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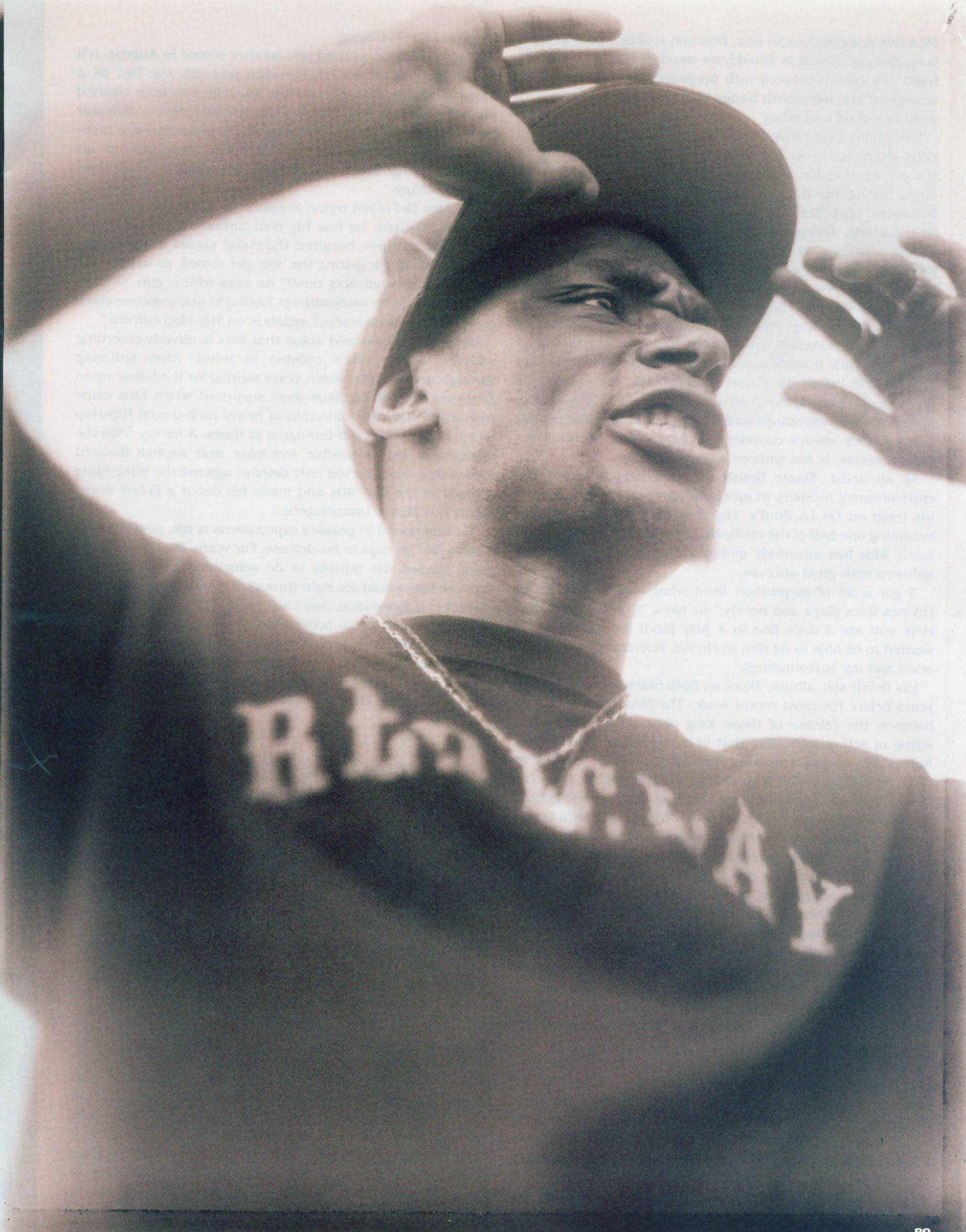
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INSTINCTIVE TRAVELS

AS HE PREPARES HIS FINAL MAJOR LABEL ALBUM, MOS DEF IS TAKING HOLLYWOOD BY STORM. BUT, WITH HIS CAREER AT A CROSSROADS, BLACK DANTE IS ALSO FIGHTING TO KEEP HIP-HOP FROM HITTING A DEAD END

WORDS BY JERRY L. BARROW
PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRIAN SMITH



MOS DEF IS A VERY PATIENT MAN. Between sips of ginger ale at a secluded restaurant in Brooklyn's trendy DUMBO neighborhood, his speech is laced with pregnant pauses. While Mos never stutters, his mouth hangs with the weight of his words until he's good and ready.

"It's about being invested in the moment," the Brooklyn-born MC/actor says, not of his conversational style, but of his preparation for the many acting roles he has notched since taking up the craft in 1988 at Manhattan's Julia Richmond High School. "I'm trying to get to this place from this moment. There are scientific approaches to acting and there are other parts that just come. I just try to get to the point of preparation so when those moments come, I'm ready. It's a process of discovery. You don't have all the answers all the time. Sometimes you just don't know."

