

Brother Ali:
Rockin' the
flattop

Breaking Out

SPIN

Brother Ali

The whitest of white rappers turns bad times into a great album

From OutKast's "Ms. Jackson" to Nas' "Bridging the Gap," hip-hop has always had daddy issues. But few artists have tackled fatherhood the way Brother Ali does, if only by necessity. The striking Minneapolis rapper, an albino Muslim with a staccato flow and a pugilistic, almost menacing stage presence, has recently become a single dad to his six-year-old son after his decade-long marriage came to an inglorious end. "I had an ugly breakup and divorce," he says of the emotionally taxing, creatively fallow period following his 2003 debut, *Shadows on the Sun*. "I was without a place to stay, just had the clothes on my back kind of

thing. When I say I have custody, I mean we have restraining orders against my wife. It's me all day. I didn't record any music for two years."

The Undisputed Truth (Rhymesayers) breaks his reluctant silence by chronicling these painful events, which included his mother's death from cancer in 2003. "The whole foundation of my life changed," the 29-year-old Ali (born Jason Newman) says. "If you're really putting your heart into what you're doing, you can't not document that." Ali addresses his turmoil directly on cuts like "Puzzle" ("Alone in this life / Would have been at my throat with a knife...if not for my passion to live"), while the deceptively jaunty "Walkin' Away"

FAST FACTS

→ Brother Ali also performs with a band called **Ursus Minor**, featuring Stokley Williams of Twin Cities funkateers Mint Condition.

→ Other albino musicians of note include blues guitarists (and brothers) **Edgar and Johnny Winter**, Malian singer **Salif Keita**, and reggae artist **Yellowman**.

tears a page from the Em-and-Kim play-book ("You don't love me, I don't think you ever did / And if you hadn't tried to kill me, I'd have stayed for the kid").

Family tragedy and court orders aside, Ali hasn't lost his sense of humor: On "Lookin' at Me Sideways," he raps, "You got more exes than the Honorable Elijah Muhammad." The beats, by Rhymesayers' in-house producer Ant, of Minneapolis duo Atmosphere, alternate between rock-tinged stomps ("Whatcha' Got") and sweet, low-key soul ("Walkin' Away"), while the single "Truth Is" mixes Native Tongues boom-bap and dancehall.

Ali admits it took some coaxing to get motivated, not to mention a little stalking. "Ant knew I was gonna be home for a while," says the hard-touring rapper. "I'd put my son to bed and he'd call and say, 'I'm standing outside. Let's record.'"

BY MICHAELANGELO MATOS
PHOTOGRAPH BY JONATHAN MANNION