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# Word Is Bond

By Francisco Ordonez

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[train clattering slowly]

[clattering continues,

train whistle blowing]

[J. Cole]

I just wait for a feeling.

When I get a... a chill,

when I get, "Whoof. Oh!"

That's how it is

when you in the zone.

'Cause, like, it's not

really you speaking.

It's you speaking,

but it's, like, the real you.

It's, like, the...

the non-ego you,

the soul you, you know?

The part of you

that's connected to God.

It's like, it's wiser than...

than the physical you.

[ tranquil hip-hop music ]

[Rakim] I was always

kind of private

with my method, man.

Sometimes I'll have

something on there

where I felt how it would feel

if somebody seen it.

They'll figure out

how I put that rhyme together.

[Nas] A thought

can become a reality.

What you speak

into the universe

can come true.

[Rhymefest]

You gotta create a rhyme

like a theater in your mind.

It has to be something

that when you say it,

people can see it.

[Nas] I'm just happy that

I was coming up at the time

where the American language  
was being shifted  
by young black people,  
poor righteous teachers,  
in the streets.

Hip-hop MCs have spoken  
a new America into existence.  
While the Jesse Jacksons  
of the world  
were on their way down  
from their fight,  
it was time  
for a new soldier to get up  
and change the direction of,  
"How do we get out of this?"  
Hip-hop did it verbally.

[Rapsody]

The power to hold a mic,  
to take 16 bars,  
and in 16 bars,  
you were influencing  
a whole world.

[Rhymefest]

Maya Angelou, she said,  
"Words are things.  
Guard them."

[Styles P] Words are the man's  
most powerful weapon  
in life, period,  
whether you rap or not.  
Like, you could be a father.  
You could be a husband.  
You could be a brother  
or sister.

You saying the wrong words  
to a family member  
can affect  
whether their life  
goes negative, positive,  
whether they have  
a good day or a bad day.  
So definitely,  
words mean everything.

[Killer Mike] Lyrics don't

always mean complexity.

The simplest of rappers  
have made the grandest  
of statements.

[Erick Arc Elliott]

When your pen is that strong,  
you want everybody to know  
all the nuances of the words.  
Don't ever delete your rhymes.  
Don't ever.

That's my word...

that what I just told you  
is my bond.

[]

[hip-hop music playing faintly]

...need more people,

my heart is so evil

Now I'm trying

to get elite-lite

Talking 'bout your strap,

how you carry that

Said you had the packs,

3,000 Sour Diesel

You said you had the bitches,

but I never see 'em with you

You said you like the pipe

but always huntin'

For the pistol,

a bitch told me 'bout you

Yeah, I think

her name was Crystal

She said you gave

a short screw

She could never forget you,

you got a chain

But you ain't get it

from a jeweler

I have to really be moved

to go and make something.

You had A Bronx Tale.

I wanted A Queens Story.

I could see that

as a film, actually.

"Rest in peace

to Black Just,  
riding through Jamaica, Queens  
in his black truck."  
I could see myself  
in the truck with him,  
you know, playing his records  
and... we rocking,  
driving through  
Jamaica, Queens.  
He's showing me blocks...  
back blocks  
where everybody's gambling,  
and I'm meeting dudes  
from 40 Projects, Baisley,  
and we over here  
and over these backstreets  
and all that.  
He's showing me  
the ins and outs,  
and we just talking,  
having a good time,  
and I'm writing,  
"Timbs was 40 Below,  
waves to the side of his dome."  
I'm describing him,  
but I'm seeing it.  
It's not just me  
writing a rhyme anymore.  
It's like,  
"This is a serious moment."  
After my first album,  
I had no time  
to sit down at home  
and write.  
I am a writer, but...  
it's spontaneous.  
A studio's a bathroom,  
a place I go to release...  
unless I get into my pocket  
and I set aside time  
to be in here  
and not do anything else  
but record until I get it done.  
At that point,

it becomes my spaceship, man.  
Uh, rest in peace  
to Black Just  
Riding through  
Jamaica, Queens  
In his black truck,  
Timbs was 40 Below  
Waves to the side  
of his dome  
Definition  
of good nigga, yo  
Gangsters don't die,  
niggas only become immortal  
Angels don't only fly,  
they walk right before you  
[Rapsody] When they were  
bringing slaves over  
on the boats, you know,  
they didn't have a way  
to write down their history,  
so they had to tell it  
to one another...  
and they had to memorize it.  
So you're memorizing.  
You tell it to the next.  
And to me, that's kind of  
what an MC does.  
They documenting everything  
that's happening.  
[ gentle piano melody ]  
[Pusha T] It's the initial  
impact of the song  
that grabs you,  
and it locks you in.  
The first few bars,  
cadences, whatever it is...  
that feeling is felt  
throughout, man,  
from beat one.  
I remember having  
an argument with a girl  
about Biggie and Pac.  
You know, I spit one  
of Big rhymes,

and I'm like,  
"Yo, did you hear that?  
Like, that's why  
I will go with him.  
Now you tell me  
one of Pac rhymes  
that's better than that,"  
and she said, "'Dear Mama!'"  
That's all she said,  
which meant that that song  
meant something deep to her.  
Lyrics, yeah...  
in hip-hop, deep.  
Whenever we write,  
we trying to change something.  
You know, we get  
this feeling inside  
that we can't really explain...  
them chemicals in our body  
that-that-that make us  
feel awake.  
You know, I'm bald-headed,  
so a lot of times,  
I can almost feel,  
you know, the hairs  
on my head growing,  
or I just, you know,  
can feel my heart pumping.  
My heart start beating  
that adrenaline,  
and as I'm rhyming, I just...  
you know, I just feel it.  
That's when I know that I got  
something that's electric.  
When rap came through  
the neighborhood,  
it took the hood by storm.  
It was like, the next day,  
everybody was rappers  
and break-dancers and DJs.  
I was...[laughs] I was using  
the rap name Tony Tee.  
Like, "I'm the T-O-N-Y,  
the T-E-E.

Your hands can't hit  
what your eyes can't see."  
I thought I was,  
you know, killing it,  
and then I remember my man Swan  
played Cold Crush for me.  
Other MCs  
can't deal with us  
'Cause we are the four  
known as the Cold Crush  
Six-one and a half,  
no good at math  
Say rhymes to myself  
when I'm taking a bath  
Got true clientele,  
finesse, and clout  
And I don't get into nothing  
that I can't get out  
Yeah, I ripped  
all my rhymes up,  
started my whole life over.  
I played the sax  
coming up in school.  
I took what I learned  
from that...  
reading music... and started  
pouring it on the rhymes.  
My first rhyme was,  
"Mickey Mouse built a house.  
He built it by the border.  
A earthquake came  
and rocked his crib,  
and now it's in the water."  
[Brother Ali] One of the  
things that I really learned  
from you... you know,  
you would write a rhyme,  
and then we would  
come back to it later...  
that you might forget  
exactly how  
these words are  
supposed to land.  
Whether we're writing on paper



or typing on a computer,  
that the first space in a line  
is always the one.  
If you come in before the one,  
those words go  
on a line above,  
and then that syllable  
that hits on the one  
is the first space  
on a line.  
And if you miss the one,  
which has become  
the style more...  
so Chuck D was really big  
on hitting the one.  
"Back, caught you looking  
for the same thing."  
You know, and other people  
might, you know,  
come in before the one.  
"Don't call it a comeback."  
- So "come" is on the one.  
- Mm-hmm.  
And nowadays,  
people miss the one most  
so when you miss the one,  
you put a dot there  
to hold that place  
to let you know.  
But then underlining  
where the snares are...  
- Underlining the snares.  
- That Rakim does something  
similar, in the sense  
that he knows  
where all of the end words  
are for the lines,  
and so he would put dots  
on the paper  
where the end was gonna be,  
and he would write  
the last line first.  
Measuring it out  
almost like sheet music.

- Mm-hmm.  
- So that, like you say,  
if I come back  
six months later  
and look at this rhyme  
and go, "Oh, you know,  
this one isn't so bad.  
It actually is good.  
Let me try spitting it,"  
I know exactly how to spit it.  
I don't have  
to sit there and go,  
"Aw, that didn't work.  
Wait, maybe that wasn't right.  
Hold up.  
Let me stare at it."  
You know, I could look  
at it and immediately  
jump right into spitting it.  
I would put the dots  
on the paper first  
to show me, um,  
how many bars I had,  
where the 16th bar was.  
As I start incorporating  
different, um, styles  
and-and trying to just...  
complicate my rhyme  
with so many, uh,  
big words and syllables and...  
you know what I mean?  
Like, the-the-the wordplay  
was so crazy.  
After a while, I had to put  
a dot on the paper  
to know where to take a breath.  
It's not easy  
to rhythmically say things  
that, in some cases,  
make chronological order  
and rhyme it  
with precise timing.  
Like, most people  
can't do that.

I don't think people  
had a respect...  
the same respect  
for rap lyrics as, like, say,  
a Bob Dylan would get  
for that genre of music,  
simply because they don't  
see us respecting it.  
They don't see us  
respecting our own shit.  
You know what I'm saying?  
We...'cause all we do  
is criticize each other.  
It's cooler in hip-hop.  
Somehow it's like,  
it's cool to criticize.  
Yeah, it's cooler  
in hip-hop to criticize.  
It's not cool to give props.  
I wanna give people  
their fucking props.  
- That's what I want to do.  
- Yeah.  
I want... artists need  
to hear that.  
Why you wanna fucking  
take away from the art?  
You know what I mean?  
Like, this is an art form.  
Lyricism should be an art form.  
It should be lyrics first.  
You got lyricists  
scared to be lyricists.  
Rappers are never  
given the credit  
with falling in love  
with language.  
These are kids...  
most of the time  
from urban environments...  
that literally  
fall in love  
with language.  
What we would call, um,

you know, bars and verses,  
you know, in poetry,  
they call them stanzas.  
And it's participating  
in the development  
of the English language  
directly.

- Absolutely.

- To this day,  
even just hearing something  
as silly and funny as,  
"Put a quarter in your ass  
'cause you played yourself,"  
immediately teaches you  
something about metaphor  
and about comedy.

The contribution  
is often overlooked  
and I think,  
sometimes, purposely.

[]

Rappers stepping to me,  
they wanna get some  
But I'm the Kane so, yo,  
you know the outcome  
Another victory,  
they can't get with me  
So pick a BC date  
'cause you are history  
[Big Daddy Kane] You know,  
when you talk about an MC,  
it could mean  
several different things.  
You can have someone  
that just basically works  
as an announcer,  
or you can have someone  
that's, like, a party rocker,  
or you could have, like,  
you know, your lyricist  
who's spitting bars,  
and that comes from battle rap.  
I used to go  
to different schools...

Eastern District,  
Westinghouse,  
Erasmus, Brooklyn Tech...  
to battle their best MCs.  
MCs would come  
to my high school.  
I mean, I could be in class  
and I see my man La Son  
come to the window  
at my door... he'd tap  
on the door, go like that...  
letting me know,  
and I'd get a bathroom pass  
and bring it back  
maybe three periods later.  
You know, I'm a big  
Muhammad Ali fan,  
so first thing  
I would normally do  
is destroy you before  
we even start rhyiming.  
I will do to Buster  
what the Indians did to Custer.  
I'm gonna wipe him out.  
"It's just you,  
or it's all three of y'all?  
You sure?  
I mean, they can go too."  
Embarrass you so bad  
that your friends  
are laughing at you.  
'Cause, you know,  
they your boys,  
they gonna cosign you anyway,  
but what you gonna say  
after you just been laughing  
at your man, you know?  
- He know he lost.  
- [male announcer] It's live  
from the world-famous  
Apollo Theater...  
the future all-stars  
in concert.  
The one and only Biz Markie.

