

MAN *or* MYTH?

JAY ELECTRONICA, HIP-HOP'S GREATEST NEW MC,
GIVES HIS MUSIC AWAY, TWEETS HIS BABY'S
BIRTH, AND RHYMES HIS NAME WITH HANUKKAH.
IS THIS GUY FOR REAL?

BY **THOMAS GOLIANOPOULOS** PHOTOGRAPHS BY **ANNA BAUER**



Jay Electronica, shot
for SPIN in Brooklyn,
New York, May 6, 2010



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AY ELECTRONICA LIVES in a third-floor walk-up around the corner from a street lined with bodegas, liquor stores, and hair salons in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, one of New York City's last neighborhoods untouched by gentrification. Barefoot, wearing a white polo T-shirt and gray sweatpants, the rapper rummages through what he calls his "bedroom-slash-studio-slash-cave," i.e. a small, nondescript office next to the living room.

He lights a cigarette, takes one drag, then leaves it to burn down in the ashtray. Tiny scars cover his fingers. "+ GOD -" is tattooed cryptically behind his left ear. His girlfriend, the neo-soul superstar Erykah Badu, described him thusly on his 2007 mixtape *Act*

I: Eternal Sunshine (The Pledge): "[He's] a weird-looking cat. His ears are kind of pointy. He has a square head. He looks like he's an alien...but in a very beautiful way. Like some kind of mythical creature who would have a bow and arrow on his back and wings under that bow and arrow."

Jay eventually settles onto a futon, and I ask him to explain the lyrics of his breathtaking 2009 single "Exhibit C," which hint that his path is destined. "I used to get dizzy spells, hear a little ring / The voice of an angel telling me my name / Telling me that one day I'm-a be a great man."

"Yeah, it's funny," he says. "You write these things, but you never expect to be questioned on them." A nervous laugh is followed by a long silence. "I can't say this. This is going to be absolutely crazy if I say this. If I told you, it would have to be off the record. Matter of fact, you are going to have to sign a nondisclosure agreement and then I can tell you. This is *personal* personal. People will be like, 'Oh, that nigga is crazy.'"

I think he's joking. But suddenly, Jay gets up and starts poking around purposefully in the closet. Nothing but four pairs of sneakers and a charcoal-gray suit. He scans a table. Just a digital camera, candles, and a pair of dice. He moves to the living room. No agreement. Jay never finds a hard copy, so he punches it up on his iPhone. (Yes, the document actually exists.) Alas, he decides against me even reviewing it, saying that if I read it out loud, the *entire interview* will be off the record.

"I'm hearing that he is kind of a weird dude," says DJ Enuff of New York City's Hot 97 FM, speaking diplomatically. Enuff is credited with breaking "Exhibit C" on commercial radio. "I've met him twice. He seemed cool to me. But I hear that he's out there."

Here is why people think Jay Electronica is "out there": He goes on spiritual retreats to the Pashupatinath Hindu Temple and the Bodinath Buddhist Temple in Kathmandu, Nepal. He and Badu Tweeted *during* the birth of their daughter, Mars Merkaba, in February of 2009. (Sample: "I see the head, full of hair.") He is a former homeless drifter.

From Biz Markie to Kool Keith to MF Doom, extraordinarily talented eccentrics have always populated hip-hop. But none ever stood on the verge of stardom like Jay Electronica. He combines the presence and aura of early Rakim with the smoothly assaultive flow of *Illmatic*-era Nas, and his recent success is proof that one song can truly alter a career. Jay Electronica went from blog curiosity to budding sensation after the release of "Exhibit C," a head-snapping banger built on a sample of Billy Stewart's "Cross My Heart," with no inkling of a hook but a profusion of deep lyricism. (The deft wordplay—rhyming "Electronica" with "Hanukkah," "yarmulke," and "Asalaamica"—has already been immortalized on T-shirts.) "The hairs on my arm stood up," Enuff says, of the first time he heard the song.

When the record debuted in iTunes' Top 10 and was later added to Hot 97's rotation in January, a major-label bidding war began to intensify. Since then, he's headlined a European tour with sold-out London shows and opened for N.E.R.D. But as of now, Jay Electronica remains unsigned and uncompromising.

