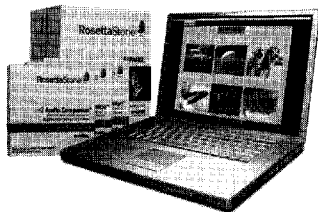


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ONWARD AND UPWARD WITH THE ARTS

THE MASK OF DOOM

A nonconformist rapper's second act.

BY TA-NEHISI COATES

I first heard the rapper Daniel Dumile (pronounced DOOM-ee-lay) when I was fourteen and hip-hop was just beginning to bloom. The music was not so much “CNN for black people,” as Chuck D would later dub it, as a lingua franca. I came up awkward in West Baltimore—a tall black boy with no jumper, no gear, and no game. But my mastery of the arcane verses of X-Clan, my sense that the decoupling of EPMD was an irreparable tragedy, and my abiding hatred of Vanilla Ice ushered me into the scowling ranks of my generation.

In those days, you could tune in to “Yo! MTV Raps” and see everything from the gangsta stylings of N.W.A. to the mysticism of Rakim and the goofy musings of the Afros. This was the heyday of sampling—most rap was too small for lawsuits—and a hard-ass beat could come from anything: the opening piano riff from Otis Redding’s “Hard to Handle,” the horns from Inspector Gadget’s theme song, a hook from “Schoolhouse Rock.”

Dumile was typical of that motley generation. Performing under the name Zevlove X, he made his debut in 1989 with a verse on a song called “The Gas Face,” the second single by the group 3rd Bass. In the video, an assortment of hip-hop royalty gives “the gas face” (a maneuver that involves shaking your face in a slack-jawed manner, while moaning) to Adolf Hitler, the South African President P. W. Botha, and the mainstream rapper MC Hammer. Dumile, who was eighteen years old when the video was made, wears a gas-station attendant’s uniform and a baseball cap cocked to the side. His babyish face seems to shrink behind a pair of oversized glasses.

Two years later, as a member of the group KMD, Dumile released the album “Mr. Hood.” It was uneven, notable mostly for the cult hit “Peach Fuzz” (“By the hairs of my chinny chin chin, gots many plus plenty / String by string, I

think I counts like twenty”). Dumile’s style is vibrant and freewheeling; he skates over the beat, undisturbed by guitar and piano riffs, sliding words into the empty spaces between the snare and the kick drums. “At the time, it was people coming out everywhere,” he told me recently. “It was ‘Such-and-such over there is live. Such-and-such over here is live.’ And we were all going hard. It was slightly competitive, and everyone was blowing before us. We were kind of the fringe group. It was like, ‘You know about KMD, yo?’”

KMD never got the chance to blow up. In 1993, Dumile’s brother Dingilizwe, also a member of KMD and known as Subroc, was hit by a car and killed. Later that year, KMD’s label, Elektra, refused to release the group’s second album, “Black Bastards,” fearing a controversy over the cover art (a Sambo figure being sent to the gallows). The group left the label, just as rap’s commercial appeal was becoming undeniable. Artists like Snoop, Tupac, and Dr. Dre were going multi-platinum, and by the end of the decade rap had gone from American cult music to American pop music.

Meanwhile, I kept the assembled works of Wu-Tang Clan on repeat and stewed, convinced that somewhere around 1998 hip-hop had run out of things to say. I was not alone. Disaffected music fans began to refer to the halcyon days of the eighties and nineties—when every rapper had a d.j., and label owners didn’t vamp in videos, confusing themselves with artists—as “the Golden Era.”

We were the kind of fundamentalists that haunt every genre of popular music. By the end of the nineties, we had started seeking a sound that offered something other than guns, girls, and drugs. Some of us found neo-soul. Others got lost in our parents’ jazz records. And still others were radicalized and turned to U2 and Björk.

Dumile vanished from the national

scene and began living as a civilian in New York City. He had a child. "I was just doing regular stuff, just raising my son," he told me.

Then, in 1999, Dumile released a solo record, "Operation: Doomsday," under the moniker Metal Face Doom. His verbal agility was intact, and his lyrics had grown more sinister. There was a mean streak to his humor, and he made references to the death of his brother ("On Doomsday—ever since the womb, till I'm back where my brother went / That's what my tomb will say"). And something else—Dumile, in the guise of MF Doom, did literally what most rappers only do metaphorically: he wore a mask.

A rap album is an autobiographical comic book, whose author styles himself as a twisted, oft put-upon antihero. Carlton Ridenhour, a Long Island native who studied graphic design in college, picked up a mike and became Chuck D, an enemy of the state, a revealer of racist conspiracies, a militant watched by the F.B.I. Christopher Wallace was morbidly obese and, by his own assessment, "black and ugly as ever," but when he became Biggie Smalls he transformed himself into a Lothario whose hits, like "One More Chance," portrayed him as a prolific cuckold artist—"Where you at flipping jobs, playing car-notes? / While I'm swimming in your women like the breaststroke." At various moments, the rapper Nas billed himself as Nasty Nas (corner seer), Nas Escobar (gangsta drug kingpin), and Nastradamus (sanctimonious, persecuted celebrity).

