

Is this the album of the year?

## Bittles' Magazine | Barclaycard Mercury Music Prize Award 2014

It was a result which startled the nation! People ran onto the streets in celebration, flags were raised, children cried with a strange mixture of hope and relief and even the Queen gave a small whoop of joy. The reason for this was that on Wednesday the 29<sup>th</sup> October the *Barclaycard Mercury Prize* judging panel gave us a result which shocked the United Kingdom, if not the entire world, to its very core. What was that decision you ask? Why, it was giving **Young Fathers** the award of *Album Of The Year* for their alt-rap LP *DEAD*. By **JOHN BITTLES**



Ok, I admit that the verdict didn't cause any of the results which I have listed above (but, wouldn't it be cool if it had?). In fact, most of the UK simply shrugged their shoulders at the news and went back to reading about the peril of Ebola-carrying immigrants in the *Daily Mail*. Sure the album is a quality listen. You could even get away with claiming that it is great. What no-one would try to tell you though, is that it was their British or Irish album of the year. In fact, it would even be hard to argue for it as the hip hop album of the year, since **Kate Tempest's** succinct and poetic *Everybody Down* is 2014's stand-out for most.

At least giving the award to **Young Fathers** is far from the worst decision that the *Mercury Music Prize panel* have ever made. In previous years they have inexplicitly awarded album of the year status to the likes of **M People, Talvin Singh, The Klaxons**, and, in one of the most embarrassing verdicts of all time **Speech Dabelle**. Yes, it is fair to say that, since its formation in 1992 as an alternative to the pop-dominated *Brit Awards*, the *Mercury* judges have backed the odd clunker or two.

It is not that by announcing *DEAD* as their album of the year, people are upset, traumatised or repulsed. In fact, such has been the awful decision making of the judging panel over the last few years, most of the music world reacted with a shrug of the shoulders, and a 'so what?'. Giving last year's award to **James Blake** was a boring pronouncement, while giving it to an, admittedly talented, Edinburgh based rap trio, with limited cross-over appeal is very unlikely to make the world sit up and exclaim »Holy Shit!«.

In the past the powers that be have been able to give the award to a band or artist that perfectly summed up British music that year. Previous winners like **The XX, Portishead, Reprzent, Primal Scream** or **Pulp** succinctly encapsulated the British people's tastes at the time. Now it seems as if the judging panel are trying so hard to be obscure and cool that they are forgetting that the name of the award is supposed to be *Album Of The Year*.

Sure, it has hardly been a vintage year for British music, where indie-rock is dying on its feet, while hip hop has gone so commercial it resembles a rabid arms dealer grovelling at your feet begging you to buy his wares. Dance music meanwhile, is either so underground that it can only be found under large rocks outside the cooler record stores, or so overground and needy that it makes you want to never listen to a processed beat again. Yet, a short-list which found no space for stellar albums by the likes of **Daniel Avery, The Bug, Wild Beasts, The Horrors** or **Chvrches** should hang its head in shame.

Is this the album of the year?

There were still some great albums in the short-list, which, to my mind at least, were also deserving of the award. The previously mentioned *Everybody Down* is a **Streets**-like tale of urban life that takes hip hop into places that even the average *Guardian* reader would dare to go. The self-titled debut by **Jungle** meanwhile, is the feel-good album of the year. The main stand-out for most people though was *LP1* by **FKA twigs**; a spookily dark and erotic masterpiece that creates a devastating world filled with wonder and heartbreak.



At least **Young Fathers** themselves treated the whole thing with the disdain it deserved, snarling 'What do you expect us to be doing, jumping around?' when asked if they were excited to have won. With the usual hyperbole that so pisses off anyone with at least half a brain, one of the judges *John Kennedy* gushed »The great thing about **Young Fathers** is that they are such a unique band and that they could really only come out of Britain, and could really only come out right now.« This highlights perfectly why this type of people should be banned from all contact with music for the rest of their lives.

That's not to say that *DEAD* is a bad record. It isn't! In fact, it's really rather good. It is a difficult and challenging listen that demands your complete attention from beginning to end. Put it like this, it will raise a lot of frowns and protest should the dinner party brigade ever try to adopt it as one of their own. Tracks like *Am I Not Your Boy*, *Hangman*, *Just Another Bullet* and *No Way* brim with a furious sense of paranoid menace, while the music seems so dense as to envelope the listener within a world that will never let go. Make no mistake, these are very talented guys indeed.

But is it the album of the year? The short answer is NO.

| [JOHN BITTLES](#)