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Testament: Kiss Me through the Phone

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I first saw Testament perform in 2007, following a small-scale riot in Athens, Ohio. It was exciting to see an MC delivering an explicitly anarchist message with the skills and charisma it takes to make real hip hop, rather than the well-intentioned imitation one sometimes finds in politicized circles.

Testament has since released a handful of recordings, some of which are freely available for downloading. His original work, such as “Get Into It” with Illogik as Test Their Logik, shows great promise, but thus far my favorite track is his interpretation of pop radio hit “Kiss Me Thru The Phone.”

Testament does with this song what we did with pay phones and the Situationists did with comic strips. Just as a minor billboard alteration can expose the sinister truths concealed in an advertisement, Testament’s cover version reveals the story latent within the original. No one can relate to the chorus more intensely than those separated from their lovers by prison walls—and with 2.3 million behind bars in the US, that may help to explain the song’s popularity.

Testament raises this plotline to the surface:

I wanna see you but all I can do is listen to your voice
on this phone we’re digitally kissin through telephone
wires til they let me outta prison

This brings out all the longing and sadness in the original, formerly buried beneath a thick layer of pop glitz. It’s surprising how much feeling this trite, throwaway jingle can convey when the lyrics deal with something real. Like every other product of industrial capitalist society, radio hits are produced from the toil and tribulation of thousands never credited; superficial and disposable, they’re designed to mask the coercive social relations behind them. But the ghost of all the humanity squandered to produce them lingers somewhere within, and all it takes to summon it is to draw back the curtain.

Drawing it back, Testament casts light on a civilization in which life at every level of society increasingly resembles imprisonment.

The backstory of “Kiss Me Thru The Phone” is that most of us are separated from our loved ones to such an extent that even our fantasies and love songs include this distance. Our friends and families are scattered across the continent by the enforced transience of the job market; our lovers are gone at school or work, even when we are not; we hardly even get to raise our own children. The shelves stocked with energy drinks at every gas station attest to the unsustainable pace of modern life: scrambling to keep up forces us beyond the limits imposed by our own bodies, without ever delivering the promised pleasure and belonging. How many people have absentmindedly nodded along to the original version of this song in semi cabs, in Greyhound buses, in canneries and warehouses, in barracks in Iraq? How many use mp3 players and Ipods as surrogates when they cannot even call their loved ones, or have none to call?

In the music video produced by Interscope, romance mediated by commodities gives way to a romanticized relationship to commodities themselves: the singer’s lover is shown listening to his recordings in place of talking with him, and the love song becomes a product-placement ad for the latest in cellular technology. The more impositions we accept on our lives, the more false substitutes we settle for in place of intimacy, the further removed we become from each other and the possibility of self-determination. The function of pop music is to channel real longing into emotional release without raising the question of where that longing comes from. Yet all it takes to render this longing *dangerous* again is to show it in its true context, as Testament has done here.

This review is dedicated to a few of our many comrades currently serving or threatened with time behind bars:

Political prisoner Jeffrey Luers

Environmental activist Marie Mason

Imprisoned organizer Daniel McGowan

Victim of FBI entrapment Eric McDavid

Grand Jury resister Carrie Feldman