This summer, Mos stars in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* as Ford Prefect, an alien journalist masquerading as an out-of-work human actor while he records information about Earth before the planet is destroyed. "He watches as much as he participates," Mos says of Prefect. "He kind of absorbs his surroundings and adapts. Nothing really throws him off. He's always confident that he'll land on his feet." Fate, it seems, is not without a sense of irony.

As an artist, Dante Smith has diligently observed the entertainment industry in much the same way. Since cutting his teeth on De La Soul's "Big Brother Beat" in 1996 and becoming one half of the celebrated Black Star duo with Talib Kweli, Mos has intuitively moved around the entertainment industry with great success.

"I got a lot of inspiration from what I wanted to do in rhymes from plays and novels," he says. "Coming from Hip-Hop, you see a dope line in a play [and] it's like, 'Wow.' I wanted to be able to do that in rhyme, referencing my generation and my surroundings."

His debut solo album, *Black on Both Sides*, came a full five years before his most recent work, *The New Danger*. But in between the release of those long players, he amassed a string of acting roles, like that of a dog-hating thief in *The Italian Job*, and side hustles, like hosting HBO's *Def Poetry Jam*. As a result, *The New Danger* charted higher than his first CD and is approaching gold sales status, despite getting no visible push from his record label. While most MCs would be crying bloody murder, Mos simply rolls with the punches.

"There is definitely a transfer of power happening in the industry that people at the top are struggling with," Mos says. "Artists are starting to realize that you don't necessarily need all of these middlemen, like an A&R or a program director at a radio station, if you have any sort of following or awareness around what you're doing. The music speaks for itself. It's a tenuous time for labels because Prince, Souls of Mischief and MF Doom are off that radar but are just as viable, lucrative and have a growing audience. And they aren't asking anybody's permission. They're doing exactly what they want to do."

Mos Def's career represents a paradigm shift in the Hip-Hop industry. While neophyte MCs are clamoring for extracurriculars like acting before the ink dries on their recording contracts, Mos has worked in reverse, making his acting career work for his music. Not unlike Will Smith, who at \$25 million a picture does not need to rap, Mos composes now for the love of the art, not to live. This affords him a degree of freedom and a perspective that the average MC on

the grind doesn't enjoy.

"I'm working on putting out another record in August. It'll be my last record with Geffen and probably the last on a major label for a while," says the MC who was once courted by Jay-Z to sign with Roc-A-Fella Records. "It's a different time. I think the record industry is an industrial-age technology. And it's having industrial-age responses to an information-age world. They rely on the formulas more than they did before."

But Mos Def is not trying to mimic the platinum sounds of Nelly or 50 Cent; he has his own formula in mind. "What would two or three hundred thousand copies of my record look like when I'm getting the 'xyz' per record, as opposed to the prorated in contracts now?" he asks with a grin. "I want the opportunity to work without having to ask someone else's position or provide a short syllabus on Hip-Hop culture."

However, some would argue that Mos is already recording without anyone else's opinion in mind. After suffering through nearly half a dozen years waiting for the follow-up to *Black on Both Sides*, fans were surprised when Mos came with a left-of-center collection of heavy rock-tinged Hip-Hop which bordered on self-indulgent at times. A far cry from the provocative yet accessible wordplay and asphalt-flavored sonics that stood as the only defense against the bling-bling armada of the late '90s and made his debut a B-boy document. But Mos is unapologetic.

"If I was bound to people's expectations of me, people would smell a rat," he says in his defense. For years, Mos has resisted being labeled. He refuses to do something he isn't feeling because fans would see right through it. "At the end of the day, respect is a foundation they can't move. I'm trying to create a place for myself as an artist where I can do whatever I like without heavy scrutiny. The biggest thing with *The New Danger* was rock 'n' roll, and America, for whatever reason, has a difficult time digesting Black people in a modern context and rock 'n' roll. Fuck that. You gotta do what you feel."

"JIMMY IOVINE, LYOR COHEN, DOUG MORRIS... WERE NOT PREPARED FOR A WORLD WHERE THEY HAVE TO DEAL WITH PEOPLE WHO ARE OUTSIDE OF THEIR CLASS AS PARTNERS. IT'S A BITTER F*IN' PILL TO SWALLOW."**

RING THE ALARM

Maybe it's the heat, but standing on a deserted road at the edge of the Florida Everglades has altered Mos Def's mood. A discussion about what kind of support his labelmate Common will receive for his new album has triggered a fit of rage. While Mos earned many accolades for his acting roles in *Something The Lord Made* and *Top Dog/Underdog*, it becomes clear that his temperamental character in





Bamboozled, Big Blak Afrika, might not have been an act.

"It's starting to be like the corporations are only supportin' personalities and stories that fit into a perception that is easily digestible for them in their experience or a character that they're fixated with," he says of the reluctance of labels to promote positive images in Hip-Hop. "People in control like to see niggas fighting, gangster posturing. Those are the only stories they're interested in. They turn them on for reasons they're aware of and not aware of. Racism is like a cancer; it starts in your foot and spreads. Unfortunately, it is so [much] a part of the American psyche that people are acting out racist reflexes without realizing it, you know what I'm sayin'?"