Biz come to me, and he already  
knew what he wanted.  
He came, was like,  
"I wanna do a song  
called 'Pickin' Boogers.'"  
And I'm like, "About what?"  
He's like, "I don't know,  
but just do me one favor.  
Somewhere in the song,  
just say,  
'Hey, Ma, what's for dinner?  
Go up your nose  
and pick a winner.'"  
He had the idea, so it's really  
just trying to figure out,  
you know, "Okay, what  
stupid stuff can I write?"  
So I decide to just  
go story format.  
You know, just tell stories  
about a situation  
where you got caught  
picking boogers.  
Yo, don't try to front  
like it's so gloomy and gray  
'Cause we all  
pick our boogers  
Sometime every day,  
whether out in the open  
Or on the sneak tip  
With a finger, tissue,  
or even a Q-tip  
You aren't who you are  
without your influences.  
You hear, and you say,  
"I like that.  
I wanna do that."  
Pac was the first rapper  
that I remember hearing  
that it was like,  
"Oh, I feel that.  
I feel what he's saying,"  
and was way too young  
to be feeling it...

the pain coming from it.  
I could feel whatever it was  
he was trying to express.  
In "Brenda's Got A Baby,"  
he's telling a story.  
I'm like, "Damn,  
I feel that story."  
...went out and had  
a church of kids  
As long as  
when the check came  
They got first dibs  
[Killer Mike] You know,  
when you talk about lyrics,  
you think about  
storytellers, man,  
like KRS, Slick Rick,  
you know, Ghostface.  
You know what I mean?  
Scarface.  
The amount of different styles  
and, I guess,  
different influences  
I've had  
has been amazing  
thanks to rap.  
You know, the same way  
that people argue...  
you know, great writers,  
Frost, Chaucer.  
You know what I'm saying?  
Twain.  
- We argue the same.  
- [El-P] And the chick  
- who wrote Harry Potter.  
- [Killer Mike] Oh, yeah.  
[laughing] Yeah.  
[ eerie hip-hop music ]  
[Zombie Juice] All right,  
so I'll start off. Eminem.  
[Meechy Darko]  
Notorious B. I. G.  
[Zombie Juice] Nas.  
- Tupac.

- Jay-Z.  
- DMX.  
- 50 Cent.  
This nigga said DMX,  
took my shit.  
- Big Pun.  
- Jadakiss.  
[quietly] Wow.  
I'm just gonna say  
Bizzy Bone.  
- Tech N9ne.  
- Mos Def.  
- Twista.  
- Kanye West.  
Kweli.  
- Fuck.  
- [laughs]  
- Did someone say Kanye West?  
- [both] Yeah.  
- [all chuckle]  
- Andr.  
- Common.  
- Andr 3000... and Big Boi.  
- Tech N9ne.  
- I said that.  
- Tech... you said Tech.  
- Okay.  
- Twista.  
- I said that, motherfucker.  
- No, you didn't.  
- UGK.  
- Kanye West? [laughs]  
- You said that already?  
ODB is in the back.  
We're children of hip-hop.  
We really are.  
We're not the new age, like,  
"We just found out  
about rap music."  
[man] You left out  
Jerry Garcia.  
- Oh, Jerry Garcia. [laughs]  
- Is he a rapper?  
Kids call me the black



Jerry Garcia. I don't know why.

[Meechy Darko] 'Cause you look like a black Jerry Garcia.

[chuckles]

Damn, we definitely left somebody out.

Love's gonna get you,  
love's gonna get you

[J. Cole] Some stuff

I'd go to, I was like,

"I remember when

this sounded old to me."

Now I hear it differently,

like, "Okay...

yeah, it's old,

but what if I put myself

in the shoes of somebody

who had never

heard this before?"

Like, I went and listened

to KRS's album...

I'm in junior high

with a B-plus grade

At the end of the day,

I don't hit the arcade

I walk from school

to my mom's apartment

I gotta tell the suckers

every day, "Don't start it"

'Cause where I'm at,

if you're soft, you're lost

To stay on course

means to roll with force

...I was blown away, 'cause

I remember a point in time

when I literally was looking

at KRS in that era like,

"Aw, them dudes old."

Like, "Ain't nobody trying

to hear that,"

to when now, as a grown man,

I'm going back, listening,

and like, "Oh, my God.

This went platinum?

This dude is dropping  
knowledge.  
Like, every bar, this dude is,  
like, firing off knowledge."  
You know what I mean?  
Like...  
'cause it was fresh back then,  
so to hear that  
for the first time was like...  
[imitates explosion]  
My brother's five years  
older than me,  
and I told my brother,  
like, you know,  
"No, MC Hammer is  
the best rapper, man.  
You gotta check this guy out.  
I'm telling you."  
I'm dope on the floor  
and I'm magic on the mic  
And he was like, "No, man."  
Like, "MC Hammer's  
the best entertainer.  
There's a big difference  
between what MC Hammer says  
and what..."  
at the time,  
it may have been,  
oh, Rakim or Run-DMC.  
"What do you mean, like,  
it's a big difference?  
No, do you see him?  
He's, like,  
doing the typewriter  
across the stage.  
This is everything."  
And he was like,  
"Nah, it's cool.  
Lyrically...  
there's a big difference."  
I started listening  
differently.  
Ruff  
Uh, uh, uh

[Styles P] All right,  
let's do it.  
Fuck the frail shit, uh  
[]  
Yonkers is like a gumbo...  
of... all of the boroughs.  
We got a little bit of Bronx,  
a little bit of Harlem,  
a little bit of Queens.  
- But we different.  
- Yeah, but...  
a whole lot of Yonkers.  
...furnished, I'ma take it  
My bathtub lift up,  
my walls do a 360  
We got the shit  
that the government got  
Talking money,  
then you rubbing the spot  
Real niggas say  
that they be wilding  
We on the Cayman Islands,  
on a yacht...  
We keep our foundation here.  
As you see,  
our studio is right here.  
You know, we have...  
It's important to show...  
the youth here  
that they can make it,  
you know what I mean?  
It's important to show them  
that it's not far-fetched.  
- It's not...  
- Impossible.  
You know, your dreams are...  
your dreams are right there.  
You... you know, if you wanna  
pursue a rap career,  
you can do it.  
You got all that nice shit on.  
- Who?  
- You.  
I got the same gear

from last night, D.  
[Styles P]  
It sure look like today to me.  
'80s hip-hop beat  
I wanted to be Lee  
from Beat Street.  
That was probably  
the first person  
I ever wanted to dress like  
- or have... live his lifestyle.  
- Beat Street was so edgy  
to me, compared to Breakin'.  
- But I loved them both.  
- Breakin' was dope,  
but I think  
Beat Street hit us.  
I wanted to be in Beat Street  
more than I wanted  
- to be in Breakin'.  
- Yeah, for sure.  
But I love watching Breakin'.  
I love Breakin'.  
I didn't like Breakin' 3.  
I would've rather be  
in Krush Groove  
- more than any of them.  
- Krush Groove, definitely.  
- [upbeat music playing]  
- A kiss on the spine  
Do things we never do  
[Jadakiss] I was nice  
in break-dancing.  
All over the town,  
all different basements,  
wherever the best  
linoleum was at.  
[ groovy hip-hop music ]  
I won a few talent contests.  
My name rung around Yonkers.  
- Hip-hop's a Ferris wheel...  
- [Styles P] Mm-hmm.  
...that's just constantly  
going like this,  
you know, sonically,

the fashion...

- [Styles P] For sure.

- ...and the haircuts.

The hardest part of that  
is staying on the Ferris wheel.  
On this particular beat,  
maybe I say...

I'll drag a word out  
and he won't drag the word out.  
Like, you know what I'm saying?

Maybe he says it  
at a pitch that  
I wouldn't say it at,  
or the word before,  
which becomes...

a whole entity  
of creation itself  
within one line.

Last time, I just  
sat next to him  
while I was hearing his verse  
as he was making it up.

I kind of made the verse up...  
the next verse off of that,  
and then I just could hear  
what I... what I want to say  
when he's mumbling,  
or sometimes I hear it out,  
or he hears it out.

You might listen to it  
and think we're going like,  
I'm doing a part,  
and he's doing a part,  
we're doing the whole song...  
either he's doing it or me...  
and then we gotta fill it in.

Say a couple lines,  
you gotta leave some out,  
you gotta come back in  
with the same energy  
like the lines were there.

- We don't punch.

- We don't punch, yeah.

We don't punch in here.

We get through the whole verse.  
We don't get... we don't give you  
one or two of the lines,  
tell the engineer to stop,  
and then fill it in.  
Like, if we don't say  
the whole verse  
from the first word to  
the last word of the verse...  
[Jadakiss] We going from...  
we go back to the top.  
...we go back to the top,  
to the top, to get it...  
[man] Why's that?  
We just... that's how  
we was raised.  
MC is a craft.  
This shit is like basketball,  
boxing, mixed martial arts.  
I move up a couple pounds  
and fight a upper weight class,  
or I lose some pounds  
and fight a lower weight.  
You conversating with the beat.  
When that beat comes on,  
there's somewhere distinctively  
that you're pulling from...  
people, ancestors, spirits,  
energy, friends.  
I could crush you  
whatever way you wanna do it.  
I still could demolish you.  
You stand no chance at all.  
[Styles P]  
You won't live at all.  
[ bright music ]  
[Fashawn]  
Bright as I ever been  
Brighter than  
the predecessors of Edison  
This African  
effortlessly wrecking shit  
The exorcist  
is checking them

With a crucifix,  
rebuking the devilish  
I'm clearly heaven-sent  
Eh, I'm done, man.  
[laughing] Oh, my God.  
That's ridiculous.  
To me, there was always  
a difference  
between an MC and a rapper,  
you know what I mean?  
And to me, the MCs  
were the lyricists,  
and the rappers were  
guys that were here  
for the monetary gain  
and here for the fame,  
here for the camera time,  
et cetera.  
Those were those guys,  
and, like,  
the lyricists  
were guys who, like...  
who never really  
cared about that,  
people who really  
worked on their craft  
and really, um, emphasized...  
cadences and finesse  
and style and, like, um...  
choice of words and vocabulary.  
To me, rappers don't  
worry about that stuff.  
They just have fun.  
And so "lyricist"  
is more of a...  
I don't know.  
You kind of gotta  
drive yourself insane  
just to be...  
just to have your...  
just to justify  
calling yourself a lyricist.  
[chuckles]  
You know what I mean?

My desire's everything  
that I acquire  
Means nada if I'm not  
one of the ghosts  
Built the convocation  
with this gospel I spoke  
Am I not someone  
you quote?  
Prophesied I would  
profit off what I wrote  
Popular as the pope,  
unlock and then I unload  
[Killer Mike] By 1986,  
I was seeing, like,  
my world turn upside down.  
And everybody talks  
about crack, and...  
Nobody was talking about it.  
It was just going down.  
[Rakim]  
It was kind of necessary  
for MCs to say something.  
The hood was so conscious  
at that point.  
Rappers that wasn't conscious  
started digging in and,  
you know, picking up a book.  
[Killer Mike] These kids who,  
you know, through Reaganomics  
and through a lack  
of funding for music  
got everything kind of  
snatched from them  
found a way to make music  
with electronics  
and to... to...  
like jazz vocalists  
that played and teetered  
on the keys and notes,  
found a way to make  
the English language  
an instrument within itself.  
Once rap started to mature,  
the 16-bar format came out.



