

Eminem, photographed
in New York City, 2000



EMINEM

ONE OF HIP-HOP'S GREATEST RHYMERS, HE EXPANDED WHAT A VOICE AT THE MICROPHONE COULD SAY.

BY RJ SMITH

Look: If you had one shot or one opportunity to seize everything you ever wanted in one moment, would you capture it or just let it slip? ¶ That's the question Eminem asked in his 2002 ground-rumbling "Lose Yourself." It's also the question lurking throughout his twenty-five-plus years in hip-hop. How do you treat every time like the one time? Nothing can be taken for granted. There's always somebody ready to take your place. Eminem wants to be loved, but the opposite is okay, because either way you will remember his name. He's on the prowl and ready to fight for your attention – for a gold record, for a chance to continue. And continue he does.

Throughout his career, Eminem has shown many sides. He's the kid from Detroit who never forgot where he came from; the sarcastic cartoon brat talking back to Mom; an out-of-control berserker seeking revenge on a world that made him this way. He's a jokester and a dad, a deep student of hip-hop music, and a truth-teller who is hard on everybody, but hardest by far on himself.

Oh, he's funny alright, but funny like a stand-up waiting to jump on a heckler. In all his best material, there is the feeling that whatever you have can be taken away. You have to fight for tomorrow, so you might as well win.

Of course, Eminem is not just a great rapper – he is the

great white rapper. And that changes everything about the equation. Eminem's reaped the benefits of that distinction, and the criticism of being someone removed from the culture that created his chosen art form. Being a white star in a field created by Black genius that spoke to the Black experience makes him a novelty, an outsider, and someone with distinct advantages.

It created a huge advantage on MTV and magazine covers and interview requests. Maybe that's why he makes a point of talking about craft and skills, and not about gifts and artistry. He's a Midwesterner way more eager to show he's put in the work than show all the benefits he's earned.

Eminem has won big since his 1999 breakthrough. His major label debut, *The Slim Shady LP*, went platinum in six weeks and won two Grammys. He starred in a movie of his life, *8 Mile*, filmed a year later. He was a global phenomenon, and when he bragged of building an army of kids just like him, he scared millions of parents. It seemed plausible.

Born Marshall Mathers III in St. Joseph, Missouri, in 1972, he was raised by a single mom who settled outside of Detroit when he was 11. He heard the soundtrack to the 1984 film *Breakin'* and wanted to write rhymes of his own. By the time he dropped out of ninth grade, he



Early days, live at Tramps,
New York City, 1999

was filling up notebooks with raps. Soon he was a fixture on the local club circuit, taking his turn before a largely Black crowd. He told *Rolling Stone*, “As soon as I grabbed the mic, I’d get booed. Once motherfuckers heard me rhyme, though, they’d shut up.” He learned to assert himself and own the space he stood in. But when he took the mic, he had to have something to say, and that meant owning who he was – describing his experience and finding ways for a hostile audience to care. Originality was paramount, especially when, as a white kid interpreting a Black American art form, he was going to get extra scrutiny.

Being funny – or at least having an excellent smirk – was part of his strategy. Mathers drew on the joy and direct pleasures exhorted in the old-school acts that first nourished him – Fat Boys, RUN DMC, and LL Cool J, among them – but he hijacked their delight and compulsion to entertain to tell the world what was inside his head. He became one of the music’s greatest rhymer, and one of the grossest, too.

With his buddy Proof, he formed the Dirty Dozen in Detroit, and they were all rising on the local scene when Eminem put out his solo debut, *Infinite*, in 1996. They liked it fine in the Motor City, but meanwhile he was working in factories and as a short order cook.