Back in 1990, KRS-One alluded to this same notion on the song "The Racist," in which he declared that the most dangerous racist is "the unconscious racist." But Mos doesn't excuse the powers that be. They benefit either way.

"Jimmy Iovine, Lyor Cohen, Doug Morris...all of these dudes were not prepared in their schooling or in any of their social upbringing for a world where they have to deal face to face with, not only people who are outside of their class, but people who in their minds could very well be their servants," Mos says, clarifying things for anyone who thought that "The Rape Over" was done for shock value. "Now you gotta deal with somebody you've been trained to deal with as your underling as your partner. It's a bitter fuckin' pill to swallow, 'cause now you need this person. Jimmy Iovine is not your buddy. Lyor is not happy about Jay-Z [being president and CEO of Def Jam]. I don't give a fuck what he say. If the dude could go from rhyming to being a CEO in 10 years or less, what is he going to be in 15 or 20? He might have Lyor's job at this rate."

Mos stands defiantly in a red, black and green ensemble with an unlit cigarette dangling between his fingers as he rants. His sword cuts both ways. The executives are only part of the problem he sees with the state of Hip-Hop. The artists must also be held accountable. He pops a disc into the van's CD player and the beat to Common's "The Corners" comes blaring out. Soon Mos's voice follows in what will be the remix to the song once Scarface and Common record their verses. According to Mos, the mic is a military weapon used in times of emergency. Not everyone is meant to use it. Hip-Hop was once an outlaw culture in a time when meeting on corners to rhyme or breakdance was considered unlawful assembly. But now we've been reduced to being the soundtrack to other people's lifestyles.

"Our priorities is gettin' fucked up," he says. "Lil Jon—I love his music. But why are the East Side Boyz' names Big Sam and [Lil] Bo? What the fuck? What's next, Kunta and Kinte? The South should know better. This is the same country that ran up in Fred Hampton's crib and shot him in bed with his pregnant wife. You think the rules changed 'cause niggas got No. 1 records? What are we supposed to tell our kids? After Malcolm, Martin and Dubois we got Sam-Bo? I'm supposed to be down with that 'cause it makes me dance?"

Nothing seems to be out of bounds for Black Dante. Not right now. Everything from "The Whisper Song" being played on the radio when kids can hear it to MCs naming themselves after crack, "a plague of the Black community," has the jade fist around his neck swinging as he shouts.

"Paris Hilton don't really care about y'all niggas, man. She can't even hear y'all niggas. I'm just keeping it real. This shit is entertainment to them. We're adopting their morals like we them and we never been them. We don't have the same struggle. Dudes is no more than 20 years removed from real

poverty. For dudes to have this much access to money and it's not translating to people power, it's inexcusable."

Mos already knows that the chants of "mad rapper" and "hater" will come in force when his words get out, but he remains undaunted. "It used to be 'fight the power'; now it's 'watch what you say about me,'" he says. "Now you a hater. Get the fuck outta here. That ain't no real nigga shit. I'm not makin' music for dumb niggas. They ain't my audience and I'm cool with that."

Mos's audience will have plenty to ponder when *The Undentable Free Flaco* drops this summer. With like-minded artists such as Q-Tip, Common and Kanye West putting out albums this year, Mos wants to be part of that dialogue.

"I want to do something for my last major label album that will be eventful and a building block to the rest of my career, artistically and on a business level," he says. "The new stuff is definitely boom-bap material. It's also got that dreamlike quality as well, like 'Electric City Ghost Story,' where I use parts of Victor D. LaValle's story *Slapboxing With Jesus*. It's me. This one is going to be...more basic, fundamental formats without sacrificing creativity or imagination to achieve it."

**"I'M NOT MAKIN' MUSIC
FOR DUMB N****S.
THEY AIN'T MY AUDIENCE
AND I'M COOL WITH THAT."**

THE BECOMING

Hours later, Mos Def has found a happy place. His face creases into a dimpled smile as he nods his head to songs from Jean Grae and 9th Wonder's unreleased project, *Jeanius*. "What is she doing to me? Is she trying to make me fall in love from rhyming?" he jokes of his former *Lyricist Lounge Show* co-star. He doesn't lament that her project has yet to reach the public. Instead, he feels that passing it along through the headphones is truer to the culture. "Keep sharing it," he advises. "People will demand it."

The conversation inevitably leads to artists who struggle financially because they won't compromise their integrity. As he takes off the headphones, his voice drops slightly.

"Dude, I have a large family with small children. I need money every day. But there is certain shit I'm not doin'," he says. "God been feeding me and taking care of me. I have success on my own terms."

Mos glances ahead to the traffic on the Florida Turnpike. He knows his final destination, but isn't quite sure how he'll get there. His career path is pretty much the same way. He starts filming a movie with Bruce Willis in the next few weeks, but the music is taking priority, at least tonight. There will be some mixtapes down the line, and definitely a Black Star album, but not before the time is right. He's flexible, and hopes that Hip-Hop is still open to some new directions.

"I am going to be the first artist from my era to prove that you don't have to be what White people are comfortable with [to] connect to the streets," he says. "I'm connected to Black people, not because of BET or radio...but because I'm still here." **S**