

NLE Choppa is relentless. With more than five billion total streams, 14 RIAA-certified plaques, 18 million combined followers, and two 2023 singles that found a comfortable home on Billboard's Hot 100 chart, the superstar 20-year-old MC from Memphis has already accomplished a lot. And yet he's perennially pushing forward, constantly working to satiate the needs of his fans and prove wrong any remaining doubters. There are fewer of those people than ever, but Choppa's recent work—culminating in his new album, *Cottonwood 2* is still an ante-up on every conceivable level.

Take the pre-album single "AIN'T GONNA ANSWER," which features Lil Wayne and situates Choppa as a technically brilliant and enthralling MC in his free-flowing approach. Choppa handles the chorus over booming bass and the chaotic swell of anxious synth-strings and then goes bar for bar with one of the best MCs in the game. He offers a defining statement for the album: "*Don't be worried 'bout what we be doin' / What we doin'? Makin' money / What they doin'? Hatin' on us / If they want it, take it from me / What them other n****s doin'? / I don't know 'cause I don't stunt 'em.*"

Securing a feature from Weezy was a bucket list event for Choppa, who viewed it as a confirmation of all his hard work. "I grew up watching Wayne and studying him. It's something I prayed for," Choppa says. "It also gave me confidence in my ability to manifest and pray toward the things I want. It confirmed that my studies were paying off."

Cottonwood 2 builds upon Choppa's fascination with numerology and meditation but also finds the MC at his most confident. That said, he spends much of the record perplexed over those still unwilling to give him flowers. "For some period of time, I didn't know who I was. So how could I expect others to give me respect if I didn't have that respect myself? I didn't know my worth," he explains. "Now I know who that person is. I do know my worth. That's what *Cottonwood 2* is about."

The mixtape *Me Vs. Me*, released in 2022, was a solid reset of NLE Choppa's standards. It was introspective and confident and filled with vulnerabilities. The multitude of ways in which Choppa developed as a rapper and a man from his emergence as a 15-year-old wunderkind to his rise to the top of rap is chronicled in his work, and *Cottonwood 2* is the strongest representation to date of his maturity. His vegan lifestyle, meditation practice, and social activism establish the core of his philosophy, but he's also able to conjure playful turn-up anthems that show his maturity as a songwriter.

On previous projects, Choppa was intent on showcasing his skills as one of rap's most dextrous and ferocious spitters. On *Cottonwood 2*, he demonstrates his ability to write catchy hooks that work equally well in the club as they do on the radio. It's an infectious and joyful effort that nonetheless finds Choppa spending the album's entirety wanting to prove to anyone that has ever doubted him that he's one of the best rappers alive.

Choppa's emergence in the rap game is the stuff of legend, but for the uninitiated: His Platinum-certified single "Shotta Flow" became one of the biggest rap songs of 2019 without a premiere, co-sign, or major label push. Within a week of Choppa uploading the music video to YouTube, the song went viral. With a brilliant flow, he goes after everyone who has stood against him, laughing as he buries them in clever bars and stunning metaphors. Record labels obviously came calling and offered life-changing advances in its wake, but Choppa chose to move differently. Desiring creative control and ownership, he partnered with Warner Records to distribute his music and future releases on his label, No Love Entertainment—what the NLE in his name stands for.

Fast forward to 2023 and the technical pyrotechnics remain, but Choppa has spent more time turning inward, reflecting on his devotion to family and spirituality, and sharing more of himself than he ever has. Choppa grew up in the roughest parts of Memphis, an upbringing that's loomed in his head even as he began racking up successes. His songs about overcoming struggles and celebrating wins have won support from *Billboard*, *The New York Times*, *Forbes*, *GQ*, and *Complex*. Never one to rest on his laurels, he's continued to drop music at an enviable pace. On *Cottonwood 2*, he's reintroducing us to all of himself and proving he's even better than before.

Take another project standout, "Do It Again," featuring 2Rare. Choppa gets vulnerable as he laments losing a partner he knew wasn't right for him. Despite the pain, he still knows he deserves better. He raps, "*Lil' baby, you act like you know you was wrong / You lyin', watch yo' tone / I'm too fine to be so alone / Not my kind, he is a clone.*" Though the tone is intense, Choppa still manages to conjure up a memorable chorus, one that helped propel the song onto the Billboard Hot 100.

Above all, *Cottonwood 2* is Choppa's demand for respect. It's remarkably mature for someone still too young to legally drink, but Choppa's ability to think beyond his years is part of his appeal. Now he just wants the rap conversation to reflect his immense talent. "When you mention the greatest artists, or when you mention the hottest artists out right now, I have to be in that conversation," he declares.