



03

FUTURE_MUSIC

ALI

THE PASSENGER

he rides the bus, but it's brother ali who's transporting himself to the top



“‘HE’S ALBINO BUT HE TALKS LIKE HE’S BLACK BUT HE’S WHITE!’ I DIDN’T WANT THEM TO WRITE THAT STORY”

“Been ridin’ [the bus] faithfully for 10 long years/Step on, they shout my name like I’m Norm from Cheers/Sick of that trip—look at who I’m forced to interact with/Strictly for the fact that I don’t have shit/So after my show I’ll sign your CD/ And if you’re going north I’d like to get a ride home, please” —“5 Line King”

“Don’t worry about being late, I just left my house, haha,” Brother Ali texts me from the Hennepin Avenue bus as I’m speeding Mario Andretti-style through Minneapolis streets to meet him. Smirking at the mental picture, one can’t help but wonder why, after wrapping up his dream tour with Rakim, Ali himself isn’t paid in full. You’d think he’d have landed a trusty Corolla or something by now. But this is just how Ali rolls; the man digs his metro transit—at least enough to keep riding despite whatever success.

It should be noted that, despite his apparent resolve to be car free, Ali isn’t one of those dime-a-dozen, down-and-out rappers who annoyingly demand everyone notice how real they choose to keep it. Outside the Twin Cities, where he gets due props, Ali is the most underrated Rhymesayer in Slug’s camp. He’s never short on attention, often times due to the music media’s insistence on backing him into the corner clearly labeled “albino Muslim indie-rapper.” Seconds after texting him that I’m in a booth in the back of Chiang Mai Thai, there’s not one but two pigment-resistant people hungrily perusing the menus, and I notice we’re already getting looks. Or maybe the patrons’ eyes are just drawn to all the light we’re reflecting.

*“One behind the next in line/It’s inspection time/Lemme check the design/ Your pedigree don’t hold up to mine/I’m a thoroughbred of the most excellent kind” —“Pedigree” (From new album *The Undisputed Truth*)*

“I used to be like, ‘All they’re saying is that I’m albino!’” Ali recalls from across the booth, leaning back to reveal a screenprinted shirt of a skull sporting a Statue of Liberty headdress. “I really felt like a lot of the writers wanted to be like, ‘He’s albino but he’s *black!*’ I didn’t want them to write that story. Or they’d be like, ‘He’s albino but he talks like he’s black but he’s *white!*’ I didn’t want them to write that story either. So I never said anything. They’d just pick whatever they thought and write that, or they’d call my publicist and ask her. . . and I wouldn’t even tell her because I don’t want her to be able to answer them.”

So just what is he, then? A rapper to take lessons from, to start. And a recent divorcé and new husband (all in one year and in that order). And a father so proud you won’t egg him ‘cause you think he might burst. As for the albino thing: “I’ll eventually address it on my terms.”

Ali, who grew up in Madison, Wisconsin listening to Melle Mel and KRS-One, knows you don’t rake in respect by just rapping about being stuck on the bus or looking notably different. What makes his flow decisively special is the commanding, effortless way he pulls the listeners into his perspective and makes them feel exactly what he’s feeling as he muses on the unglamorous realities of life and the beautiful moments spattered in between.

*“Fresh outta forced tears, kisses and hugs/You about to lose the company that misery loves/You don’t love me and I don’t think you ever did/And if you hadn’t tried to kill me I’d have stayed for the kid”—“Walkin’ Away” (From new album *The Undisputed Truth*)*

“Obviously, I’m overdue,” Ali continues with cool confidence, addressing his new album, another he made with Atmosphere producer Ant—an album that proves his consistency and dignity in making heartfelt rap songs. “I’m more overdue than a person is supposed to be in my situation. I got a really warm response for being brand new, and I kinda let it die. Things happened to me, you know? Wait. . .no, I made choices. Because of those choices, my life changed. I had to make an album that reflected that.”

He entertains a purposeful silence for a few seconds and is seemingly content with his admission. His gold wedding band catches my eye, reminding me about one of those “choices”: Ali married his Bronx-born bride in a somewhat impromptu ceremony last August. But just months earlier, things weren’t all roses. He was undergoing a dramatic divorce with his first wife, who he’s portrayed at times as being perpetually unsatisfied, greedy and domineering. But from that otherwise bleak situation (he says on his new album that she tried to kill him), he was blessed with a son, Faheem, who is now six years old.

“I got divorced, I was kind of homeless for a little while, and there was a lot of crazy stuff that went on between me and my ex, and my son was involved in that,” Ali explains. “After getting re-established, starting this new relationship and getting married again, and the whole time being on tour, I couldn’t just fuck around with those topics. It would have been easy to sit down and be like, ‘OK, these are my issues, boom, boom, boom. Here’s another ‘Forest Whitaker,’ here’s another ‘Prince Charming,’ here’s another ‘Picket Fence.’ My divorce song is not a ‘fuck you, bitch’ song, which is normally in hip-hop what you’d do. My song about my son is not like, ‘You’re the greatest thing ever, you’re my angel.’”

While he didn’t call Faheem his “angel” on record, when Ali talks about him, you can’t help but see that’s exactly what he is. Bearded with neatly trimmed white stubble, Ali can’t hide the big grin that takes over his face when asked about his son (who used to say, “Daddy don’t go on tour,” every time he’d see a white van).

“He’s really into science. That’s the thing that he loves that I don’t know where it came from,” Ali laughs. “He loves the human body and the solar system and shit like that. We do his homework every night and he gets straight A’s. None of those little brats can fuck with my son in class. We have such a bond that when I come off tour we’re always good again, but I said in the song [“Faheem”] that if I ever came home and felt it hurt us as friends, I’d never do it again.”

It’s a sobering thought that one of underground rap’s most-deserved careers hangs in the balance to some degree, but it’s enough to make any fan want to thank Faheem for sharing his dad.

Looking at my cell phone, I realize we’ve been sitting here for almost two hours. He notices me looking and seizes the opportunity in typical Ali style: “Speaking of Faheem, I have to pick him up from the bus stop at two. Think I can get a ride?” 🙄🙄🙄