

# The New York Times

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## ATMOSPHERE

*"When Life Gives You Lemons ..."*

(Rhymesayers)

Slug was the rare rapper who delved into his failings and insecurities when he and his partner, the producer Ant (short for Anthony Davis), started Atmosphere in the 1990s in Minneapolis. For a while Atmosphere was tagged as emo rap. Now that Slug (whose real name is Sean Daley) is in his 30s and Atmosphere has a loyal audience, he has almost — not quite — run out of confessions.

On "When Life Gives You Lemons ...," Atmosphere's fifth retail album — it released a free downloadable collection on [Christmas](#), still available from [rhymesayers.com](#) — Slug mostly looks at other people's lives: a bunch of losers, or at best strugglers, who get his hard-nosed sympathy. There are waitresses, prostitutes, a homeless man, drunks, addicts, a faded rock star and some unsuitable parents.

The words are upfront, with a naturalistic delivery that sometimes recalls [Kanye West](#). These are storytelling songs, not club tracks, moving at midtempo and often easing back toward ballads. Ant's lean, varied productions often use just one vamp per song, which might be a buzzing synthesizer riff, some gospel-soul piano chords, soul-band horns or, in "Guarantees," which is a portrait of a working stiff, a singer-songwriter's lone guitar. A few songs have melodic choruses that Slug sings modestly, but effectively.

Slug himself is still in a few songs: "Yesterday," which sounds as if it's about an ex-girlfriend until its last few rhymes, and "Me," a warning to prospective hookups over a hint of bossa nova. And in "You," after sympathizing with a waitress who is constantly fending off unwanted advances, he can't resist flirting himself. He doesn't judge other people harshly — he's been seeing his own flaws for far too long. **JON PARELES**