"Labels know that they have to deal with my terms," he says, without ever specifying what those terms are. "I recognize that it's a blessing. I'm not saying it in an arrogant way. It's just, the rules *do not apply*."



**"IT'S A REBEL-
LIOSNESS,
A BREAKING
OF THE
CHAIN, THAT
IS WHAT JAY
EMBODIES."**

DENAUN PORTER

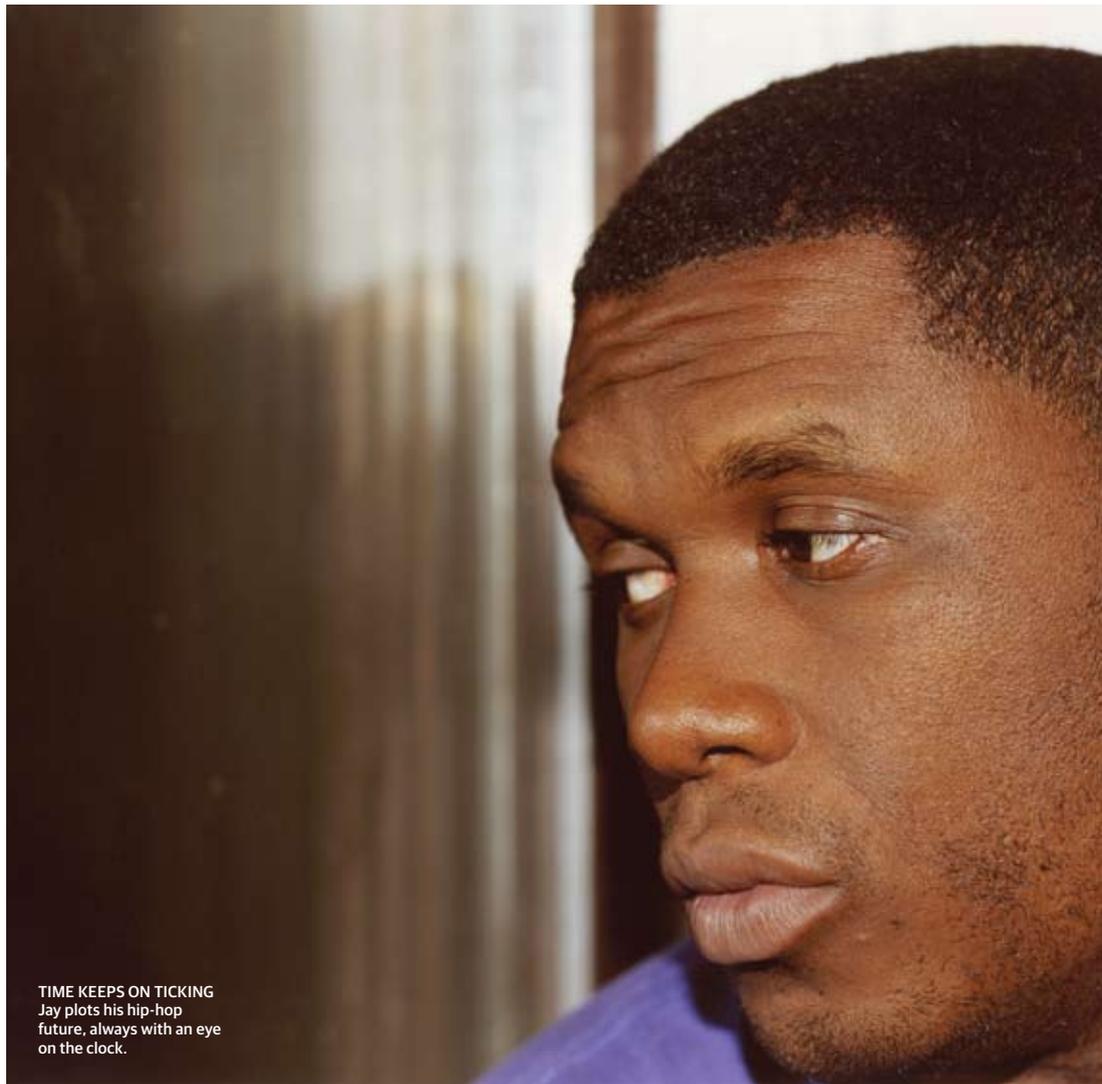


JAY ELECTRONICA, born Timothy Elpa-Thedford Flowers (he's also gone by the name Je'ri U. Allah), is a 33-year-old native of New Orleans' Magnolia Projects. His family has lived in Magnolia since the 1940s, and one of his earliest memories is of accompanying his mother to a neighborhood bookstore called the Little Professor. He read widely, but the book that had the most impact was the Bible.