But soon  
you start to suffer  
The tune'll get rougher  
when you start to stutter  
That's when you had  
enough of biting  
It'll make you choke,  
you can't provoke  
You can't cope,  
you should've broke  
Because I ain't no joke  
[Rakim] Now I had to get  
my point across  
within 16 bars.  
I mean, before,  
I would take  
30-something bars,  
and I would  
complicate the rhyme,  
give you little, um, ideas  
of what I was getting at,  
but not give you the sum of it  
till the end.  
Word, yo,  
what up D-Nice?  
Yo, what's up,  
Scott La Rock?  
[Scott La Rock]  
Yo, man, we chilling  
It went from the "huh to  
the huh to the"...you know,  
Run-DMC style of, like,  
cadence, back and forth,  
to this new... these guys  
had different nuances.  
I mean, it was different  
bounces within  
just the traditional end  
of your rhyme.  
There was rhymes within rhymes  
and different style patterns.  
That's when that started  
getting explored.  
So for me, '86 is the year.

It's like the big bang theory,  
'cause that's  
when everything changed.  
Many people tell me  
this style is terrific  
It is kinda different,  
but let's get specific  
KRS-One specialize  
in music  
I'll only use this type  
of style when I choose it  
You got guys that are, like,  
watching all of this happen.  
They watching the Salt-N-Pepas,  
they watching the KRSSs,  
they watching the MC Shans,  
they watching Rakim,  
they watching LL for years.  
They don't never get  
the opportunity  
to blow up quick,  
but they're crafting.  
They're working  
and rehearsing.  
And all this time  
they're not getting found,  
they're, like, getting nice.  
"First, I'm starting  
to copy Rakim,  
and then I mix  
my little bit of Rakim  
with, like, Kool G Rap,  
and then I'm mixing that  
with, like, my original  
LL thing that I had."  
Before you know it...  
you got Nas.  
Packing like a Rasta  
in the weed spot  
Vocals will squeeze Glocks,  
MCs eavesdrop  
Though they need not  
to sneak, my poetry's deep  
I never fell, Nas' raps

should be locked in a cell  
It ain't hard to tell,  
it ain't hard to tell  
You know, I'm the guy  
who said hip-hop is dead.  
J. Cole makes people  
like me go, "Wow.  
This thing of ours...  
of J. Cole's, of mine...  
this thing, it's serious.  
It's real."  
Freedom or jail,  
clips inserted  
A baby's being born  
same time my man is murdered  
The beginning and end  
As far as rap go,  
it's only natural  
I explain my plateau and also  
what defines my name  
Yeah, long live the idols  
May they never  
be your rivals  
Pac was like Jesus,  
Nas wrote the Bible  
Now, what you 'bout to hear  
is a tale of glory and sin  
No ID my mentor,  
now let the story begin  
I used to print out Nas raps  
and tape 'em up on my wall  
My niggas thought  
they was words  
But it was pictures I saw  
"But let me do it slick  
like this, on a, um...  
on a sheet of paper  
and on a song."  
It's creative.  
I never intended  
to write that song, mind you.  
You know, it's not like  
I had a, like, "Oh, I got  
a idea for a song.

I'm gonna do something  
called 'Let...'"...nah.  
I just started writing,  
and that's what came out.

[]

[Pusha T] Yo, yo, yo, yo.  
Yeah.

My process of writing,  
a lot of times,  
starts early in the morning,  
in the shower.  
Water. [chuckles]  
Water in the shower is, like,  
the best freestyle session.  
Off-the-cuff, creative,  
just my thoughts running wild.

We used to drive  
from Virginia to New York,  
pile up in, uh, Chad's car,  
it was at the time.

Drive up here thinking  
that we're coming to meet  
with some VP of A&R,  
and probably, it was just,  
like, the mail guy,  
by the time we got up here,  
who was trying  
to raise his position.

But, um...

you know...

that was the game back then.

Young, hungry... you know,  
creatives, man.

Um... people who-who  
had ambition,  
they always, you know,  
were the ones  
who connected with, um...  
with our movement  
musically, man.

Always. Always.

We gonna take  
this music shit  
back to where we all began.

Yo, I go by the name  
of Pharrell...  
- I'm yo' pusher  
- ...of the Neptunes  
Come on, come on  
[Pusha T] Put out a record  
like "Grindin',"  
with no formulaic...  
structure of a hook  
at a time when Pharrell  
was at his height,  
singing on every record  
on the radio.  
And he didn't sing on ours,  
and "Grindin'"  
is the cult classic.  
From ghetto to ghetto  
to backyard to yard  
I sell it whipped, unwhipped,  
it's soft or hard  
I'm the neighborhood  
pusher  
Call me Subwoofer  
'Cause I pump bass  
like that, Jack  
On or off the track,  
I'm heavy, cuz  
Ball till you fall,  
'cause you could duck...  
The "Grindin'" beat, man...  
Pharrell was at the studio,  
and he basically called me  
and told me  
if I didn't get to the studio  
in 15 minutes,  
he was going to give  
a beat to Jay-Z.  
I was like, "All right, man,  
I'm coming."  
Like, he was like,  
"No, listen.  
If you don't come,  
I'm giving this beat to Jay-Z.  
I'm telling you,

you better get here.  
Don't sleep. Don't do nothing.  
Don't hesitate. Don't stop."  
He knew that would  
get me there.  
It was so unorthodox to me.  
I think that might've been  
the first time I had  
to rewrite... rewrite a verse.  
It took a while  
to, like, get it.  
You know, once I got it,  
it was history,  
and I knew it.  
Radio DJs would say,  
"Look, man,  
I ain't gonna play this, man.  
I mean, if you let me remix it,  
I'll play it.  
I mean, it's all drums.  
Where that...  
where's the synths at?  
Where the Neptunes  
stuff at, man?  
It's all... you know,  
it's only, like, a few sounds.  
Like, what-what are you doing?  
Why-why they give you  
this beat?"  
Hip-hop dictates  
everything, man.  
- [man] Yo, Pusha.  
- What's up, G?  
All right.  
Hip-hop dictates  
everything, yo.  
Everything.  
And it's been like that  
for so long.  
Um... shout-out to...  
shout-out to Kanye West, man.  
[laughs] You know?  
Sometimes a artist be so big,  
and it takes a...

it takes a long time  
for people to really, um...  
to really admit the impact  
of-of-of hip-hop and rap  
on the culture,  
but when you got someone  
like Kanye spearheading  
and being  
the forefront of it...  
you can't deny that truth.  
[ bongos playing ]  
[ J Dilla's  
"The Creep (The O)" playing ]  
[ staccato electronic beat ]  
[Tech N9ne]  
I used to be a dancer,  
so I can enjoy Young Thug.  
He fucking cracks me up  
'cause I can't understand it,  
but he has melody that works.  
And I know melody,  
and I know harmony.  
And I argue with Krizz all  
the time 'cause he's a singer.  
He's like,  
"That shit is off-key."  
I said, "No it's not."  
Yeah  
Yeah  
All those notes  
that Young Thug hit  
work within that beat.  
Best friend,  
best friend, best friend  
Best friend, best friend,  
best friend  
[]  
Welcome to my car wash.  
It's called The Wash.  
Strange Music's own car wash.  
Who the fuck in hip-hop  
has a car wash?  
I don't know.  
I ain't never heard of one.

Fans, they'll travel  
from Texas  
just to come  
wash their car here, man.  
They'll travel  
from all over the world  
to Kansas City  
to get the car wash.  
It's top-notch.  
This is something  
to be proud of, though.  
You know what I'm saying?  
We can literally walk  
to headquarters right here.  
Strange Lane  
is what I call it.  
Pretty soon, we'll own  
all this shit.  
Next is gonna be a hotel,  
then it's gonna be  
a concert hall.  
We're gonna keep growing.  
- [line trilling]  
- Hello?  
I want to party,  
you want to party  
- We need to party  
- Grazie  
Let me get up.  
- Saturday morning  
- Yes  
I ain't gotta work  
Last night's show  
sold a lot of merch  
Bad bitch in my bed,  
so I ain't gotta jerk  
Forbes' list caught me  
So it's hard  
to make a dollar hurt  
We are now inside  
Strange Music headquarters.  
This is the house  
that rap built.  
This is our warehouse.



Every time I come in here,  
I trip out.  
This is where  
all my colleagues work.  
It's Strange Music  
everywhere, man.  
Funny that we started  
with just a hat and shirt,  
and now look at all this, man.  
It's so wonderful.  
This is what I like the most.  
I like ladies.  
Boom.  
"Kali Baby."  
Where are the G-strings at?  
I... had nothing...  
but talent...  
to be able to write a song.  
I thought my way  
onto the Forbes' list.  
When I first started rapping,  
I sounded like Ice Cube.  
I been mad ever since  
my date of birth  
My mother told me I'll be  
a threat to planet Earth  
Now I'm living up  
to that title  
[mumbles] Some shit  
I used to say. I forgot.  
It was a long time ago.  
I been mad ever since  
My date of birth,  
my mother told me I'll be  
A threat to planet Earth,  
now I'm living up  
To that title,  
black with a rubber, yell  
"Fuck Billy Idol,"  
the shit's too vital  
I had to tap into what I was.  
"Why do I have  
these weird thoughts?"  
You know what I mean?

So I gave them to my fans.  
Gobble the track up like  
I'm grubbin' at Mama Naka's  
I can pop at you proper  
'cause I'm partners  
With Waka Flocka,  
give me the top of hip-hop  
And watch him make 'em rock  
with a showstopper  
The sick people that listen  
to it, they connected.  
[man] Why do you call them  
sick people?  
Because I'm sick... mentally.  
I stole books because  
they wouldn't give me  
the classes in high school,  
you know?  
I stole psychology books.  
I started doing drugs,  
you know, and sizzling.  
I almost died on those drugs.  
I've been clean for,  
like, 11 years.  
What I realized  
is that me writing my life  
and telling people all  
is totally my therapy.  
Going through all the things  
I went through  
with my mom passing,  
I noticed that over the years  
that I'm my fans'  
psychiatrist.  
I was talking  
about Krizz Kaliko  
and my brother Makzilla,  
you know, and I'm sizzling.  
They're with me all the time.  
Krizz is always with me  
on tour.  
Me and Makzilla lived  
in the house for some years.  
We're a writing team.

- How do you like the sriracha?  
- [Krizz] It's hot as hell.  
It's hot as hell,  
but it's good, though, right?  
Man, you got his mouth...  
you got his mouth on fire.  
Yelowolf ain't make these hats.  
[Tech N9ne] Yelowolf  
can't make what?  
Yelowolf ain't make these hats.  
- No, he did not make that hat.  
- This is my Black Amish.  
- [Makzilla] What you doin'?  
- Aw, I'm in here  
talking shit about y'all,  
about writing.  
[Makzilla]  
You telling secrets?  
- Oh, yeah.  
- Ain't no secrets.  
[laughs]  
[Tech N9ne] How we did  
with "Fear"...  
only my brothers  
could write a chorus  
to that personal song  
about my mom.  
- Mm-hmm.  
- You know what I'm saying?  
We experienced  
a lot of that with you.  
You know what I'm saying?  
Even if you was in a dark place  
when you write it,  
look what came of it, though.  
That time that you have  
to go to them places  
in order to pull  
that type of stuff out  
is like, you wanna try  
to get in there  
and get out as fast as you can,  
'cause you don't want  
- to dwell on it too much.

