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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

