

# COMMON

When was the last time you saw yourself in a hip-hop song? When was the last time a hip-hop artist gave you an extraordinary description of the lives of ordinary people? While many of his peers were drawing black and white pictures of thugs, gangsters, pimps and hoes Common was dipping into a thousand-color palette to paint a picture that would capture the experience of the average person and all of its nuances. The name of his masterpiece is BE, simple yet profound the album is culmination of 13 years in the music biz and a lifetime of feeling, learning and growing. "I look at my career like a circle," says Common. "My last album, [2002's Electric Circus,] was the furthest point away from the starting point and now I'm back at the root again. The name of my new album is BE. It's about being able to be without trying, being able to be in the present moment, being able to be natural and being who you are. Musically, I want to express that state of being. For me, it also means not dwelling on the past and not worrying about what people are saying about me. It's about where I am right now as an artist and as a person."

While his last album, Electric Circus was critically acclaimed as an audacious endeavor that challenged and expanded the creative boundaries of hip-hop, many diehard fans who'd been tracking Common's career since the release of his street-smart debut CD, Can I Borrow A Dollar?, felt that he'd abandoned his hip-hop purist roots in favor of an eclectic fusion of sunnier sounds and textures. In the wake of *Electric Circus*'s disappointing sales and Common's subsequent breakup with his longtime girlfriend, neo-soul songstress Erykah Badu, the rapper who was born Lonnie Rashid Lynn says he "hit the ground" and re-evaluated the direction of his life and career. "It was definitely a rugged time that brought me back down to earth," he recalls. But rather than brooding over his discontent, Common picked up his pen and pad and began writing the foundation for BE.

Recorded mostly in New York and Los Angeles, and largely written in the Chicago native's hometown, BE is a brilliant manifestation of raw, warm, soulful, pure, contemporary hip-hop that clocks in at just 11 songs. "It's not overdone," Common says, explaining his minimalist approach to BE. "I wanted to choose the best songs and make it a complete story. For a lot of the songs I didn't even write three verses-some of the songs are shorter-because that's what felt right and good. Ultimately, I felt like each song was powerful enough that I didn't need more than 11 songs."

Common's return to his roots and to his music's unadulterated essence meant that the bulk of BE's production would be helmed by Kanye West a fellow Chicagoan who came up under the tutelage of Common's first producer and good friend No I.D. West, contributed nine tracks and helped to shape the overall sound of the LP while A Tribe Called Quest collaborator Jay Dee, produced two cuts ("Love Is" and "It's Your World"). BE is the second release on West's Getting Out Our Dreams Music label, which launched earlier this year with the release of John Legend's debut, Get Lifted. The result is a superlative collection of successive gems that finds Common, a seasoned vet, rhyming with the hunger, intensity and fire of a newjack. "I feel like this is a reintroduction in a way," says Common, explaining his motivation behind songs such as "Chi City," a hometown anthem anchored by a hard drum beat, a soulful horn sample and cuts by DJ Dummy and DJ A-Trak, in which Common spits: "I rap with the passion of Christ / Nigga, cross me / Took it outta space and niggas thought they lost me / I'm back like a chiroprac with b-boy survival rap / It ain't '94, Joe, we can't go back."

"As an MC, I'm just getting some things off my chest," Common says. Not only does Common spit aggressively to solidify his status as a super-MC, he also shows and proves with masterfully crafted story raps and conceptual rhymes that showcase the depth of his ability as a storyteller. Take, for instance, "Testify," a rugged, cinematic, suspense thriller that finds Common spinning the tale of a woman testifying for her man in court. Other highlights include "Faithful," wherein Common contemplates the connection between God and woman while the soul-stirring voices of Bilal and John Legend tug at the listener's heart strings.

"Kanye was very enthused and passionate about creating some good hip-hop music and I knew he could create something unique that real niggas in the world could feel-that the average Joe could connect with," says Common. "It was the same thing with Jay Dee," he continues. "His music possesses a soulful rawness that I felt like anybody could relate to. More than anything, I love their production. They're both creative and original guys. Its people out there now who imitate both of their sounds. They're the originators of a sound. Plus, we got that Chicago-Detroit connection real strong. The root of our thing comes from the soul era of Diana Ross and Marvin Gaye. As far as hip-hop goes, Kanye and Jay Dee are in the spirit of soulful hip-hop, which is what I love and what I've wanted to create since I started my career."

In keeping with Common's unpretentious approach to BE, the album's guest appearances are kept to a refreshing minimum: Besides frequent collaborator Bilal ("It's Your World," "Faithful") and John Legend ("Faithful," "They Say"), the only other co-star is Kanye West, who trades verses with Common on "They Say," along with The Last Poets, whom enhance Common's lyrical portrait of inner city blues on "The Corner" and, as always, Pops, who drops knowledge on the outro. "A lot of the hip-hop albums that I enjoy and that are classic-records

like Illmatic, Low End Theory and Paid in Full-don't feature a lot of people on 'em," says Common. "I believe that true artists don't need a bunch of guest appearances to make there album or to shine. You can create good music yourself. I wanted people to know where Common is right now and who I am."

Unlike many of his hip-hop contemporaries, Common doesn't make disposable art nor does he run from the title "conscious". He's concerned with making music that'll speak to the listeners' mind, body and soul, good music that'll stand the test of time. BE won't just raise the bar for hip-hop albums it is destined to have the name Common said in the same breath as artists like Marvin Gaye, Bob Marley and Donny Hathaway and that, friends, is exactly as it should be.

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