- Aw, yeah.  
- Wonderful.  
- [Tech N9ne] That's why I'll  
never do a totally dark  
album ever again.  
'Cause I didn't know I had  
all those dark stories to tell.  
Reoccurring dream  
I was falling,  
dropping from something tall  
And Jesus' name  
that I'm calling  
This is pretty deep  
I'ma decorate  
the city street  
Little bitty pieces,  
there's really gonna be  
Some chalky drawings  
I been doing this  
for so many years.  
We write our music  
to perform it live, dude!  
The youngsters  
don't do that nowadays.  
You know what I'm saying?  
I mean, that's cool.  
You know, they didn't have  
no OG teachers teaching 'em,  
"Uh, how are you gonna  
rap that onstage?  
You just rapping  
and rapping and rapping.  
[stammers] When are you  
gonna get a breath?"  
"Um... I don't know."  
I'm taking a breath.  
I take a big breath. [inhales]  
Follow me, all around  
the planet I run the gamut  
On Sickology, they could  
never manage, we do damage  
With no apology,  
pick 'em off the panic  
A little manic 'cause

I gotta be, frantic  
I'ma jam it 'cause  
I'm an oddity [inhales]  
[rapping frenetically]  
You know what I'm saying?  
I got all that breath  
to do that  
'cause I took a breath.  
I wrote it like that.  
I want the fan  
to come to the show  
to hear what they love.  
[Tech N9ne]  
This is 904 Michigan.  
From birth to ten years old,  
I stayed in this house  
with my mom, her mom,  
her sister Suzy,  
her sister Ivy,  
her brother Ikey,  
other brother Ricky.  
We all lived in this house.  
I used to ride my Big Wheel  
down these steps...  
over and over.  
What's up, bro?  
Kickin' it like a donkey?  
- [laughs]  
- I don't think they knew  
- I was from down here.  
- I knew you're from down here.  
- You knew?  
- Yeah. [laughs]  
[woman] Did y'all wanna  
come in?  
[Tech N9ne] Wow.  
Ooh, I don't know  
if I'm ready for that.  
Sarah, you letting us  
come in here?  
You know my grandma's name  
who lived here?  
Uh, Sarah Lee Yates.  
How another Sarah

live here now?  
Wow, that look way better  
than when we lived here.  
[women talking indistinctly]  
- How you doing?  
- [woman] I'm all right.  
I'm Tech.  
- I'm Hazel.  
- [Tech N9ne] Yeah.  
My grandma had  
a couch right here.  
Our kitchen table  
was right here.  
I remember fried bologna  
in the morning.  
It feels smaller  
because I was little.  
You know what I'm saying?  
I was... I was a baby.  
This is where I grew up, dawg.  
I ain't think  
I'd ever be back in here.  
It ain't no roaches in here  
like when we had roaches.  
[woman laughs]  
I used to have to do this  
every morning.  
I was about to put on my shoes.  
I used to have to do this.  
[distant train horn blowing]  
[faint indistinct chatter]  
[crossing bells clanging]  
[faint laughter and chatter]  
[train horn howling]  
[J. Cole] I didn't  
view myself as a writer.  
I didn't appreciate  
even writing  
until I started writing raps.  
I didn't care, actually.  
Anything I would write  
would be maybe a paper  
for school or something,  
you know?

Middle school,  
you gotta write a essay  
or-or something like that,  
like...  
but it was more like a job.  
Even as I started  
writing raps, it was like,  
"Now I'm a rapper."  
I wasn't really appreciating,  
like, the-the skill level  
that you had to have  
until later.  
When I first started rapping,  
I got challenged.  
It was, like, battle raps,  
you know,  
like, just rhymes.  
I'm-better-than-you raps.  
A bunch of those.  
How can I go to school  
on Friday  
and tell five people  
that I'm better than them  
and how... you know,  
how much better than them I am  
in these ways,  
with these metaphors,  
in these type of flows  
and rhymes?  
When I started trying  
to make songs,  
there were some-some  
older guys...  
some guys that  
were older than me  
around the city  
that I linked up with,  
trying to learn.  
Really, trying to get  
beats from them.  
One of them was like,  
"Yo, you gotta start  
telling stories.  
Like... all of

that shit is cool,  
but, like, that shit  
can't make no song."  
It clicked.  
I was like, "Oh, man.  
He's right."  
And I remember  
when I wrote,  
I was like, "Whoa."  
It had, like, a beginning,  
a middle, a end.  
It had a climax.  
It had suspense.  
It had foreshadowing.  
All the shit that I had  
kind of learned in school.  
And it changed  
my whole perspective,  
'cause I realized that  
that's really what... moves me.  
The braggadocious  
is just like,  
you know, it's-it's cool,  
but it's just like...  
[stammers] It's a...  
it's a box around that.  
- Yeah.  
- [ heavy bass beat ]  
[ distorted singing ]  
Why every rich black nigga  
gotta be famous?  
Why every broke black nigga  
gotta be brainless?  
Uh, that's a stereotype  
Driven by some people  
up in Ariel Heights  
Here's a scenario  
Young Cole pockets is fat  
like Lil TerRio  
Dreamville, give us a year,  
we'll been on every show  
Yeah, fuck, nigga,  
I'm very sure  
I was up one night



reading the dictionary,  
and I came across "rhapsody,"  
with a H.  
R-H-A-P-S-O-D-Y.  
And the definition,  
in a nutshell,  
is poetry spoken  
with great emotion.  
Wrote a Hallmark,  
a couple line  
To touch your feelings,  
stared at wall art  
Some days I feel like  
Three Stacks  
Up at that altar,  
international player  
Like DeRozan,  
I can ball hard  
Real friends  
always pick up...  
I came from  
a small country town  
in North Carolina.

**Population:**

Everything hip-hop-wise was,  
like... this magical place.  
You know, I'd sit  
in front of the TV  
and-and watch the Fugees,  
and I'd watch Nas and Biggie,  
and I'd watch MC Lyte  
and Queen Latifah,  
Salt-N-Pepa,  
and it was like, "Wow."  
And I didn't have anybody  
that I could go out and touch.  
I think it was just the fear  
of being judged  
and not even thinking  
it was possible.  
It was Charlie Smarts  
from Kooley High.  
He was like, "You here

at the studio every day.  
I know what you want to do.  
Go write a rhyme  
and get in the booth."  
Talking big game,  
you ain't Torry, homey  
I don't drive pickup,  
but I do dodge Rams  
It's really all wolves  
all clothed as lambs  
I'm really superhuman,  
y'all just pose like Cam  
[laughs]  
I used to have a tendency  
to overthink it.  
You know, instead of  
letting it come naturally,  
I would focus way too much on  
trying to say the most witty,  
intricate punch line.  
It's like basketball.  
Like...  
you know when somebody's  
in they zone.  
You see it when they come down  
and they got this crazy,  
special rock.  
When they rocking like that...  
"Oh, he about to pull up,  
'cause he in his rhythm."  
Bam.  
So when I'm overthinking  
the game,  
it's like, I lose my rhythm,  
and that shot don't fall  
like it's supposed to fall.  
Don't overthink it.  
Don't try to make it perfect.  
Just do you.  
- Heavyweight champ  
- [ swelling orchestral beat ]  
Mm, rocking Amsterdam,  
got the U. S. coasting  
Rapping like I'm golfing,

got the U. S. open  
The beast has awoken,  
his speech is ferocious  
Here our drama, leave beef  
with the ghost-es  
When it comes to flows  
I'm the rapper  
with the mostest  
Shut down the party, it  
don't matter who the host is  
Now it's 'bout money  
and it's all about the cars  
It should be about bars  
It don't matter  
who the brokest  
Heavyweight champ  
with the heavyweight chip  
Ball all four quarters  
[Freeway] My writing has  
changed my life tremendously.  
Before this,  
I was a drug dealer.  
Only other job I had  
was sweeping hair  
in a barbershop.  
My gift of speech provides  
for me and my family  
and several other  
people's families,  
and so it's definitely  
a blessing.  
[]  
So Freeway in the past,  
you know,  
he's looking back  
at some of the mistakes  
he might have made or  
some of the paths that he took,  
and he's going through this  
and saying,  
"You know what?  
If this Freeway didn't exist,  
you wouldn't have this Freeway  
that we have here now."

Yeah, so, basically, you know,  
the color and everything,  
I definitely think  
it-it works well.  
I mean, I'm glad you let me  
listen to some of the...  
some of the lyrics  
in the... in the album, man,  
but I honestly think  
this is gonna be  
your best album cover,  
especially for this classic  
- you about to drop.  
- Do me a favor too.  
Make sure I get  
a little prostration mark.  
[laughing] I got you, bro.  
I got you.  
[Freeway] I was a huge  
Naughty By Nature fan.  
I thought Treach was,  
like, one of the dopest.  
I loved Dres from Black Sheep.  
Course, Biggie, Tupac, Jay.  
She listening  
to new God MC  
I'm something  
you'll never doubt  
[]  
[soulful vocalizations]  
I hate rap right now.  
But... all right, I'm sorry.  
I don't mean to say that.  
The competitiveness is gone  
because there ain't nobody hot  
to even compete with.  
You start chilling,  
like, "This shit is wack,  
and I don't even wanna  
do this shit  
'cause these niggas  
is horrible."  
I need somebody to put  
some pepper in my shit.

You know what I'm saying?  
Lyrically.  
'Cause it's, like,  
ass-backwards right now.  
The dope people gets no credit,  
and just the wack niggas,  
it's just like they throwing...  
[stammers] There's, like,  
a party for these dudes.  
You know what  
I'm talking about!  
You be like, "Yo, this nigga  
sounds just like so-and-so."  
But they don't know... the kids.  
My son like,  
"Dad, you're crazy.  
- He's hot."  
- [man] Mind-blowing.  
We did the shit  
that nobody could do.  
Like, we had Jay-Z  
on the same block,  
and then we put it on TV.  
[laughs]  
[Peedi Crakk] That's crazy.  
Talkin' owe Sparks five  
Ride for a dollar bill  
Famous up in Hollywood  
High in them Holly-hills  
As a kid,  
poetry and rhyming was my vent.  
You know what I mean?  
I wasn't good  
at expressing myself.  
I didn't know how to deal  
with my anger too good.  
Words and poetry  
just turned into...  
uh, it just turned...  
it just opened up  
a whole new world to me.  
I'm a poet.  
You know what I'm saying?  
[soulful beat playing]

[]  
[Freeway rapping indistinctly]  
I don't rock with  
these other rappers  
They be rapping wrong,  
all them niggas sound alike  
They should do a rap-along  
I let 'em over here 'cause  
I'm light-years past them all  
They acting,  
so I split a clip  
Wheelchair, cast them all,  
gunmanship, man  
I run this shit  
like a triathlon  
Wanna go outside and play,  
you gotta ask your dad  
You wanna grind  
and get this pay  
- You gotta ask the Don  
- [man] Mm!  
A psychic read  
on my mom's palm  
Said your son gonna live  
and grow to be a born leader  
I'm about to drop  
these torpedoes  
- We a score leader  
- Was floating on it, though.  
I'm on the north side  
Of Philly with a seorita  
I will never leave her  
'Cause a papi got  
all the pops  
[grunts rhythmically] Yeah!  
[Freeway rapping indistinctly]  
[grunts rhythmically]  
[]  
'Cause I'm light-years  
past them all  
They acting,  
so I pull a clip  
Wheelchair,  
cast them all, gunmanship

Man, I run this shit  
like a triathlon  
I used to try to fit  
a lot of words in a verse,  
and Jay was like,  
"You don't gotta do that.  
You don't gotta fit everything  
into one verse.  
You can let the beat  
breathe some."  
It's unorthodox.  
It separates me  
from everybody else.  
What's good, everybody?  
Happy hump day.  
[machine beeping]  
We out here.  
[medical devices beeping]  
Well, I just came  
from dialysis,  
the process that you go through  
that cleans your blood  
when you... when you got  
kidney failure.  
You know, I didn't know  
what was gonna happen.  
You know I'm a devoted Muslim,  
so the first thing I did  
was, I went to the masjid,  
and I prayed  
and asked Allah to help me  
get through whatever it is  
that I have to deal with.  
Then I went to the hospital,  
and, you know,  
they diagnosed me  
with kidney failure.  
And they cut my chest open  
and put a port in my chest,  
and then the next day,  
I was doing dialysis.  
Four hours a day  
three times a week.  
And by the grace of God,

I was healthy enough  
to get on the transplant list,  
so now I'm active  
on the transplant list.  
So they could call me anytime,  
day or at night,  
and then I gotta rush  
to the hospital,  
and they're gonna do  
the transplant for me.  
I just wanna show people  
that...  
it's not a death sentence.  
New things happen in my life.  
That's just more content  
and more ammunition  
for me to put in the music.  
Tell me, how could you  
take my smile away from me?  
You said you love me  
But you lie,  
you lie, you lie  
Tell me, how could you  
take my smile away from me?  
[ melancholy electronic beat ]  
[]  
This is Betty's old house  
right here.  
He was a creative child.  
He liked to draw.  
He liked little artifacts...  
LEGOs and things like that.  
When the hip-hop bug hit him,  
uh...  
he-he became consumed  
with that.  
And everybody that  
he associated with,  
they were consumed  
by hip-hop as well,  
so... uh, it was different.  
I wasn't a big "being consumed  
by hip-hop" type of parent.  
See, I came up



on the Sugarhill Gang.