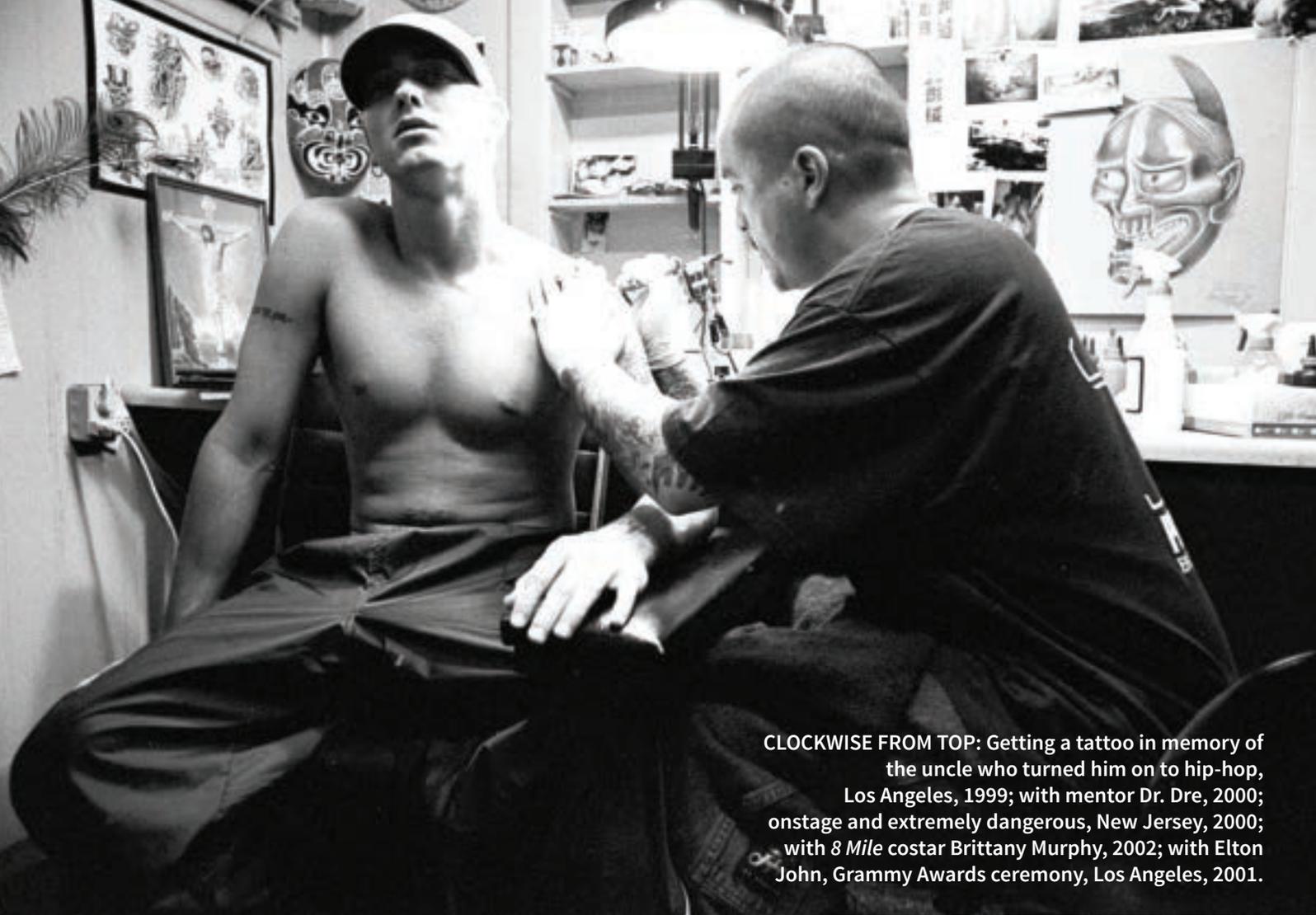
A recording landed in the hands of rapper/producer Dr. Dre and Interscope’s Jimmy Iovine, who were calibrating a West Coast rap that was soulful, lean, and menacing, and transforming the recording industry. In Eminem, they saw a chance to transform it some more. On *The Slim Shady LP* (1999), Eminem represented

as a white working-class zero, spraying insults and one-liners, slasher film violence, rhyming about mind-altering substances and the paybacks he had in mind.

He listened when Dre told him, “It can be in bad taste as long as it don’t taste bad,” meaning make sure you say it with humor and good writing. By introducing Slim Shady, a comic book alter-ego, as the voice of the album, he could issue a defense that has been asserted by countless artists since: I’m only playing a character. “God sent me to piss off the world,” he crowed, and those on Earth agreed. The PMRC attacked him, the Secret Service investigated him, and a *Billboard* editorial said he was “making money by exploiting the world’s misery.” Everybody knew his name.