"I grew up in the Baptist church," says Jay. "It's New Orleans, it's the South. My mom would ask me, 'What does this scripture mean?' I didn't look at it as boring. A lot of times, it scared me. For a long portion of my childhood, I was afraid at night. It wasn't the boogeyman; it was, like, the Devil. That kind of shit. Religion had me scared."

Inspired by LL Cool J's *Radio*, he started rapping at ten years old. He also played free safety on his high school football team, but like many New Orleans kids, gravitated to the band, bouncing from color guard to baritone horn to tuba. After graduation, he attended Northwestern State in Natchitoches, Louisiana, but only for a semester. "That was the end of my schooling career—until I went to Harvard for two years," he says, then pauses. "*I'm just fucking with you.*"

Back home, he worked at a French Quarter café, but quit to attend 1995's Million Man March in Washington, D.C.; he soon became fascinated by the Black Muslim sect the Five Percenters. After returning to New Orleans, though, he was rocked by the brutal murder of a close friend. So on January 1, 1996, Jay Electronica—he chose the moniker because it



TIME KEEPS ON TICKING
Jay plots his hip-hop future, always with an eye on the clock.

sounded like a female superhero, and he felt hip-hop was too macho—left home to seriously pursue a rap career in New York, except he got off the bus in Atlanta. “I saw all the NOW HIRING signs because of the Olympics,” he says. He got a job in the kitchen at Morris Brown College, but it didn’t pay enough to cover the rent. “They didn’t have a Covenant House in Atlanta, so I ended up homeless.” He lived at a shelter, but if he missed the 7 P.M. curfew, he slept in parks or at a train station.

“I remember having the overwhelming fear of ‘How is my life going to turn out?’” he says. “Then, I realized that I was becoming a man.” Afterward, he bounced around to New York, Denver, Dallas, Washington, D.C., Baltimore, and Philadelphia, always participating enthusiastically in each city’s hip-hop scene. Eventually, he moved to Detroit, where he worked with the late producer J Dilla and Eminem cohort Denaun Porter. In 2004, *The Source* picked him for the magazine’s “Unsigned Hype” column, but he still remained on the industry’s fringes.

Then, a friend introduced him to Just Blaze, the producer behind hits for Jay-Z, Cam’ron, and many others. The duo released the brooding head trip “Exhibit A” in November 2008 (a remix featuring Mos Def also exists) and a year later, “Exhibit C” (“Exhibit B” remains unreleased). There are now about 50 Jay Electronica songs floating around the Internet—compiled on the *Style Wars* EP, mixtapes like *What the Fuck Is a Jay Electronica* and *The Jay Electronica Project*, plus one-off collaborations with Nneka, Zed Bias, and others.

Although the two “Exhibit” singles are his only official releases, Jay still

commands awe among his peers. “He’s a brilliant guy, a brilliant thinker,” says Denaun Porter. “Just imagine a guy with the knowledge of a professor—with a gun. It’s a rebelliousness, a breaking of the chain, a rage against the machine, that is what he embodies. What Jay does, no one can touch him at it. And he’s just scratching the surface.”

AT A RECENT industry event, a timid Jay Electronica was cornered by a pair of prominent hip-hop managers, who gushed compliments. “Everybody is probably after the guy,” one of them later told me. “You’d be stupid if you weren’t.”

The major labels’ infatuation might seem strange. Here’s an intensely independent, thirtysomething guy who spits like he worships Queensbridge’s finest circa 1994. There are no goofy dances attached to his songs, and he’s far from a matinee idol. He’s the antithesis of Drake, hip-hop’s other hotshot rookie. Drake is 23, raps in pithy punch lines, sings his own radio-friendly hooks, runs with Lil Wayne, uses cheesy vocal effects, and is half white. Drake is a major label’s wet dream. Jay Electronica boasts a burning Internet following but seems destined to baffle the mainstream.