I remember when  
hip-hop first got here,  
so I said, "Okay, how long  
is this gonna last?" you know?

The hip,  
the hippie to the hip  
Hip-hop and you don't stop  
Rock it out, baby bubba  
To the boogity-bang-bang  
The boogie to the boogie,  
the beat

[Gregory] He was supposed to do  
an assignment.

It ended up being  
some poetry that he wrote  
that he converted into a song.  
The teacher was so impressed...  
first, she was  
kind of offended.

Something had to do  
with a toilet stool  
- and things like that, so...  
- Oh, yeah, yeah.  
- I remember that.  
- Do you remember?

You're talking about  
"The Little Miss Muffet."  
"The Little Miss Muffet."  
That's what it was.

I got a "A" on that?  
I thought we... she was mad  
and you had to go up there.  
I thought she got mad at...  
she got mad at me.

- She got mad?  
- Didn't I get in...  
didn't I get in trouble  
with her for that?  
- Uh, yeah, you did. [laughs]  
- Yeah, yeah.

[Gregory]

But he still got a "A."  
- [Judy] I don't know.

- [Royce Da 5'9"] It was,  
"Little Miss Muffet"...  
"Little Miss Muffet  
sat on her caboose,  
and then she drank  
the toilet juice."  
- [Gregory] That was it.  
- [Royce Da 5'9"] And then  
I, uh... I drew a picture  
of a toilet...  
a toilet  
with the toilet lid up  
with a lady  
with her head in it  
with the feet sticking out.  
She was highly offended  
by that,  
so my mom went up there  
to talk to her.  
I came up and I fell in love  
with hip-hop,  
and I came into the game  
as a battle attack artist.  
You know, open mic,  
battling other artists.  
Yo, I came out  
naked at birth  
Making it worse,  
making a verse  
Sacred  
and shaking the Earth  
Niggas got plenty  
opinions about Royce  
But they ain't got a voice  
I'm dooper than them,  
so they ain't got a choice  
I met Marshal,  
and he pulled me into hip-hop.  
That was my introduction  
into the game.  
Stay on the shelves,  
playing yourself  
Promising threats  
to test y'all

Just doing this rap shit  
until UPS calls  
I never thought of myself  
as an artist  
going on to sell records,  
to have to think about,  
"How can I sell this music  
to all of these people?"  
That wasn't on my mind.  
I just wanted to be  
lyrically superior.  
It's the feel of the beat.  
I stay in the studio  
for 30-plus hours straight.  
I almost don't do songs  
unless I rewrite something.  
[choir vocalizing]  
[]  
What we're doing right now  
is a benefit concert  
for the crisis that's in Flint  
right now, with the water.  
[]  
[Colberg] It's got  
so bad where it's affecting  
kids and grown-ups  
at the same time.  
I have spots on my legs.  
My ribs are swole up.  
I don't even drink this water.  
I don't even cook  
with it no more.  
If we can't cook with it,  
can't bathe with it,  
can't drink with it,  
why do we have  
to come out of our pockets  
and pay for it?  
[Tracy]  
I'm 45 years old  
and I be scared to bathe.  
When my grandson...  
he comes over,  
I mean, we just... we're itching!

We're constantly itching,  
you know?  
It's just like  
having scabies or...  
I don't know what it is.  
It's just this... I dig.  
I scratch until I draw blood.  
They say it's the water.  
[Colberg] It even affecting  
how the trees and stuff turn.  
All this used to be  
greenery in the summertime.  
[Tracy and Colberg]  
Everything's dying.  
[Tracy] I pray a lot about it.  
- [Colberg] Mm-hmm.  
- [Tracy] You know?  
You got people that just  
don't even live here,  
they coming in  
to help us out.  
God bless them.  
God's touching  
everybody's heart  
to come here, 'cause  
we definitely need help.  
[Royce Da 5'9"] Everybody's  
donating a performance.  
So it's for a good cause.  
I'm just glad  
that I got invited  
and I'm able  
to help out somehow.  
- [crowd cheering]  
- [male announcer] Yeah!  
Flint, make some noise  
out there!  
Shady Records  
is in the building.  
[indistinct]  
What's up, TJ?  
Uh-oh.  
Let's go!  
[both] Hey, hey, hey, hey

- [TJ] Come on!  
- [Royce Da 5'9"] Hey, hey  
Get 'em up, get 'em up  
Everybody say 5'9"  
- Hey  
- [crowd] 5'9"!  
- [both] Say 5'9"  
- [crowd] 5'9"!  
- [both] Say 5'9"  
- [crowd] 5'9"!  
- [both] Now make noise  
- [TJ] Come on!  
I'm the verbal-spit  
Smith Wesson  
I unload with sick spit  
The quick wit could split  
a split second  
Bomb with  
a lit-wick expression  
You hear a tick-tick,  
then you testing  
My saliva and spit  
Could split thread  
into fiber and bits  
So trust me,  
I'm as live as it gets  
Everybody claim  
they the best  
And they head the throne  
since B. I. G. is gone  
If you ask me,  
they "Dead Wrong"  
[Rhymefest] I used  
to always say, "Man,  
Chicago is the consciousness  
of hip-hop."  
If you... think about this:  
everybody who really  
sustainably made it  
- in hip-hop out of Chicago...  
- [man] Was conscious.  
[Rhymefest] ...was conscious.  
Period.  
- [man] Yeah.

- [Rhymefest] You know  
what I mean?

Like, Chicago has a spirit,  
and the spirit will not  
allow you to, like,  
leave if you just  
on bullshit, period, right?

- [students] Right.

- You can be on bullshit,  
but you gotta have something...  
substance in yourself...  
or this city will not  
let you...

[students murmur  
simultaneously]

Everybody you know  
from Chicago that's sustainable  
is, like, ill,  
like Barack Obama, Lupe...

[man] That's it right there:  
substance.

That's what Chicago is.  
If you've been born  
and raised in this city,  
you travel through these hoods.  
Chicago makes you.

Donda's House started  
two years ago.

My wife is a high school  
English teacher.

And I said, "I could use  
my creative

and my resources

and people I know,

and you use your skill

to create curriculum,

and let's create

a hip-hop curriculum.

Let's teach creative writing,

studio etiquette,

conflict resolution.

That's the same thing

that Dr. Donda West,

who's Kanye's mom,

**gave to me:**

I remember me and Kanye was,  
like, making some rhymes,  
and I was talking about  
how many bitches I fucked,  
how many people I killed,  
how many drugs I sold.  
And Dr. Donda West  
pulled me to the side.  
She didn't know much  
about rap.  
She was like, "Rhymefest,  
did you really, like,  
have sex with all those women  
and kill all those people?  
And, you know,  
I know you, like, 15.  
I'm not judging you.  
I'm just asking."  
And I'm like, "Nah,  
I'm just trying to get famous.  
Like, that's what is  
on the radio."  
And she said,  
"Would you be comfortable  
living in a lie  
you told on yourself?"  
She was like,  
"You should tell your truth,"  
and changed my life.  
Every young person need that.  
Dude, rap don't mean nothing,  
music don't mean nothing  
unless you're combining it  
with some kind of movement.  
This is my movement.  
Even if you got good music,  
who are you?  
Everybody rap.  
Everybody got beats.  
You gotta be... well, you have  
to be somebody before the music.  
- [woman] Right.

- Yeah.  
Now Che bustin' in  
to hit 'em  
Fuck the cynicism,  
I'm quick to give  
Y'all niggas  
constructive criticism  
Like, "Wait,  
you basically suck"  
His mother said,  
"My son wanna rhyme"  
I'm like, "Ma'am, I don't  
agree with that decision"  
I don't believe  
that I write for anyone.  
Everyone that I work with,  
I consider a collaboration.  
You're gonna be in the room,  
and I'm gonna say something  
to the track,  
and you're gonna say, "Ooh!  
But what if we..."  
[speaks gibberish]  
And I'm like, "Yeah!"  
And then we're gonna  
build something together.  
We're gonna build that.  
You know, in the case  
of "Glory,"  
me and Common  
sat on the phone.  
Common was like, "Yo, man,  
we gotta make  
something glorious.  
We gotta have something  
that's, like...  
man, from the heavens."  
And I was like,  
"Yo, you know  
what we should do?  
We should pray  
to the ancestors."  
Now, this is the first time  
this ever happened.



"Let's ask them  
to write the song."  
So we asked Dr. King,  
Fannie Lou Hamer,  
Mike Brown,  
Medgar Evers,  
Emmett Till,  
Eric Garner.  
We asked all  
of the recent martyrs  
to guide our hands  
and write their story.  
[snaps fingers]  
Two hours later, it was done.  
It was so fluid.  
Hands to the heavens,  
one man, no weapon  
Goes against,  
yes, glory is destined  
Like, one of my favorite lines,  
you know, is, uh,  
No man can win a war  
individually  
It takes the wisdom  
of the elders  
And young people's energy  
This is the story  
we call victory  
Coming of the Lord,  
my eyes have seen the glory  
A human being can't write that!  
Yo, I got a shorty, man...  
15 years old,  
living next door to me.  
Every time I step out,  
he's like,  
"I can't believe you live  
next door to me."  
But what does that do  
for where he think he live  
or who... like, that...  
that's what we lost  
in integration.  
We lost the doctor

that live next door,  
the artist  
that live next door,  
the lawyer  
that live next door.

As black people in America,  
we so traumatized...  
that we're always trying to run  
from ourself and our community.

[man]

Che "Rhymefest" Smith says  
that he was robbed today  
at gunpoint.

It happened about 7:30  
this morning  
as Smith was sitting  
in his car  
at 43rd and Cottage Grove.

Smith says someone  
got into the car,  
put a gun to his head,  
and threatened to kill him  
before taking his wallet.  
The Grammy-winning performer  
had a message for the robber.  
I help so many young people  
in this city.

You don't have to rob me.

[stammers]

Come to me.

Contact me.

I will help you get a job.

[man] Smith also  
expressed frustration  
with the Chicago police,  
saying that officers  
were distracted  
and even swore at him  
as he tried to make a report.