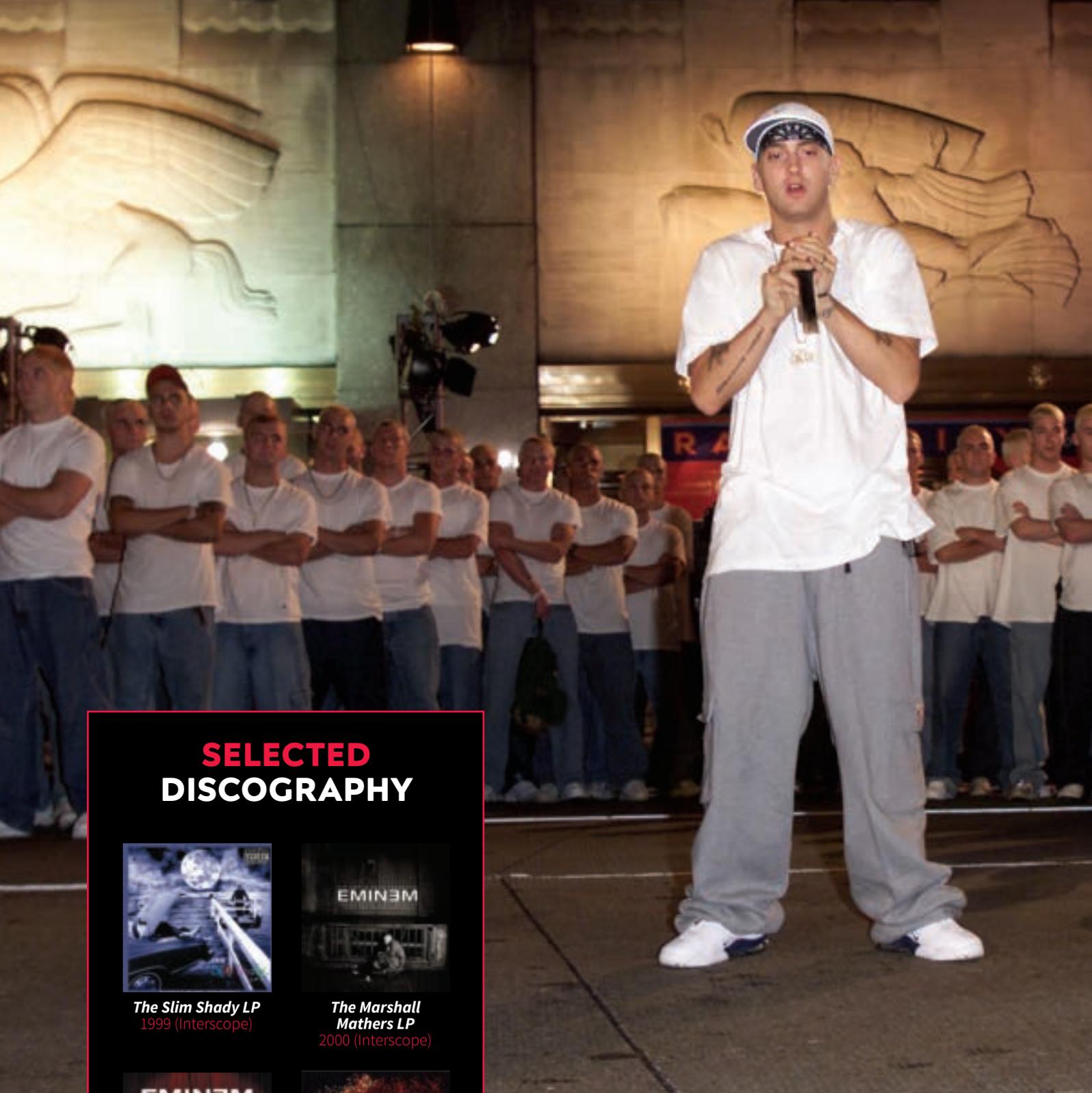
A year later, *The Marshall Mathers LP* amplified the outrage, the horrorcore lyrics, and, unfortunately, the homophobia. But there was also “Stan,” a mesmerizing look at the relationship of fans and their heroes. He was an international star and an international target: Lynne Cheney attacked him at a Senate hearing, and Canada wondered if they should keep him out.

