

OUT OF THE SHADOWS

HAVING BATTLED HIS DEMONS ON THE MIC BEFORE SLIM GOT SHADY, **CAGE** TRIES TO REINVENT RAP-ROCK AND TAKE YOU ON THE NEXT DOWNWARD SPIRAL



ONE MORNING IN 2004, CHRIS PALKO WOKE up in Middletown, New York's Elizabeth A. Horton Memorial Hospital, terrified that he would be committed again. Six hours earlier, depressed over his stalled career, his Volkswagen's busted engine, and a recent breakup, the rapper known as Cage had eaten half an ounce of psychedelic mushrooms (typically, two people would split an *eighth* of an ounce). Now, at 8 A.M., he was lying next to a guy in a partial body cast who was groaning in pain.

Cage's left arm was bandaged to cover self-inflicted cigarette burns and slash marks. But he was more concerned with doctors discovering that as a teenager he'd spent 18 months in a psychiatric ward at Westchester's Stony Lodge Hospital. After this latest episode, doctors were likely to recommend that he again be institutionalized.

So he got dressed and fled.

When he returned to his Middletown apartment, Cage was horrified. His own blood covered the walls. A photo of him and his ex-girlfriend was tacked to the ceiling, her eyes scratched out, devil horns framing her skull. His phone rang; it was the producer El-P, calling from a Brooklyn studio where recording time had been scheduled. "You're not gonna make it, right?" Eventually, Cage did attend the session, but he wasn't his usual arrogant self, worried that he'd blown his shot at signing to El's respected Definitive Jux label.

"I'm going into business with this dude, and I showed up like a basket case," Cage, 35, says today. "I had a very sobering moment with El. He was like, 'Dude, what are you *doing*?' It was the first time I was embarrassed because of my behavior. I took a step back, looked at myself, and realized I had to change."

Cage stubs out a cigarette and sips his coffee. He's sitting in the living room of El-P's duplex apartment in Brooklyn's Fort Greene neighborhood. Jagged scars still decorate his left arm, but Cage bears zero stylistic resemblance to the MC who toiled in the bogs of the indie-rap scene starting in 1992. He's lost nearly a hundred pounds, sports Zac Efron-like bangs, and ditched his baggy B-boy wardrobe for a more hipster-chic getup; currently, that means a snug,

striped T-shirt and skinny charcoal-gray jeans. The look mirrors his newly refined music.

Cage's recently released third solo album, *Depart From Me*, is the most seamless, compelling union of hip-hop and modern rock since the two genres first collided. It's full of big hooks, power chords, crispy synths, earnest emotions, and rap verses that don't sound like rap verses. There are lots of Nirvana- or Pixies-influenced loud-quiet-loud patterns and hummable choruses. "It's catchy as fuck," says El-P, who produced four of *Depart's* 14 tracks. "We've been on the underground anti-pop-music shit for so long that, at this point, the new frontier, artistically, is to make cool pop music."

