



***TIMBO'S PROGRESSION* review: One man's evolution is another man's arrested development. A standard that has dropped to "da Bassment".**

If you listened to any kind of music between 2005 and 2010, the vast form of music producer Timbaland was hard to ignore. From hit records with the likes of Justin Timberlake, Nelly Furtado, 50 Cent, Madonna and even Soundgarden's late Chris Cornell, Timbaland was ubiquitous.

Today, the beat maker extraordinaire's legend has loomed a little smaller. Timberlake and Furtado's releases have grown more sporadic and other producers have emerged onto the scene in a big way, with the likes of Boi-1da, Sounwave, Hit-Boy, WondaGurl and Jack Antonoff all being the go-to-guys-and-gals for beats these days.

But, Timbaland seems keen to let us all know that he's still got the Midas touch when it comes to music. His newest release, *TIMBO'S PROGRESSION*, is a largely instrumental affair, inspired by afrobeats and percussion.

For anyone who's been paying attention over the years, Timbaland has something of a penchant for announcing and subsequently never releasing projects. From his long-awaited *Shock Value III*, his "deeply personal" *Opera Noire* and a conveyor belt of other artist's projects that never see the light of day to a bizarre reveal of a JAY-Z, Justin Timberlake & Nas track ("Sinatra In the Sands") which never came out, *TIMBO'S PROGRESSION* can now be considered a rarity, in that it actually came out!

The album is made up of luscious grooves, enticing melodies and, as per usual, the infectious percussion that made him the go-to-guy in the late '90s and early 2000s.

The record's opening, "Kent's Bounce, Pt. 1" is made up with a simple drum pattern, warm piano licks and funky horns while an un-named vocalist shouts the same simple refrain throughout: "Timbo!"

The record is made-up of similar sounding songs, that sound like a cross between the likes of Fela Kuti and Quincy Jones, perfectly blending the afrobeats that so-inspired the release, and the horns that punctuated much of Justin Timberlake's *The 20/20 Experience* record.

But even as the record plays out, something seems to nag here.

As warm and enticing as these percussive numbers are, there's still a feeling of missed opportunity. The un-named and un-credited vocalists littered throughout the record felt like an opportunity to be able to shine a light on the many African artists that inspired the record and hopefully contributed to it (more on that later).

Plenty of artists have recorded music in Africa over the years from Damon Albarn to Beyoncé to Kendrick Lamar, and have used the opportunity, not only to broaden their musical palate, but to share the spotlight with musicians who's culture they so identify with.

TIMBO'S PROGRESSION is noticeably lacking in that regard. It is, of course, a record focused on Timbaland's proficiency for beat-making, but it feels as though the Virginia beat master wants to stand in the spotlight entirely on his own.

But something else looms larger than life over the release too; Artificial intelligence (AI).

Timbaland has copped a lot of flak over the past three years for his continued support and use of AI. From creating a song that used an AI'd Notorious B.I.G. verse, to creating entire beats with a prompt, to becoming the "Strategic Advisor" for controversial AI music company, Suno - AI is now Timbaland's life.

Perhaps it is a testament to just how sophisticated AI has become these days, that it is becoming harder and harder to spot when it's being used, but *TIMBO'S PROGRESSION* feels like a project where it's been used extensively.

In fact, if you were a gambling man or woman, it feels like it would be a safe bet to say that they "un-named vocalists" littered throughout the project, don't actually exist, but are a session player, or even Timbaland himself, simply using an AI voice filter.

The record's best track "Shaku Shaku" features credits for Timothy Mosley (Timbaland) and his sons Jordan and Justin, as well as Zayd Portillo.

A quick internet search on the latter takes you to his Instagram page, wherein his latest (at the time of publication) video is of Timbaland talking extensively about how he was able to remix a London Hill track using AI.

In a [recent interview with Rolling Stone](#), Timbaland revealed that his latest AI prompt (Baby Timbo) allows him to make multiple beats a day. "You can put out great songs in minutes," he says. "I always wanted to do what Quincy Jones did with Michael Jackson's *Thriller* when he was [almost] 50. So my *Thriller*, to me, is this tool!"

You may be asking where the review of *TIMBO'S PROGRESSION* is. Why it is that the track reviews are not more descriptive, why there's no talk of cultural and musical touch points that can be compared to it or why "Shaku Shaku" is my pick for the best track on the record - well, that's because a true review of *TIMBO'S PROGRESSION* feels near-impossible.

The malaise of AI-generated music feels as though it is difficult to express what Timbaland is doing. Are you reviewing a succinct body of work by a producer who's back to his very best? Or

are you merely reviewing a bunch of AI prompts that Timbaland and his sons have fed into an AI generator a few days ago? Did Timbaland make these beats from scratch and then ask an AI to change them into an afrobeats style? Did the AI make them themselves? We'll likely never know.

Four of the album's ten tracks are named after specific African musical genres, so it seems more likely that Timbaland has fed an existing creation of his own into an AI and asked it to re-produce the song in the style he picks.

Another important aspect to mention with this record is its supposed "executive producer", Swizz Beatz. Quite what Swizz Beatz brought to the production is anyone's guess. He has no songwriting or production credits across the project's 10 tracks.

Swizz himself seems to be big proponent of AI - using to produce a visualiser for his track "Runaway" with Nas and for an [art instillation in Venice](#). Perhaps his inclusion as the album's "executive producer" is to help facilitate Timbaland's AI usage here.

This whole record feels like a missed opportunity. A chance to bring African musicians into the legendary producer's orbit. A chance to become inspired by local sounds and lush grooves and begin to find his place in music once again. A chance to champion a new sound, a newer generation of artists and to shine a light on a musical culture that has become both commercialised and marginalised over the years.

Imagine a record working with local, non-famous, African musicians, who create their music in free-form jam sessions that form the essential part of the canvas for Timbaland to work his long-buried magic on. Projects like DRC Music's *Kinshasa One Two*, or Kalbata & Mixmonster's *Congo Beat the Drum* or Africa Express' myriad releases have shown just how endlessly creative these projects can be.

What about pairing those musicians with some of the lorry-load of famous friends he has in his phone? Local musicians duetting with Justin Timberlake, Beyoncé, JAY-Z, Missy Elliott, Drake or Nelly Furtado, as Africa Express does with *EGOLI*.

Instead, it's a deeply meaningless project, all centred around a producer who has been as taken in by AI as he was by the ill-fated Bored Ape NFT project he became a part of three years ago (as well as his hilariously awful and subsequently dropped NFT alter-ego "Congo" ([yes, really](#))). A project that serves as little more than a vanity project to show just how many beats you can knock out with an AI prompt and a decent internet connection.

Are ten or fifteen beats a day really worth [destroying the planet for](#)? Especially when most of them are never even heard outside of Timbaland's own production team?

In terms of the AI, itself? Its impressive that it can do it. No denying that. But the fact is, human art will always reign supreme, and as clever and miraculous as AI is and has become, it will always be a far-distant second to music made by actual humans, regardless of quality.

Even the project's colourful album cover, is made and created by AI. Another chance squandered. A chance to highlight African visual artists, again, missed.

In summary, this is a project that does not pay tribute to African music, but shamelessly rips it off. A project that does not celebrate African culture or music, but desecrates it, made by a producer who has long since lost the magic touch.

Upon release of the record, Timbaland said: "Progression. Rhythm, percussion instrumentation it's vital to everyday life. This project is a journey of culture and soul and how I hear music", but the record seems to forget the most important instrument, vital to all art: a human heart.