When in 2002 he starred in *8 Mile*, a fictionalized telling of the Eminem story, it only made sense. It showed there was a human being at the middle of the stories he was telling, a skinny striver in an oversized hoodie who believed in himself. The film came with the global hit “Lose Yourself,” a triumphant crunching shout, not to mention a song Barack Obama said he would play when he was campaigning in 2008, because it was “about defying the odds and putting it all on the line.”



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Getting a tattoo in memory of the uncle who turned him on to hip-hop, Los Angeles, 1999; with mentor Dr. Dre, 2000; onstage and extremely dangerous, New Jersey, 2000; with *8 Mile* costar Brittany Murphy, 2002; with Elton John, Grammy Awards ceremony, Los Angeles, 2001.





SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY



The Slim Shady LP
1999 (Interscope)



The Marshall Mathers LP
2000 (Interscope)



The Eminem Show
2002 (Interscope)



Relapse
2009 (Interscope)



Recovery
2010 (Interscope)



Music to Be Murdered By
2020 (Interscope)

He was a target: He mattered, even if it was hard for any three people to agree on how. There are a lot of thoughts and voices in that head. The bigger he got, the more he was watched, and he gave all the watchers plenty to write about. How about a hot American mess as entertainment, right about the time domestic chaos was breaking big as reality TV? He was the only writer the Eminem Show needed: Married to and divorced twice from Kim Scott, a longtime subject of his lacerating lyrics, he wound up sued by Scott for defamation for ten million dollars. He was addicted to various opiates and nearly lost his life when he overdosed on methadone, which he discussed nakedly on *Recovery* in 2010. Is the real-life turmoil fodder for the music, or is the music a soundtrack to the drama?

The late critic Greg Tate once called Eminem “the only free man in commercial hip-hop.” By which Tate meant



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
Trendsetting at the MTV Video
Music Awards, New York City,
2000; at the MTV Video
Music Awards, 2014; performing
“Stan” with Dido on *Saturday
Night Live*, 2000; onstage
with Rihanna, 2014.