Flexing like your  
toothpaste, Arm & Hammer  
You ain't, trippin' like  
your shoes ain't laced  
Got so many bars, I need

space, it's gonna come to me  
No rebate, I'm macking it  
like a clean slate  
I'm always up on it  
like I'm not a teammate  
I reap success, and so  
I progress, so it has to  
Be fitting, I seem great  
I'm too big  
like Sean and Rihanna  
Stay sharp  
like teeth of piranha  
Honor me like I'm a Ghana,  
Africa, I'm a Shaka Zulu  
Who you know can step on  
these sounds?  
Ain't never been a problem  
'specially when I can  
Knock 'em down like  
a lower octave  
Down like a frown  
when no one's watching  
- [applause]  
- I say I rap until  
My fingers bleed, I write  
until my throat is sore  
Check, I wrote this  
in my sleep  
Woke up,  
then I wrote some more  
I wrote this in a cell  
Surrounded by 1,000 niggas,  
I hope to cultivate  
My people like bees  
from pollen, flowers, givers  
They say that there's  
a mental illness  
Planted deep  
within our culture  
Many free  
but still enslaved  
And waiting till they  
sentence over  
So I encourage you

to make a change  
And don't wait until I end  
this sentence  
And if I ever shown  
you love  
I just hope you know  
I truly meant it  
[students murmuring  
in approval]  
Watch me back up on you,  
'bout to back up on you  
Watch me, watch me  
back up on you  
'Bout to back up on you  
So we are in the Bronx.  
We are in the Boogie Down,  
which is the birthplace  
of hip-hop.  
Queen of the bodega,  
real Garcia Vega  
Throw it back  
like it was Sega  
Her papi be the plug  
and her mama from Grenada  
she say, "Dime, dmelo,"  
but she never do no favors  
- Hay la negrita  
- [horn honks]  
- She winding up the time  
- [Nitty Scott] Annoying.  
Ba-ba-di-da, she like  
the wave up above us  
Sguela,  
sigue la negrita  
Excuse me, papa.  
Yo!  
This is B. I. C.  
It's the homies.  
We had a show where it  
was us first and then her.  
- [Nitty Scott] Mm-hmm.  
- It was at Southpaw too.  
- Downstairs.  
- [Nitty Scott] I'm so mad

- that shit closed.  
- With Q, right?  
With Q.  
You remember that?  
- Yeah.  
- Oh, you was on that day?  
Yeah, she went after.  
She killed that shit.  
So early, yeah.  
That's, like, Baby Nitty.  
And when you opened up  
for Kendrick.  
- Mm-hmm.  
- You're able to-to grab  
the crowd by the nuts  
and just make sure  
that they pay attention to you.  
Nobody wants to give  
a shit in New York.  
Yeah, like, and you can't  
get by off being cute.  
You know what I'm saying?  
New York is not  
gonna turn up because you're  
a bad bitch or something.  
Well, if you try  
to just live off...  
And to my exes that  
regret it, that's enough  
Go send another email  
and handle my nuts  
'Cause I'm in  
another chapter  
And I left you  
where you are  
I guess you didn't know  
That you was fucking  
with a star  
[man] 2 Chainz, Young Thug.  
- [man] And Lil Wayne.  
- [Nitty Scott] Me too!  
I let the 808s in.  
- [man] Yup, 808s in.  
- [all talking simultaneously]

You need to let the 808s in.  
- You need to let them hit.  
- [Nitty Scott] Stop resisting.  
The bass in trap music,  
like, you can feel it  
in your chakras,  
and I feel like that...  
that-that's what it is.  
It's like we're feeling  
- this rumble in, like, our...  
- Bass is always important.  
Yeah, it's, like,  
in your, like, muladhara.  
- And that's-that's...  
- [laughter]  
That's why it's speaking  
to you, and, you know,  
and you're getting  
in this trance or whatever.  
So it's like... you know,  
I-I see it now,  
- and I respect it.  
- You see what we...  
[man] You need  
a ghostwriter.  
[man] I don't care anyway,  
to be honest,  
because I feel like  
music in general...  
I mean, if you look  
at singers in R&B  
and pop and everything,  
they ghostwrite to make  
- a bigger...  
- [Nitty Scott] Record.  
...a bigger record  
for the world.  
It's bigger than one person,  
bigger than one hood,  
bigger than one...  
[Nitty Scott]  
It takes a village sometimes.  
[man] Royce Da 5'9"  
wrote a song

about Dr. Dre's brother dying.  
So I answer the phone.  
Dre identified himself.  
I didn't know who he was  
at the time.  
I knocked on  
the bathroom door, and I said,  
"Ryan, there's somebody  
named Andre  
on the phone  
wants to talk to you."  
"Dr. Dre is on the phone?"  
I was like, "What the fuck?"  
[Gregory]  
So next thing I know,  
the shower door falls off.  
There's all kind of slipping  
and sliding going on.  
He comes out of the bathroom  
half-dressed.  
[Royce Da 5'9"]  
And I was like, "Hello?"  
And he was like,  
"Yo, what's up? It's Dre."  
And I was like,  
"Yo, what's up, man?"  
It was literally  
my first time  
ever talking to a celebrity...  
even coming close.  
If you only knew  
the way I felt  
Before they ruined  
the crew  
I thought I learned  
from Eazy  
Now I'm going through it  
with you  
He said he liked my music,  
and he wanted to know  
if I was interested  
in coming out to LA...  
and just kind of helping out,  
you know what I mean?

They was working on  
The Chronic at that time.  
Would I be interested?  
And I was like, "Would I?  
- I would love to."  
- "That was Dr. Dre."  
I'm like, "Dr. Dre?"  
At first, I thought  
he was kidding.  
Like, "Yeah, right.  
Go clean the bathroom up."  
- No, that was Dr. Dre.  
- I got on a plane  
- and went out there.  
- And I do think  
that's a skill, to be able to...  
like, if you ghostwrite...  
yeah, to be able to kind of  
fall into their persona  
and be like, "This is what  
I would say if I was you,"  
or be like, "So what are you  
feeling right now?  
What are you going through?"  
And take that and be able  
to do... like,  
that's a skill too.  
So I think it's like,  
different skill sets  
have different roles  
in the game.  
A lot of these pop artists  
and everybody got writers...  
you know, Beyonc got writers.  
This is hip-hop  
we're talking about, though,  
and in hip-hop,  
it's from the streets,  
and you're supposed  
to write your story.  
So there might be a problem  
if somebody else  
is writing your story.  
An MC having someone else



write his rhymes... is wack.  
An artist having someone write  
their rhymes is understandable  
because every other artist  
in any other genre  
of music does that.  
With me, I call myself both...  
but MC first.  
What is allowed?  
My friend that I do music with  
my whole life can't tell me,  
"You should say 'the'  
instead of 'that'  
at the end of that bar"?  
Is that him...  
now I have a ghostwriter?  
Am I wack now?  
And no other genre is like...  
would they even, like,  
think to have  
this silly conversation.  
Like, "Is it oaky to get help?"  
And this is the only reason  
I will say maybe it's not okay  
to have people write your raps:  
it's 'cause rap is rooted  
in authenticity.  
Rap is rooted in, "I did this."  
- [students] Right.  
- "I went here  
and did that there,  
and this is how I came up."  
You rap about what you know.  
You rap about, you know,  
what's going on outside.  
I try to rap in real time  
all the time.  
You don't gotta...  
you don't gotta make up stuff.  
But what's crazy  
in hip-hop now is,  
there is no rule.  
Like, Rick Ross don't have  
to be a drug dealer

to say, "I'm really  
a drug dealer."  
And then kids  
is listening to it.  
[woman] Right,  
thinking that it's...  
[Rhymefest] Be trying  
to act out different things.  
Like, rap is like the Bible, G.  
Like, there was this one point  
in hip-hop where  
it was like, "You have  
to write your own shit."  
But that was only  
a point in hip-hop.  
- [man] A phase.  
- [John The Author] Right?  
You know what I'm saying?  
Well, a lot of people bought  
into that belief, but, like,  
now we out of that stage.  
[Rhymefest] Nobody believe  
that rappers should write  
their own rap?  
Well, somebody like Puff  
don't care,  
so if someone like Puff  
asks you to write,  
- he don't care.  
- Stop right there  
for a minute.  
The heat of the game is now...  
the people don't care.  
If you're calling yourself  
a rapper and an artist,  
you should be able  
to formulate your own lyrics.  
And if there's somebody,  
for example...  
[Rhymefest] But what if  
you found out  
Quincy Jones wrote  
for Michael Jackson?  
[all talking at once]

If somebody's writing for you,  
you should let that be known.  
And then it's a...  
it's a fair shake.  
But when it's going on  
under the table,  
you're really, like,  
cheating the people.  
- You're cheating the...  
- [P Styles ] That's wack.  
That's wack, but...  
- You're tricking the culture.  
- But as a writer,  
I take the gig.  
I've ghostwritten  
numerous times.  
[sighs] This is the thing:  
it's when the artist  
puts themselves  
on a pedestal for being...  
the artistic great  
and...  
it's not their composition.  
I ain't got no problem  
with ghostwriting  
until we start talking about...  
if you can't write  
your own lyrics,  
then you can't come  
sit at the table.  
That's how I feel about it.  
[laughs]  
Who wrote "Rapper's Delight"?  
Not the motherfuckers  
rapping it.  
So who cares?  
People are entitled  
to handle their business  
and their art craft  
how they want to.  
You know, Michael Jackson  
didn't write his songs.  
You know, the actors  
don't write the movies.

I feel like it's...  
everyone plays a part  
in whatever they want to do.  
I personally write  
my own things, but...  
I don't, you know,  
judge the next man.  
Flatbush Zombies'  
"This Is It" playing  
All you fools  
just sound the same  
Ain't no credit  
to your name  
Ain't no credit line open  
That's discrediting  
the fame  
Form your business  
in the name  
Something unique,  
like a slang  
Make a difference,  
make a change  
But ain't no puppets  
on a string  
I won't feel cool or good  
going onstage  
and performing a song that  
aren't lyrics that I wrote.  
I would feel  
like a fucking idiot.  
I would feel like a faker,  
a fuckin' actor.  
Not a fan of pointing  
fingers at men  
It's dependent on who  
can pay for academics  
Homey, your chemists  
are missing appendages  
You're back into handling  
business, no kidding  
My head's at the clinic,  
I need a prescription  
My vision is clear  
but there's smoke

In the mirrors,  
I can't be compared  
To them niggas you hearing,  
so don't be offended  
When niggas don't feel you  
If you're in the studio,  
everybody that's there  
helped write it.  
Their energy is contributing.  
But then if your pen  
is coming off the paper  
and you're handing me  
the paper  
and I'm reciting it  
after you wrote it for me  
like I wrote it?  
Like, if it's not one  
of these guys, you know,  
then it's kind of weird to me.  
Like, it just...  
it's just part of something  
to me that's like,  
hip-hop is the only genre  
that really is all about you.  
I get my joy  
out of the creation,  
so I gotta be creating it.  
You know what I mean?  
That's just me personally,  
but anybody is entitled  
to do it how they want to.  
Everybody morals  
ain't my morals.  
Everybody goals  
ain't my goals.  
Everybody has  
different intentions.  
My intentions  
with this music shit  
is to just be...  
to get chills from my shit.  
That's what I want.  
I'll put it to you like this.  
Hanging out with Will Smith...

