was nearly killed. Another blunt prophet, Uriah, was executed and thrown in an unmarked grave. Hypocrisy and mendacity are cheap and safe. Honesty is dangerous.

In its recently released third album, the rap duo Run the Jewels does not hold back a word. *Run the Jewels 3* is a searing cry of prophecy. In a world where many wonder what counts as truth, this duo makes the claim that truth sounds like rap music. The music of MCs El-P and Killer Mike barges into polite town hall discussions like Jeremiah strides into the square. Its insubordination betrays our public scripts, and it refuses to abide by our social codes. The musicians expose these codes as constructed and maintained for the powerful and mourn that “only some” lives matter.

In “Talk to Me,” Killer Mike raps, “Born black, that’s dead on arrival, my job is fight for survival, in spite of the #alllivesmatter-ass white folk.” El-P answers, “What, me worry? Nah buddy, I’ve lost before, so what? You don’t get it, I’m dirt, motherfucker, I can’t be crushed.” In another song Mike stands firm against “the principalities.” “I refuse to kill another human being in the name of a government. ‘Cause I don’t study war no more, I don’t hate the poor no more, gettin’ more ain’t what’s more.”

El-P and Killer Mike formed Run the Jewels after long careers in hip-hop. The collaboration gave them new creative energy and resulted in *Run the Jewels 1* and *Run the Jewels 2*, which reflect their creative chemistry—the duo raps with two voices and one heart. *Run the Jewels 3* has a new sense of urgency and anger. The aggressive and dissonant sound may incite one listener to shout, “Turn that down!” while at the same time empowering another to respond, “Hell no!”

For 40 minutes Mike and El-P take turns calling out “demons,” “devils,” and “imps” who in their view are running the world, including the political right and left, which prefer staying in power to empowering the oppressed. Here Mike and El-P become more than rappers or even prophets; they are exorcists. When there is “a bull market on madness,” as theologian Brian Blount puts it, casting out devils is more important than preserving politeness. As El-P says, “You talk clean and bomb hospitals, so I speak with the foulest mouth possible.” For Mike and El-P “manners” are a smoke screen preventing conversation about the vulgarities of life.

While anger is the driving power of *Run the Jewels 3*, friendship is its heart. Killer Mike and El-P love each other. The pain of screaming out prophecy eases when your

friend stands next to you, hands you the mic, and lays down a beat.

Run the Jewels 3 begins with a righteous confidence, but as the record progresses, that confidence wanes and a cold lament sets in. What do we say when another black body lies dying in the street? Does a clever rhyme even matter? Does speaking out change anything? In scripture, one of the words for prophecy is burden. The prophet carries a burden to the people. It is lonely work and full of despair. Mike and El-P remind us that prophecy is a burden best shared among friends.

Listening to *Run the Jewels*, I find myself wondering what Jeremiah and Uriah could have accomplished if they had worked together. *Run the Jewels 3* suggests that if a turntable and mic can't change the world, then friendship will.

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