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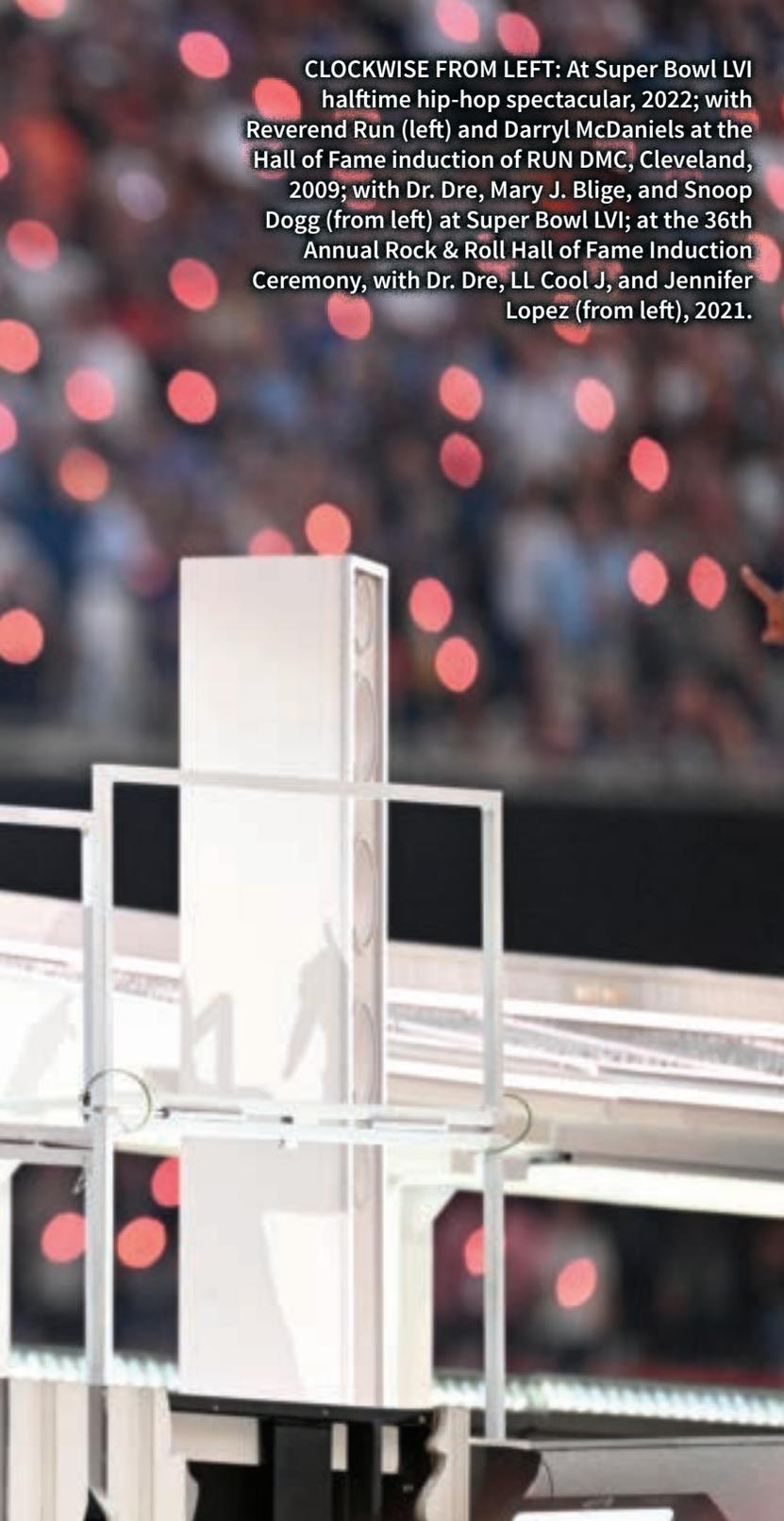
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that his work was as experimental as an art rocker, as autobiographical as that of any singer-songwriter. Eminem expanded what a voice at the mic could say. But Tate also noted that he was only able to do this because of his “white male freedom,” his skin color giving him the

liberty to explore subjects and feelings, tell stories and share impulses, that other artists could not.

It’s a situation Eminem has always talked about in his lyrics – giving credit to Black artists past and present, talking humbly and directly to Black listeners in

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: At Super Bowl LVI halftime hip-hop spectacular, 2022; with Reverend Run (left) and Darryl McDaniels at the Hall of Fame induction of RUN DMC, Cleveland, 2009; with Dr. Dre, Mary J. Blige, and Snoop Dogg (from left) at Super Bowl LVI; at the 36th Annual Rock & Roll Hall of Fame Induction Ceremony, with Dr. Dre, LL Cool J, and Jennifer Lopez (from left), 2021.



moments when the mask comes all the way down, never hiding from what he was and was not. In his wake, million-selling hip-hop artists play and inhabit alter-egos and multiple characters. They explore themes and employ humor that takes them miles and dimensions away from the “street realities” that the market once demanded rappers give their loyalty to. That’s one sign of Eminem’s influence.

In recent years, Eminem’s focus has tightened, and he has gone out of his way to say what he is and isn’t. Take “The Storm” in 2017, his notorious dissection of Donald Trump; or “Darkness” on *Music to Be Murdered By*, a number that both reaches back to Eminem’s essence – narrated by a twisted mind – while refining the concept. In the 2020 track, he becomes a Las Vegas mass shooter, and the song becomes a searching, valuable examination

of how disturbed, and maybe how run-of-the-mill, the lone gunman mindset has become.

“I never would’ve dreamed in a million years I’d see so many motherfuckin’ people who feel like me,” he raved on “White America” from *The Eminem Show* (2002). “It’s like a fuckin’ army marchin’ in back of me.” Martial Marshall, the white guy at the right time: He put his finger on a gathering disaffected legion of struggling, damaged, and rageful Americans. He wanted to lead a First Amendment army. And if the armies that have sometimes followed are varied and contradictory – everything from rap-rock legions to suburban teens rebelling against fast-food wages to Q-Anon-inspired rebels – one thing is clear. Eminem paved the way, and he would flip them off in a heartbeat. And do it in a wicked rhyme.