“I don’t think everybody is built to understand Jay Electronica, and I don’t think Jay Electronica is built to understand everybody,” says Kevin Liles, the former Def Jam president, who is now advising the rapper. “A lot of people get in this business to get rich. Jay did it because God gave him a skill set. He’s not looking at money. He wants to say something and be about something.”



FRIENDS IN HIGH PLACES Clockwise from top left: Sharing a backstage moment with Mos Def; engulfed by British fans, 2010; getting in touch with Badu; gripping and grinning with Diddy



“WE ARE LIKE SOLOMON AND THE QUEEN OF SHEBA. HE’S MY BEST FRIEND. AND I’M HIS BEST FRIEND.”

ERYKAH BADU

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: TERENCE JENNINGS/RETNA; NOSAKHARE MALCOLM; PHIL KNOTT/CORBIS OUTLINE; SCHOHREH GOLMAN ESFAHANI

Erykah Badu, reached at her home in Dallas (where Jay also keeps a house) agrees. “He definitely can’t be bought,” she says. “That is inspiring. It reminds us of art in its truest form.” The couple met six years ago through a mutual friend, and according to Badu, have talked on the phone every day since. She says Jay visits their daughter regularly, though he’s often on tour. “We are like Solomon and the Queen of Sheba,” she adds, as her three children play loudly in the background. “He’s my best friend. And I’m his best friend. We are very, very busy, but we have our whole lives to know each other.”

That may be true, but is the clock ticking on Jay Electronica’s musical future? Will he remain a mystery to potential fans? Or will he become an inspirational voice in today’s fast-buck hip-hop landscape?

“Over the course of the next three months,” he tells me in mid-March, “there is going to be a gradual...” He hesitates, then continues. “You will see some visuals. In June, I will be full-on with material; *Act II [Patents of Nobility (The Turn)]* will be out. It’s not a mixtape, though. It’s an album. But it’s free.” This release date might stick. On April 30, he debuted an odd new track, “The Ghost of Christopher Wallace,” on Shade 45 Sirius XM Radio. It features unlikely friend P. Diddy talking shit over at least four minutes of the song (“Black is back, get a suntan, bitch!” he barks), while Jay busts an intricate rhyme about Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy.

Back at his Brooklyn apartment, Jay carefully describes his writing process. Usually, he listens to a beat and plays a movie on mute—*The Prestige* is a favorite, due to his fascination with the late 19th century. There is plenty of literary inspiration around too. His bookshelf is lined with books,

including Elijah Muhammad’s *The Theology of Time*, Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*, Homer’s *The Odyssey*, Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and *The Communist Manifesto*, plus tomes on Ethiopian church treasures, world mythology, Federalist debates on the Constitution, and the African origins of biological psychiatry. Despite all the chaos in his career—recording a proper debut, being hailed as a hip-hop savior—he seems relaxed, almost like some kind of, yes, mythical creature.

“I don’t feel urgent because I feel the momentum,” he says. “It’s not like I’m doing one thing, and boom, I need to capitalize: I need to get a T-shirt. I need to sell this. I don’t feel that at all. The pressure I feel is that I don’t want to fail people when it comes to the artistry and the music.”

On St. Patrick’s Day, Jay was late to a meeting in Manhattan. As any New Yorker can attest, traffic is murder on a parade day. He hailed a cab and stated his destination. The hack refused. Jay then tossed \$200 into the front seat. During the ride, the cabbie, a hip-hop fan named Jesus (pronounced *Jesus*, not *Hay-soos*) recognized his passenger. “He said, ‘I know Jay Electronica is not in my cab,’” says Jay. “The whole way across the bridge, he was like, ‘Look, man, you got to do it. Put more songs out. We believe in you.’”

“When we got to where we were going, he was like, ‘Please call me anytime when you need a ride. I’ll put on a suit. I want to be your personal driver.’ And I called him last night. I called him for a ride last night.”

A Newport burns away slowly in the ashtray. “My whole life is like this,” he says, pondering the fact that he now has Jesus as his on-call chauffeur. “It’s crazy.”