

# The Last Poets

*Album Review By Benjamin N. Banerd*

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## Who Are The Last Poets?

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During the year 1968, **Jalal Mansur Nuriddin** chose to go to prison instead of fighting in the war of Vietnam. While incarcerated, he learned an early form of rapping called “spiel”, and met two other inmates, **Abiodun Oyewole** and **Omar Ben Hassan**, who would later form a group called The Last Poets. Following their release from prison, they began to perform spoken word poetry on the street corners of Harlem, New York. Even though they performed together quite often, they did not officially form as a group until May 16, 1969. The name of the trio was adopted from a South African poet by the name of **Willie Kgositsile**, who considered the era to be “*the last age of poets, before the takeover of guns*”.

## Career

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In 1970, following a performance on one of the local television programs, The Last Poets were signed by Alan Douglas who was a jazz producer at the time. This gave them an opportunity to release their well-known debut LP titled “*The Last Poets*”. Unfortunately, before the trio could go on their first tour, Abiodun was arrested in connection with an armed robbery, and sentenced to 14 years in prison. The group then had to replace him with a percussionist named Nilaja, and proceeded with the tour.



Predating the famous block parties of **DJ Kool Herc** by about five years, The last Poets were the true ‘*forefathers*’ of the hip-hop music genre. They brought spoken word poetry to the street corners of Harlem, addressing a variety of topics faced by the minority population at the time, such as drug abuse, assault, discrimination, white oppression, and the use of over-excessive police force. This would later play a part in the creation and development of the art of rap music. Sadly, the group separated in the late 70’s, but would resurface again in future projects and collaborations.

## ‘*The Last Poets*’ (Album)

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This particular masterpiece was The Last Poets debut album that kick started their career in the 70’s. The issues that are brought to light in this album are things such as street violence, drug abuse, racial assault and police brutality. It also attempted to show the need for change in the way that white America treats its citizens, but more importantly told the African-American population that if they were in need of a revolt, that they would have to be completely committed to the idea. This particular ideology was adopted from an earlier artist by the name of **Marvin Gaye**, on his hit album ‘*what is going on*’.

## Interesting Album Information

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The album peaked at twenty-nine on the *US Billboard* 200, and held the third position on the *R&B/Hip-hop (Albums)* Billboard for quite some time. The recording, as well as the production of this album occurred at the *Impact Sound Studio*. This collection of spoken word poetry, was very influential in the later hip-hop music industry. A variety of artists would go on to sample the trio's tracks, such as **The Notorious B.I.G.**, **NWA** and even an east coast hip-hop group referred to as **Brand Nubian**.



One of the inspirations for The Last Poets to release an album like this, was drawn from the African-American Civil Rights Movement that took place from the mid 50's to the late 60's, led by **Martin Luther King Jr**, **Malcolm X**, **Rosa Parks** & **Booker T. Washington**. The aim of the movement was to implicate equal rights for minority groups and fix particular problems such as segregation and discrimination. This album brought awareness to similar issues, but instead of protests and gatherings this trio utilized their passion and talent for spoken word poetry to deliver such messages.





## Important Songs

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### Track #12 - Two Little Boys

The particular story told within this track is quite sad, but also is one that needs to be told. Drug abuse affects many people in our society today, and even did back when this album was released in 1970, and a long time before that.



The song describes the life struggles of a young boy who became addicted to heroin by 'Chasing the ghost' which refers to the injection of the drug. A couple of important lines to note: *"Have you seen the skinny little boy that chases the white ghost at night? Face puffed up, tracks in his arms and mind blown"* In my opinion, I think that these lines were able to effectively describe the appearance of this little boy, after the continuous use of heroin. They were also able to bring awareness to the physical consequences that this drug can cause if used. In the following lines *"His momma somewhere drinking and talking about survival, and his Pop's in jail or downtown in*

*the Y"* These describe the home life of this poor boy, and how his mother and father were not there to take care of him and raise him as a youth. I believe this was an awesome concept to provide awareness for, as it is an issue for some in our modern day society to live without a maternal or fraternal figure. The way by which money is obtained to support these drug addictions, are not always morally right, and in line 14-15 the poets were able to show this *"Have you seen the two little boys running past you with a lady's purse? They stole a black woman's purse, yesterday, today, tomorrow."* Personally, the lines that stood out to me the most, were those that used very vivid imagery to describe the appearance of the boys after using heroin, for example *"Face puffed up, tracks in their arms, and eyes popping out of their skull."* gives the reader not just a description of the details of his appearance, but instead plants an actual image into the audience's mind. Derived from my own opinion, this song was very well written and presented, and I would definitely suggest that you listen to it.