we were labelmates  
on Columbia Records  
at the time...  
and he was working  
on, um, his big record,  
Big Willie Style.  
The song "Gettin' Jiggy  
wit It," I got...  
people credit me  
as the writer sometimes,  
but really, I just hung out  
in the studio with him.  
He was writing  
the song himself,  
and I'm just there  
having fun with him,  
just rapping to the beat  
with him.  
No love for the haters,  
the haters mad  
'Cause I got floor seats  
at the Lakers  
See me on the 50-yard line  
with the Raiders  
Met Ali, he told me  
I'm the greatest  
I didn't necessarily write it.  
I'm just sitting there  
having fun with him,  
finishing a line for him.  
Will Smith is an MC.  
There's ghostwriting,  
and then there's...  
there's creating, um,  
with-with your people  
in the studio.  
[ bluesy hip-hop music ]  
[]  
[Siddiq] Rhymesayers  
pretty much started up  
from a group of local cats  
here in Minnesota.  
You know, just started out  
of my basement

for the most part.  
We recorded  
our first three albums  
out of my basement  
in my house.  
You know, we put together  
a core unit of people  
that really believed  
in a common goal,  
and it lasted.  
It's like, we've got  
a rich musical history here,  
whether it's Prince  
or Flyte Tyme or Bob Dylan.  
I think a lot of the artists  
that we work with  
had a lot of different  
influences,  
and I think those influences  
also then shaped them  
as songwriters,  
more so than just  
as MCs or rappers.  
Fifty percent is the beat,  
and 50 percent  
is the lyrics.  
Either you better have  
hella style,  
or you better  
be saying something.  
Shining right up  
in my face  
Everyone's a critic  
of the minutes I waste  
Got me waiting in a line,  
got me running in place  
I don't really know  
what to tell you  
Say I spent  
too much time in the cellar  
I've experienced a life  
full of accidents  
Trying to write it all down  
before it vanishes

[Slug] I like  
to think of things  
to write about  
while I'm driving.  
This is my theory.  
But having  
my peripheral vision  
stimulated,  
it allows me  
to start thinking in a way  
that I can't do  
when I'm just sitting  
at a desk.  
It allows me to start  
thinking around the story  
or thinking out  
certain parts of it.  
And I like to write that down.  
Driving is problem solving.  
It's my favorite thing to do  
in the whole world.  
And I'm really good at it.  
I don't hit things.  
I don't get in trouble.  
I study my surroundings  
and I analyze them,  
and I'm thinking moves ahead.  
Writing is very similar,  
because if I want to reach...  
the end of the song,  
the end of the story,  
I've got two,  
maybe three verses  
and a hook to figure out  
how to get  
from the beginning  
of that story  
to the end of that story.  
And I can't just freewrite it  
and start here,  
and then hope that my character  
gets to the end.  
I have to consider the whole  
trajectory... while I'm going.



Like, it's not just about  
getting from point A to point B,  
but you have to actually  
visualize the route  
that you're gonna take  
to get there.

You gonna take  
the scenic route?  
You gonna get there  
in a hurry?

You got time?  
What are you doing?

[]

Anthony would have  
different artists  
to his... to his house to...  
to record,  
so we would end up  
writing together  
and working together,  
and it was, uh...  
it was organic in the sense of,  
we wouldn't come together  
and be like,  
"Oh, here's what we're gonna  
do tonight.

We have this plan."

We would just get together  
and let things happen  
as they happen.

I would sit and I would write  
100,000 bars  
and be ready to spit that  
over a ten-minute beat,  
but it was...

it was in times like this that  
slowly shaped me and refined me  
and taught me how to actually  
write a song,  
an arc.

Here's how the story starts.  
You want to hit your ending.  
A big part of it was Ant  
but also working

with somebody like Ali.  
Not just exchange ideas  
but also to exchange  
techniques.  
So this is  
the home and, uh, work space  
of Ant,  
and he's the anchor  
and he's the center  
of what we do at Rhymesayers.  
All of the founding artists  
came through him.  
[Ant] All right.  
That was a four-track  
over here.  
A couple of them, actually.  
One of them is Slug's  
from back in the day.  
There's even a old picture  
of my basement.  
It's kind of tight.  
This is all hip-hop right here,  
and I think over here is just  
things I might rip off...  
well, I won't be  
ripping them off  
now that I showed you that.  
I have, like, choice things,  
you know what I mean,  
like... that are in the front,  
like my DST,  
pretty much made me  
want to start scratching.  
I grew up in the military.  
I, uh, traveled around a lot,  
moved around.  
I didn't move here till 1990.  
Well, I had my four-track,  
and I put a little flyer out  
saying, like,  
"I'll record you."  
Everybody was working  
their jobs  
and doing whatever they did,

and on Sunday,  
they would come over here.  
They would just freestyle  
on a beat.  
If I thought we connected,  
I'd be like, "Oh,  
let's be Tribe Called Quest  
or whatever the hell."  
They had a ritual  
of just working  
at an amazing rate.  
Everybody in the crew  
would write,  
minimum, five to ten songs  
a week,  
and Ant would make somewhere  
in the area of,  
like, 30 to 50 beats  
in a week.  
You know, come together  
and figure out  
how to turn beats and rhymes  
into music.  
Slug was a lot different  
at the time,  
but the big thing  
with me and him was  
his dedication and work ethic.  
If he would show up  
at 3 p. m.,  
he would stay till 3 a. m.  
He wanted just to say  
a bunch of shit.  
He just wanted to say  
all kinds of stuff.  
When I started performing,  
I started realizing that...  
that I could say things  
to groups of people  
to make them hear me  
and see me  
and set me aside from  
all the other MCs in my city.  
Well, who's you

with the braids?  
Them shits is too tight  
What the fuck  
you even trying to do?  
Come and grab the mic  
I come all the way down  
to the Sin City  
From the Twin Cities  
To show you  
you can't get with me  
Shit, your flows  
is shitty  
Shitty twice, twice  
Made me say the shit thrice  
It pushed me  
to go into myself  
and look for  
the parts of myself that...  
would stand out,  
and a lot of that,  
I think,  
came down to, um,  
showing vulnerability.  
It just happened.  
We knew that your rhymes  
were a reflection of you,  
like you could never separate  
the art from the person.  
It gave you permission  
to redefine everything  
and to reexamine everything.  
We have a lot of, like,  
really similar things  
in common.  
We both moved around a lot  
when we were kids.  
You know, we both were  
kind of, like, outcasts.  
We both didn't really look  
to people like we should be  
doing the things  
that we love to do.  
I mean, obviously,  
I'm albino.

I'm not, you know,  
the Kentucky Fried Chicken man  
or anything.  
You know, being a kid  
in the Midwest,  
not that many people knew  
what a albino was,  
so from the time  
that I was really little,  
you know, I was  
really outcasted  
and I was really  
treated like a nonperson.  
Black elders and friends  
and peers and enemies,  
like, recognized me  
as a person  
and also had some wisdom  
to help me navigate  
what it... what it's like  
to have this presentation  
that's so unacceptable  
to people.  
I grew, like,  
this appreciation  
not only just  
for my friendships  
and my relationships  
and all that stuff  
but then also  
for this particular type of  
approach to life  
that to me is really precious.  
Raising a man  
You're slipping  
through my hands  
Like grains of sand  
And here I stand  
Trying to wrestle  
with the hourglass  
Maybe see how long  
I can make an hour last  
Dear black son  
[Ant] You create

these relationships,  
and then you can get  
the deeper songs.  
You're gonna write  
some very delicate songs,  
and you need  
encouragement sometimes.

- [Brother Ali] Mm-hmm.  
- [Ant] You just do, you know?  
The courage to do  
those very sensitive songs.

- What's up, man?  
- Oh, my man.  
- My man.  
- Good to see you, brother.  
- Good to see you too.  
- All right, now.  
- What's up, Ali?  
- How you, bro?

Good to see you, man.  
I go by Dem Atlas.  
I'm a new artist  
signed to RSE.  
I remember Atmosphere  
bringing me  
on my first shows out of town.  
It's really dope  
to see you come out with  
all of the energy and all  
of the newness and, like...  
like, for us, we get to kind of  
almost relive those moments.  
Everybody know  
we do it with love  
We do it with love  
We give love  
and we get love  
Come up in the place  
And we ain't trying  
to get our dicks up  
We do not spend our money  
at a fucking strip club  
Take it home  
and feed the babies

That's how we get love  
[Lil Bibby] Y'all ready to  
word for word this, New York?  
What do you say?  
I be with pistol-toting  
Kush-smoking, lean-pouring  
Crazy-ass niggas  
Nigga want some work,  
just pull up  
Make sure you bring  
the cash with you  
I be blowing money fast,  
nigga  
Try me,  
that's your ass, nigga  
Nigga talking down  
about Buckz  
Probably 'cause I don't  
fuck with that nigga  
I say I did this shit  
for my dogs  
Just make a call,  
they risk it all  
Or if it's that  
I just send them a text  
Have my young uns  
come through  
Make it rain on your set  
Sleeping on couches,  
have pains in my neck  
Now I got three or four  
chains on my neck  
Bitches be tripping,  
I can't fuck with that  
Cut that bitch off 'cause  
I ain't for the stress  
These niggas be  
set tripping  
Switching sides,  
set flipping  
Eminem is one of my  
top three favorite lyricists  
ever, man.  
I think he got the craziest

flows of everybody.  
What he say...  
I sit back  
With this pack  
of Zig Zags  
And this weed,  
it gets me  
This shit needed to be  
the most...  
[laughs] Kendrick probably  
is in the top three  
right now too,  
but I think he, like,  
study Eminem.  
Eminem, he had to have, like,  
one of the biggest waves...  
like, you know  
what I'm saying...  
in hip-hop history.  
He wasn't even black.  
I have to be  
going through a lot.  
I come up with the best stuff  
when I'm stressed out.  
When I'm mad or, like,  
stuff like that,  
I make turn-up club music,  
you know? [laughs]  
[man] What about  
when you're happy, though?  
When I'm happy...  
I don't like the music  
when I'm happy.  
I'm not gonna lie to you.  
[laughs]  
But I got so many problems,  
man, you know.  
It's a lot to rap about.  
I gotta keep my head  
above water  
I've been going hard,  
gotta go a little harder  
I've been thinking smart,  
gotta think a little smarter



All I know is hustle,  
get that shit regardless  
Real hustler,  
I'ma get that shit regardless  
I will not starve, bitch  
Work hard, my palms itch  
I seen some garbage  
that fucked up my conscience  
Niggas, they talk shit,  
but these niggas harmless  
You can hear it in the...  
- in the way my voice was...  
- Yeah.  
...and then the lyrics  
and everything.  
So, like, from the outside  
looking in,  
everybody would think, like,  
you know what I'm saying,  
they think that's glamorous,  
you feel me?  
But there's still shit  
that we go through  
on a day-to-day basis,  
you know what I'm saying,  
that we gotta keep our head  
above, you feel me?  
[rapping indistinctly]  
[]  
[Nas] It was a rhythmic way  
of bouncing from one paper  
to this ripped-off  
piece of paper  
that the handwriting's  
different there,  
dropping the pad  
and dropping this,  
holding this paper  
right next...  
People like,  
"Yo, wouldn't it be better  
if you just did it like that?"  
No.  
Words going down

in one book.

No.

That's not how

it's coming to me.

I don't want to see it

looking so calculated

and nice and pretty

and perfect.

No, it has to be graffiti.

The angst that's in me,

it has to look like

that same energy

on the paper, and...

Oh, man, those were the days.

Those were the days.

There's a lot of rappers

out there

who I'm sure you looked up to

over the years,

but right now,

a lot of new rappers

and old rappers

are looking up to you.

How do you feel

to be like a...

uh, a living prodigy?

I mean, it's a prop.

It's a blessing.

I'm a product of hip-hop,

you know what I'm saying?

I'm a product from...

of the old school

and the newest of the new.

I'm dedicated to this music,

you know what I mean?

Respect everybody

to get respect,

you know what I'm saying?

Now, your... your style

is considered very hard-core.

Would you consider

doing, like,

remix things

with R&B artists?

