

SPIN CYCLE: ATMOSPHERE PAINTING IT GOLD

By Dan Brian

The concept of a life cycle has never been so defined in an art form as it has been in music. Many artists come and go, reaching unfathomable peaks, only to stumble into a dumpster later. But it's the inevitable, double-edged decision most successful artists are forced to make—to fight the future or fuck the past? Stay the course and risk stagnation, or explore growing sensibilities and jeopardize a fan base?

Minneapolis' finest hip-hop duo, Atmosphere, is finding a balance between growth and constancy. Along with their label, Rhymesayers Records, Slug and Ant have been a bastion of soul, sincerity, and brutal honesty for the past 10 years in what used to be a vapid Midwestern hip-hop scene.

Most know the story, as it's the typical rollercoaster many MCs and DJs have ridden before: earn your bones in the underground (Headshots), put out a few records (Overcast! and God Loves Ugly), put out a breakthrough album (Sevens Travels), get critical praise, and then get critically trashed on the follow-up record (You Can't Imagine How Much Fun Were Having). And so it goes for the two, as they endeavor upon their fifth LP, When Life Gives You Lemons, You Paint That Shit Gold, the inevitable maturation every artist must face.

"I think the title of the record gives away the concept," says Slug. "The record is about dealing with decision-making skills and trying how to be a better decision-maker."

Atmosphere's last record, You Can't Imagine How Much Fun Were Having, was somewhat of a departure for the duo as the subject matter became less autobiographical and more fictionalized, and the signature overtones of dysfunctional relationships and binge drinking became reminiscent undertones. Now Slug drinks less, is trying to be a more of a prominent father figure in his son's life, and is in a stable relationship.

"There's not too much relationship chaos on this record and, obviously, I think it's because I haven't been dealing with relationship chaos," says Slug reflecting upon his life's correlation to the new record. "There are going to be a couple of 22-year-olds that are going to be, like, 'What the fuck is this? I need a 'Fuck You Lucy,' because I'm mad at my ex. And there's no 'Fuck You Lucy' there."

Many will say that the maturation of an artist usually means the end of a good era, but Atmosphere's discography has been in constant flux over the past two years with the release of three EPs, a full-length LP, and an entirely free album à la Radiohead. There's never been more Atmosphere, and Slug attributes the recent surge in productivity to a growing sobriety.

"I'm definitely not sober, but I definitely do not self-medicate as hard as I used to. The difference is now, in the past I might have had

12 beers a night, now if I get through four in a week, that's kind of a feat. I didn't go completely sober, I just distanced myself," he says. "Alcohol was a real big social thing for me so I just started to cut off how social I allowed myself to be. And it worked well because I'm no longer single and instead of stepping off stage and going straight to where the drunk females are, I'll step off stage and go to the merch table and shake hands and kiss babies." But he admits that his marijuana consumption has skyrocketed since his decision, so he still self-medicates, just not with alcohol.

Many of Slug's personal adjustments reflect the growing amount of changes in Atmosphere's recent evolutionary arc. He feels the lyrics on the upcoming record are more optimistic and he continues to delve

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deeper into his deft storytelling abilities, with fictional characters and anecdotes that serve a sort of moral lesson. He's learning to paint with brighter colors, he says, and is trying to avoid the self-fulfilling prophecy of the dark and dysfunctional Slug caricature that he became prior to the release of You Can't Imagine How Much Fun Were Having.

"I think with that last record, that was the nail in the coffin of me wearing my dysfunctionality on my sleeve and me actually being, like, there's a bigger picture here. Whether or not Lucy kills me is really fucking irrelevant if there's a woman across the street that has to work two full-time jobs because she's a single mom," he says.

On a more technical note, the group has been slowly shedding the song sampling model that most rap acts rely on. When Life Gives You Lemons, You Paint That Shit Gold is the group's first record without any sampling whatsoever. "I think the main difference people are going to hear between You Can't Imagine How Much Fun Were Having and the new one is that were not sampling from records, we're sampling from actual organic instruments being played," he explains. "There's a fullness; there's a lot more room for things to soften, or get tighter, or get harder. There's just a lot more room to play with, sonically. But I want to trick people into thinking that we made this record just like we make all our records."

Atmosphere has come a long way from the rag-tag team producing Headshots cassette tapes, and the future is already brimming with prospective projects, including another Felt collaboration with Wurs dedicated to a another B-movie actress. Which one, he wouldn't elaborate on.

And now a PSA from Slug—"No more Vicadins for you, kids! Knock that shit the fuck off! You're fucking up your liver... It ain't worth it. And I don't want to have to pay for your shitty liver in 20 years. And quit smoking cigarettes, goddamn it! You guys are going to be fucking expensive for the rest of us..."

For more info, go to: rhymesayers.com



Photo by Matt Blum



