



[*Bedroom Rapper: Cadence Weapon on Hip-Hop, Resistance and Surviving the Music Industry*](#). By Rollie Pemberton. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2022. 304 pp. ISBN: 9780771051883.

Reviewed by Duncan McCallum

Navigating the music industry as an emerging artist is no easy task, especially when trying to make it in the Canadian music scene. Be it in Edmonton, Montreal, or Toronto—Rollie Pemberton, aka Cadence Weapon, has made a name for himself nationwide, though his journey to success was no straight path. *Bedroom Rapper* tells Pemberton’s story, from his beginnings sampling beats on a computer in his mom’s attic to the recent nationwide success of his latest album, *Parallel World* (2021), as Cadence Weapon. While the book presents itself as an autobiography, it by no means limits itself to the work of Cadence Weapon,

Pemberton’s music-making persona. Rather, Pemberton looks back on his life and broader career as an artist in Canada, outlining his successes and failures in the hopes of offering advice and life lessons for the next generation of artists trying to navigate Canada’s music scene. Throughout the book, Pemberton acts as part music historian, part music educator, and overall fan of hip-hop as he tells the reader what it is really like to make music in Canada.

The title clearly states that this book is Cadence Weapon’s take on three things: hip-hop, resistance, and surviving the music industry. While the book is not divided into these three categories, they shape as the overall narrative of *Bedroom Rapper*, with each chapter taking on a different topic—such as Pemberton’s work as poet laureate for Edmonton, his time in the Montreal loft scene, or his historical overview of hip-hop, among others—but being guided by one of these three themes. It is perhaps best then to analyze the book through these three themes, beginning with Cadence Weapon’s take on hip-hop. Chapter 2 (“Remain Anonymous”) begins with an in-depth survey of the history of hip-hop. While the history itself is presented in a more engaging manner than most textbooks would, Pemberton is also able to contextualize these artists and genres by outlining their origins and his connections to, or influence from, each. He resumes this history lesson again in



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Chapter 12 (“Trapped”), where he goes more in depth detailing the history of two sub-genres of hip-hop, trap and U.K. grime, explaining their antecedents, their pioneering artists, and how this music came to influence his discography. The book also ends with a list of suggested readings for the interested musicologist and suggested listening for readers just getting into hip-hop, including a Spotify/YouTube playlist curated by Pemberton himself.

Pemberton also captures local music scenes with skill. Chapter 8 (“It Takes a Village”) outlines the Montreal loft scene in the early 2000s. Indeed, this chapter could be expanded to a book on its own, with its overview of Montreal’s pop music, art, culture, and the aspiring artists that converged on the city’s famous Boulevard St. Laurent. Fans of Mac DeMarco or Claire Boucher (known professionally as Grimes) will enjoy Pemberton’s account of their origins as struggling musicians, their rise to fame, and his friendships with both. Here, Pemberton also reminisces about the underground Montreal music scene that has changed significantly since he lived there. This chapter discusses at length what the landscape was like, from the art crawls to the famous loft parties, and how many artists felt disillusioned with the underground community after Grimes’ rise to fame. While Pemberton also discusses the music scene in Edmonton during his youth and the current scene in Toronto where he now resides, the nostalgia he has for his time in Montreal is compelling, and given how much that scene has since changed, this chapter also offers an important cultural history of that particular time and place.

Bedroom Rapper’s second theme is resistance. Pemberton details his career struggles when breaking out of Alberta and navigating the national music scene, his troubles maintaining personal relationships while touring, and his less-than-straightforward path to success with his Polaris Music Prize-winning album, *Parallel World*. Perhaps most importantly he details his struggles with his first music label, Upper Class Recordings, spells out the mistakes he made when first starting out, and reveals how he was continually exploited by Upper Class. Pemberton also discusses his experiences of racism and discrimination as an emerging Black artist in Alberta and across Canada. While he has every opportunity to look back on these personal and professional challenges with disdain or regret, Pemberton never stoops to this level. He allows himself to be vulnerable in this book, bringing grace and hindsight that leave the reader with a newfound admiration for Pemberton and an overall feeling of hope for the future of the Canadian music industry.

The final theme Pemberton weaves through *Bedroom Rapper* is surviving the music industry. Many emerging artists today will connect with Pemberton’s early years making beats in his mom’s attic. More importantly, they will benefit from reading about his mistakes and hearing his advice. In exploring this theme, he details how he has survived the music industry from the club scene in Edmonton to touring North America. Pemberton also speaks to his musical output as Cadence Weapon and is indeed deeply critical of his own music. He walks the reader through the inception, creation, and legacy of each of his albums, outlining how he has grown as an artist and as a person between each work. The book concludes with a recounting of Pemberton’s experience living through the COVID-19 pandemic in Toronto and the social unrest and protests that followed in the wake of George Floyd’s death. Pemberton wanted to contribute to this social activism, which

ultimately led to the creation of *Parallel World*. In this most recent album, Pemberton incorporates Black Canadian history alongside themes of systemic racism and gentrification, among others, into his lyrics.

While the book is more than just an autobiography, the story of Cadence Weapon is woven into every chapter. For the most part, *Bedroom Rapper* unfolds in sequential order, but a few chapters jump back in time to recount old memories that fit the thematic focus of the overall story. Given the point of the book is to filter Pemberton's life through the three main titular themes, this ends up being quite an effective narrative tool. In fact, it almost feels more appropriate to say *Bedroom Rapper* is the story of Rollie Pemberton and not Cadence Weapon. Obviously, the latter is just a stage name for the former, but the book's title can be a bit misleading since Pemberton shares stories of his life as an artist, many of which—such as his tenure as Edmonton's poet laureate (see Chapter 7) and his time as a freelance music critic—are not strictly performance endeavours. One could easily call this last theme "surviving as an artist in Canada," not just "surviving the music industry," and to name the book Rollie Pemberton's take on these themes.

Pemberton's coming-of-age book on being a musician in Canada is a must-read for any emerging artist in the country. It is certainly most useful to those wanting to get into the hip-hop scene in Canada, but it offers invaluable advice to any aspiring or struggling artist. Readers interested in the Canadian music scene more generally will also get great value out of this book, from the history to the stories Pemberton shares of all the places and people he has encountered along the way. *Bedroom Rapper* is a love letter to making music in Canada and offers so much history, advice, and hope for Canada's future musicians.