I'm saying whatever,  
as long as it's...  
you know what I'm saying,  
as long as it's real ill,  
you know what I'm saying?  
Long as it's clever,  
long as I...  
I-I did something good,  
you know what I'm saying,  
and it sound right.  
A'ight, is there anybody  
you'd like to work with?  
Is there anybody that  
you'd like to work with?  
Yeah, I want to work  
with, um...  
I want to work  
with the Beatles.  
The Beatles?  
[ soft hip-hop music ]  
[Rakim] We out here  
in Connecticut, man.  
This was my, like,  
home-away-from-home spot  
where I used to come out  
and have free time and...  
and peace of mind  
to do my thing,  
and my man right here  
is a studio owner.  
His name is Johnny,  
and, um, he became real cool  
over the years, man.  
You know,  
good cat, man,  
and his family's my family  
and my family's his, man,  
so, you know, it was dope  
to come from New York  
and to come out here  
and find a place  
like, you know,  
covered with trees  
and... and just, you know,

peace and quiet, man.  
I ain't have  
nobody leaning  
on my studio door  
like this the whole time  
while I was recording,  
then you open the door  
and then three people  
fall in your studio session.  
I ain't have that here.  
Stand-up dude, man.  
Good cat.  
And I don't even like  
rap music.  
And he don't even like me.  
He's just...  
- Actually...  
- You know what I mean?  
Cool dude,  
you know what I mean?  
Yeah.  
- You're like family.  
- But you... you like it now,  
- though, right?  
- I put up with you.  
You like rap music now, right?  
No.  
See, check... check out  
the house that rap built.  
The... oh! [laughs]  
That's true.  
[Rakim] Check out the house  
that rap built.  
[Johnny] That's the house  
Rakim built.  
- [Johnny] Yeah. Thank you.  
- [Rakim] You know what I mean?  
Well, word up, man. You gotta  
like rap a little bit now.  
That's the truth. I...  
Okay, I love rap.  
Like, word up, man.  
Gotta like it  
a little bit, Johnny.

Okay, all right.  
I think rap writers  
and lyricists  
are a pretty brave  
batch of guys  
over the last 30 years.  
When you listen to R&B now,  
you're listening to a hybrid  
of rap.  
I'm such a fiend for...  
for what you can do  
with the form  
that whenever I hear anything  
that's new,  
be it different  
or be it in  
a different direction  
than something  
that I liked before,  
I get something from it.  
Rappers always wanted  
to sing.  
We finally stopped  
being scared and did it.  
[ melancholy guitar music ]  
[]  
Six years old, I try  
my first pair of Jordans on  
Mama, can you carry?  
It was late in the fall  
I caught a glimpse  
of my first love  
My God  
Knees hit the floor,  
screams to the Lord  
Why'd they have  
to take my ma?  
[]  
Gather round, hustlers  
That's if  
you're still living  
And get on down before  
the judge give the sentence  
A few more rounds before

the feds come and get you  
Is you gonna smile  
when your date gets issued?  
You know the feds  
taking pictures  
Your ma's in prison  
Your father need  
a new kidney  
Your family's splitting  
Rivalries between siblings  
If cash ain't king  
It's damn sure  
the incentive  
I was one of two black kids  
in my whole high school.  
I was just used to that.  
I just stayed in my room,  
made music all the time.  
[choir singing]  
[]  
I grew up playing in church.  
I got a lot of soul  
influence and everything,  
but I consider myself  
someone that's coming up  
out of the hip-hop culture,  
and when I really was trying  
to write music,  
I was... I thought  
I was gonna be a MC,  
thought I was gonna be  
a gangsta rapper,  
you know what I'm saying?  
I was influenced by  
Snoop and Dre, and that was...  
there was nothing  
bigger than that.  
What's the meaning  
of my fortune dreaming?  
When I cracked the cookie  
All it said was  
"Keep dreaming"  
When I look at my tree,  
I see leaves missing

Generations of harsh living  
and addiction  
I came to visit during  
the seven-year stint  
But they wouldn't let me in  
because my license suspended  
Now I'm scraping  
the pennies  
Just to kiss you  
on your cheek  
It's gonna be  
a couple weeks before I  
Six years old, I try  
my first pair of Jordans on  
Mama, can you carry me?  
It was late in the fall  
I caught a glimpse  
of my first love  
My God  
Mama, can you carry me?  
Knees hit the floor  
Screams to the Lord  
Why'd they have  
to take my ma?  
To the early morning  
I love Radiohead stuff.  
I like sad  
white boy music too.  
That stuff is all  
important to me,  
and it all goes  
into my artistry.  
To the early morning  
Yeah  
But it's coming from  
a hip-hop perspective.  
I feel like it's coming from  
a drummer's perspective.  
Like, that's my first tool,  
so that's kind of  
how my brain hears music.  
Cadence is huge for me,  
and tone is probably  
what I'm thinking of

even more so  
than melody-wise,  
and then I'm putting  
the pieces together  
after the fact, but I want  
to figure out the pocket  
where I'm gonna be  
and even I gotta  
take something out.  
I want to be able  
to fit perfectly.  
I can feel  
when it's not right.  
It's like I feel  
when it's rubbing.  
I think, as a artist,  
you're building  
more of that ear as you go.  
It's important to me,  
the top line, how I come off.  
The very first thing I say,  
just that first, like,  
couplet,  
it's not always the hook.  
It might just be  
just some phrase  
you blurted out,  
you know,  
but it sets the tone, you know?  
I feel like people  
like Ghostface  
and people like Raekwon  
do that really well, you know?  
Just, like, even, like,  
Bob Dylan  
and the Beatles, you know?  
They... the first phrase  
that they drop  
is just this heavy, like,  
statement that just puts you...  
puts your mind right...  
you know, in the right place.

[]

[Anderson] Hey!



I be catching you staring,  
be careful  
The idle mind is a dangerous  
place to be left in  
But keep your eyes on me  
Hey  
Your heart  
don't stand a chance  
Yeah  
It feels like  
it's been far too long  
Your heart  
don't stand a chance  
Your feet just wanna dance  
Your eyes keep me  
all in a trance  
And let me ask you  
[]  
Bases loaded...  
Hey, yo, Johnny, wake up, man.  
I'm ready to do  
my vocals now, baby.  
[Johnny] Yeah, wake up.  
Wake up.  
This is the Telefunken  
right here, man.  
You know, I get in this booth,  
man, and zone out.  
Like, I'll cut  
the lights off out there  
and I wouldn't see nothing  
past this glass.  
I'm actually looking through  
at Johnny right now.  
Even though he's right here,  
like,  
it's taking me back.  
One time, he said to me,  
"What... what's this red stuff  
over here?"  
I said, "That's  
Diana Ross' lipstick."  
[laughs]  
Word up, man.

You know what I mean?  
So yeah, I was kissing  
on the mic that day.  
I rubbed that shit  
on my cheek.

Smack.

You know what I mean?  
You know, I never believed  
in writer's block,  
but it'll be times where  
you know, I'm stuck, so,  
um, you know, you're listening  
to the track, and, you know,  
course, as the track  
is rocking,  
sometimes you know  
how you want your rhyme to end,  
so if I couldn't think of  
how the rhyme  
was supposed to start,  
I definitely knew  
how it was supposed to end,  
so I would start on that bar  
and work my way  
all the way back  
to the first bar.

Now,  
I would never let nobody  
know I was doing that  
until I seen this thing on TV.  
I think it was Martin Scorsese.  
He said, "If you want  
to write a good movie,  
you start at the end  
and work your way  
to the front."

[distant siren wailing]

[John The Author]

They love me like religion  
When I pull up  
in the coupe  
All I hear is "amen"  
when I step up out the booth  
I gave you niggas truth,

the whole truth  
And nothing but it  
The meek shall inherit  
Everything they tried  
to covet  
Look me in my eyes,  
see the anger in my soul  
I gave you niggas goals  
Through the rhymes  
I done wrote  
I gave you niggas guidance  
from a spiritual alliance  
And all I got in return  
was a lyrical defiance  
Messiah of writers,  
they say that  
I'm inciting riots  
and they right  
'Cause I'd be lying  
if I said I wasn't trying  
Vicious as a lion  
in the jungle  
With a mouth full of teeth  
And a stomach  
full of hunger  
Boy, you better  
feed him something  
Look at all the pictures  
I done painted  
in these scriptures  
Look at all the men  
I done made out of knickers  
Look at all the queens  
I done made out of sisters  
Look at all the road  
I done paved out of inches  
You can't argue with the fact  
that, like, that kid  
just said that,  
both poetry-wise...  
You can put it up  
against anybody.  
You can put that up  
against Rumi

and you can put it up  
against Shakespeare,  
but then also,  
like, spiritually  
and cosmically,  
it's evident.  
It's all there.  
The proof is all there,  
and if other people  
are able to grasp it,  
then that's just what it is,  
but even if  
they never grasp it,  
I know I saw  
how it changed my friends.  
I saw what it did  
to the people that I love,  
and I saw what it...  
I know what it did to me.  
[J. Cole] When you in  
that zone and when you know  
it's coming from, like,  
a higher power,  
it's like,  
"Oh, I'm tapped in right now."  
That feeling is, like,  
priceless.  
You know what I mean?  
So, like, I'm forever  
chasing that.  
[Meechy Darko]  
Twenty years of my life,  
I had no windows in my room.  
I was in solitary.  
I was trapped, you know?  
All your energy is bouncing  
off these four walls  
that are so close to you.  
It's like you can't breathe,  
you're suffocating,  
but at the same time,  
if you focus,  
you can use that energy  
and harness that energy

and get the fuck out of there,  
and that's what we did.

For sure.

[Zombie Juice]

Deadass, I hung out  
in a fucking staircase  
for years.

[Meechy Darko] Trying to  
figure out what we're gonna do.

[Zombie Juice]

Nasty gray walls.

That's pretty depressing.

I try to tell myself  
that I still don't got shit.

We don't got shit.

We still don't have shit,  
though.

All we got is music.

DJ Shadow's "Nobody Speak"  
playing

[]

I ain't lying,  
kick a lion in his crack  
I'm the shit  
I will fall off  
in your crib, take a shit  
Pinch your mama  
on the booty  
Kick your dog,  
fuck your bitch  
Fat boy dressed up  
like he's Santa  
And took pictures  
with your kids  
We're the best  
We will cut a frowny face  
In your chest,  
little wench  
I'm unmentionably fresh  
I'm a mensch,  
get correct  
I will walk into a court  
while erect  
Screaming, "Yes, I am guilty,

motherfuckers, I am death"  
Hey, you want to hear  
a good joke?  
Nobody speak,  
nobody get choked  
[]  
Get running  
Start pumping your bunions,  
I'm coming  
I'm the dumbest  
who flamethrow  
Your function  
to Funyuns  
Flame your crew quicker than  
Trump fucks his youngest  
Now face the flame,  
fuckers...  
[Styles P] Yeah,  
Juices For Life 211,  
we up in here,  
Yonkers, New York.  
We got wheatgrass,  
fruits of all sorts,  
protein powder, sea moss,  
people.  
You consider this  
Cheers for healthy folks.  
Like, you know what I'm saying?  
[Jadakiss] What are those?  
The knowledge is different  
from when we first came in.  
We was young boys from Yonkers,  
you know, from the hood.  
If you wasn't at home,  
you was eating fast food  
or snack foods or,  
you know,  
some type of bullshit.  
It's the balance.  
This is the equalizer.  
I feel totally different.  
I feel better.  
- I feel healthier.  
- Yo, what's these?

Armies or waves?  
I feel like, um...  
I feel like... I feel great.  
I think it's hard to find  
somebody that you could say  
been spitting for a dub.  
And we were spitting  
before we was on.  
But we been spitting  
for a dub, legit.  
I don't think you could find  
a bunch of other people  
you could say that about.  
Very few.  
There's definitely a few  
you could say,  
but not a bunch.  
So at the end,  
I think, with us,  
I think that what sets...  
sets us apart is,  
we still getting better.  
[ orchestral music  
with hop-hop beat ]  
[]  
- Word is...  
- [Jadakiss] Word is bond.  
Word is bond.  
Word is bond!  
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