Song Link:

[The Last Poets - Two Little Boys](#)

## Track #10 - Just Because

This particular song was more so aimed at bringing power and confidence back into the African-American community. During the start of the track they ask the target audience questions, such as *“You say you don’t want to die, because there is not cause to die for. Now what would cause you to say that?”* In this particular question they are asking, in more simple terms why the African-American people were so reluctant to make sacrifices or even die for what they believe to be fair.



At the time, racism and prejudice were very prominent, and this question was asked by many to those people who stood around and did nothing while they were being discriminated against, in all of its forms. The second important segment of the track is between line 16 - 22 *“To forget who is the cause, of black people being exploited and depressed, there have been many causes men have chosen to die for, but many black men are dying for a cause, and because you think there is no cause to die for, Malcolm and Martin all died because they knew what was the cause.”* In my own interpretation, this piece is the poets way of explaining the importance of standing up for what you believe in, while in



addition giving credit to Martin Luther King Jr and Malcolm X who died for fighting for what they believe in, which was the implementation of equal rights for all. This also shows how influential Martin and Malcolm were, and how they inspired those who came after them, showing them that they too have a voice. I think they did a great job with this song and background instrumentals, and it is definitely worth taking a listen to.

Song Link:

[The Last Poets - Just Because](#)

## Track #1 - Surprises

The track titled 'Surprises' is about a couple of different issues. From my own interpretation, I think the first issue they cover is the starvation of African-American children. In the line *"And I hear the hungry cries, from black children, their stomachs turned inside out."* This gives more of an image, than just a plain description, showing that living back then you could hear the cries of starving children on the streets. This issue has been a very common problem amongst minorities in the US for a very long time, and all over the world, but this song brings awareness to the concept. The second important segment in the poem: *"But the sun still rises, and the night still falls, and junkies still OD in ghetto halls, and miles still blows, and the oppression still grows, and where it stops nobody knows, and black people cry out in vain against injustice and pain."* Emphasizing the fact that time continues, no matter what you do. Describing the horrific issues such as overdosing, and growing oppression. Using rhyme and imagery to depict a vivid image. This segment alone was able to cover so much, showing just how important poetry was and still is in our world today. Moving forward, the next majorly important lines are *"He watches over us, and under us, and through us, night in and day out, and we are loved for being ignorant, and hated if we are militant, but promises can do nothing for me, it's time to set ourselves free."* You can't say that this is not the most informative piece out there. In the world of my interpretation, at first the writer points a indirect finger at the government or more so the president, saying that he watches their every move, or to be more exact the police wait for individuals of the African-American community to make one small mistake so they can retaliate with over excessive force. The writer is also able to make a statement, saying that the promises the government makes is not set in stone, rather the minorities must act themselves and spread awareness about particular issues in order to 'set them free'.



Song Link:

[The Last Poets - Surprises](#)

## Rating The Album

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Without the creation and development of ‘*The Last Poets*’ album, hip-hop would not be what it is today. Alongside the indisputable fact that these issues were necessary to address, the career of this revolutionary trio may not have been what it was had the album not been released. Even some of the artists today might not have been here if they never found inspiration from these legendary poets. So this album should be praised for its story, and for the legacy that The Last Poets left behind



Personally I love this album, as it's inspired me to not only write poetry, but to find my niche in writing conventional stories. So to me this album is very influential and inspirational, and should be studied as a form of art, similar to how **Tupac's** work is studied in universities all around the world. But in conclusion to this review, I would like to give this album a five star rating, along with my highest personal praise.

## In Memory Of

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*Jalal Mansur Nuriddin of The Last Poets*  
(1944 - 2018)





## Interested? Here Are Some More Suggestions!

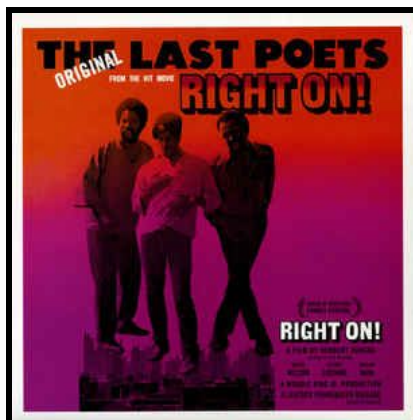
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*Understand What Black Is (2018)*



*This Is Madness (1971)*



*Right On (1970)*