When Dumile began performing as MF Doom, he extended hip-hop's obsession with façades. While other m.c.s fashioned themselves after outlaws, thugs, or drug dealers, Dumile, whose handle is inspired by the Fantastic Four villain Dr. Doom, called himself "the Su-

pervillain." When he raps, he often refers to Doom in the third person. Other m.c.s are obsessed with machismo; Dumile is obsessed with "Star Trek" and "Logan's Run."

When I rediscovered Dumile, in his new guise, I was on the cusp of fatherhood and life-partnership, and considering divorce from the music of my youth. My outlook was that of any

manner suggested a retired B-boy tossing off the trappings of domesticity for one last boisterous romp.

The mask "came out of necessity," Dumile explained. It was a warm afternoon in Atlanta, where he lives now, and we were sitting in black vinyl chairs in an alley in midtown. Dumile wore a green polo shirt, matching green shorts, a pair of

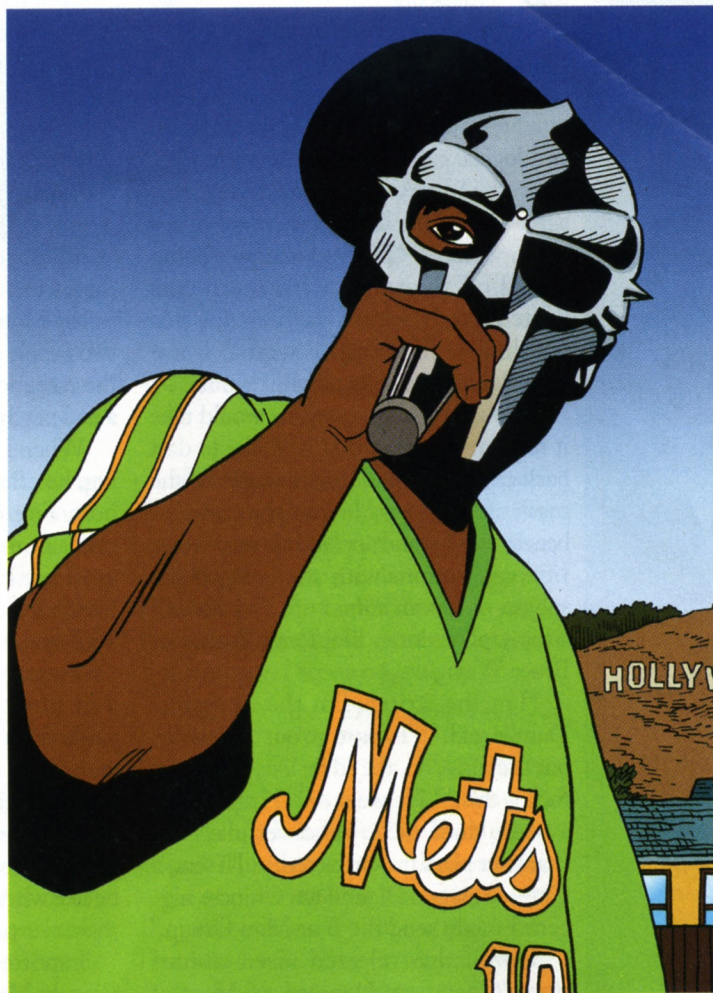
black Air Jordans without socks, and a New York Mets cap. His glasses were missing a lens and sat crooked on his face. He removed the Mets cap and placed it on his knee.

Dumile, who is now thirty-eight, was raised on Long Island, home of several prominent rap groups of the Golden Era—De La Soul, Public Enemy, EPMD, and Leaders of the New School. He started performing during the infancy of hip-hop, when no one had yet realized the potential for big money in a guy talking into a microphone.

"Rhyming wasn't that popular back then, but it was fun," Dumile told me. "And people would say, 'Oh, you rhyme? Oh, snap, say a rhyme for me! Say another one! Say the one about the girl!' Everybody had a cousin who came out for the summer and could rhyme. And you'd be like, 'Oh, he rhymes? Oh, he rhymes? I gotta meet him.'

"Ever since third grade, I had a notebook and was putting together words just for fun," Dumile went on. "I liked different etymologies, different slang that came out in different eras. Different languages. Different dialects. I liked being able to speak to somebody and throw it back and forth, and they can't predict what you're going to say next. But once you say it they're always like, 'Oh, shit!'"

For MF Doom, Dumile wanted to create a character with a complete backstory, which he would reference through a series of albums. "The story was coming together, and it worked and became popular. And now people wanted to see



Doom explains his mask as an effort to "control the story."

Golden Age proponent—I was worn down by the petty beefs between rappers, by the murders of Tupac and Biggie, and by the music's assumption of all the trappings of the celebrity culture in which it now existed.

Doom's music was revanche, and the Doom persona felt as though it had emerged from the graveyard of rappers murdered by glam-hop. Onstage, Doom looked the part. He cultivated a dishevelled aspect—ill-fitting white tees or throwback Patrick Ewing jerseys. His paunch gently rebelled against the borders of his shirt. He was visibly balding. His

