

● HIP-HOP

CHALI 2NA

Fish Outta Water

Decon

★★½

Fish Outta Water is a disappointingly accurate title for the overdue debut album from Chali 2na, the distinctly deep-voiced Chicago rapper from two critically acclaimed Los Angeles groups: the now-defunct hip-hop sextet Jurassic 5 and Latin funk band Ozomatli. The self-described “friendly neighborhood baritone” was often the highlight of the songs he contributed to, but when left to his own devices on first solo release, the results are often monotonous.

The most glaring problem on *Fish* is the lackluster production. Without the old-school breakbeats and funky horns his groups were known for, the album is relegated to sparse, looped synth beats that, matched with his James Earl Jones-esque voice, create quite a boring equation. This is most evident on songs like *So Crazy*, and the Talib Kweli-assisted first single, *Lock S**t Down*.

Much stronger tracks include odes to fatherhood (*Righteous Way*), classic hip-hop (*When Will I See You Again* with Elzhi from Slum Village) and the artistic side of graffiti (*Graff Time*), all of which combine focused narratives and soulful backdrops to bring the best out of 2na.

With a star-studded guest list including Anthony Hamilton, Beenie Man, Stephen and Damian “Jr. Gong” Marley and sometime Ozomatli rapper Kanetic Source, Chali 2na is never left alone for too long. But none of the artists are able to duplicate the harmony he had with his former bandmates. Here’s to a Jurassic 5 reunion.

— ADRIAN RUHI
aruhi@MiamiHerald.com