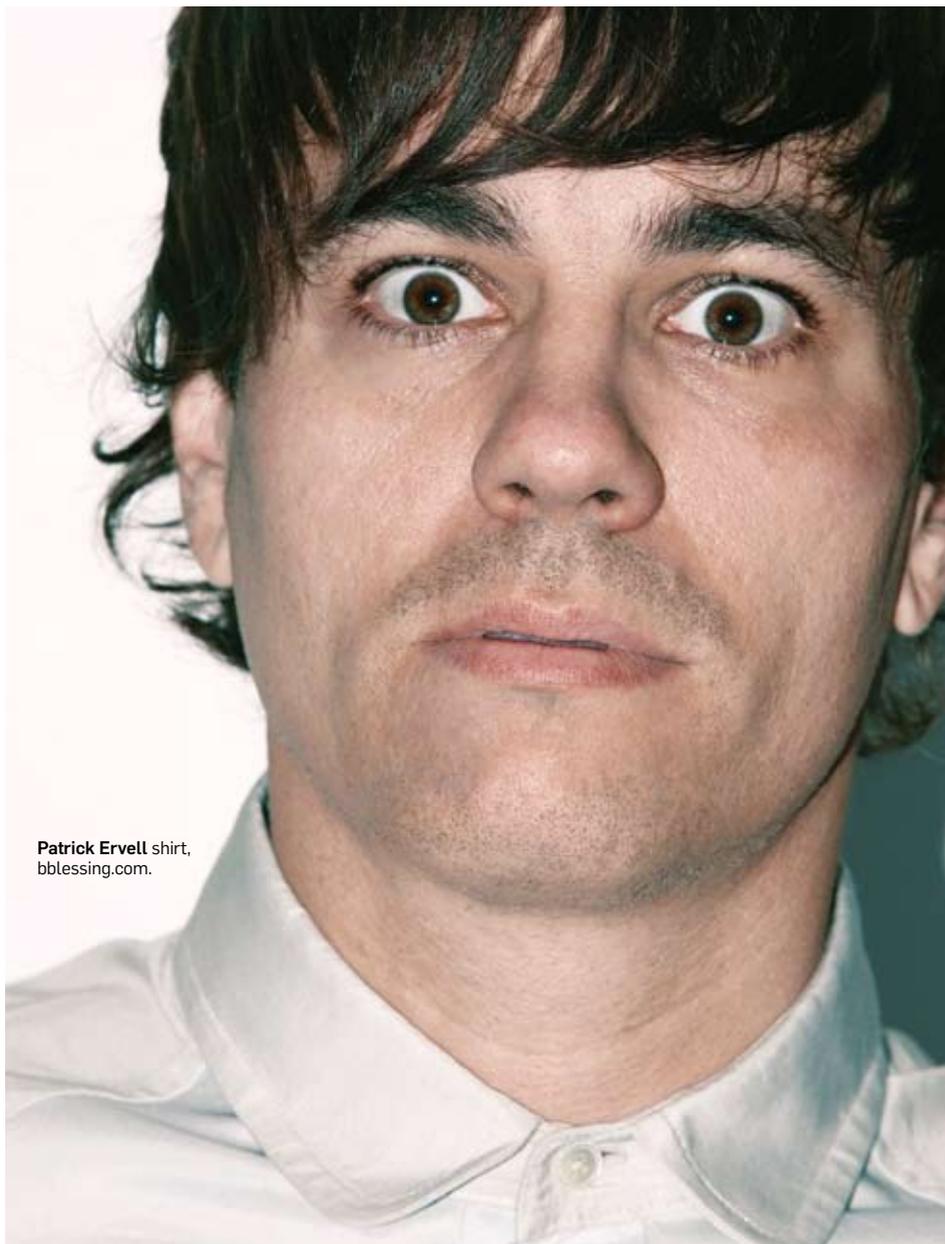
Once a talented but tasteless shock rapper, Cage became infamous for pandering to a cult following that devoured his grisly tales of drug-fueled debauchery. "Sick with a smirk, plus I be disturbed / Fucked the first two bitches like dogs, then I jacked off on the third," he rapped on his 1997 underground hit "Agent Orange." But after kicking hard drugs, he recorded 2005's more confessional *Hell's Winter* (featuring El-P, RJD2, DJ Shadow, and Jello Biafra), and began to develop into an ambitious, complex artist.

"I was like, 'I'm going to be empathetic and care,'" he says. "I wasn't going to make songs

BY **THOMAS GOLIANOPOULOS**
PHOTOGRAPHS BY **MICHAEL SCHMELLING**

Alternative T-shirt,
alternativeapparel.com.

Shot for SPIN in
Brooklyn, New York,
June 10, 2009



Patrick Ervell shirt,
bblessing.com.

"I'VE BEEN THE GUY WHO SQUANDERS EVERY OPPORTUNITY. NOW IT'S LIKE, 'DO I JUST TRY?'"

offending women. I wasn't going to make battle-rap songs. It took away all of my subject matter. That's when I started writing about just life."

Given how much drama is inherent in Cage's own life, it's somewhat amazing he waited so long to draw from it. For years, *Transformers* star Shia LaBeouf has wanted to make a movie about his favorite MC's tortured past, and now he is actively ushering Cage into the spotlight—LaBeouf recently cohosted an episode of MTV's *Subterranean* with Cage and directed and appeared in the video for the single "I Never Knew You." On May 18, MTV2 debuted and repeatedly aired the hauntingly intense clip. It also landed on YouTube's front page.

This improbable mainstream push is happen-

ing as two other white rappers are grabbing hip-hop headlines. But with Eminem rehashing his horny serial-killer fantasies and Asher Roth exploiting the goofily stoned Caucasian shtick, *Depart* presents an alternative: all-too-real visions of broken homes ("Beat Kids"), humiliation ("Fat Kids Need an Anthem"), and heartbreak ("Depart From Me"). Cage is angling to fill the Trent Reznor role for a new generation of angry, disillusioned kids. He's made the album of his life; now he just needs to get the hell out of his own way.

"I've always been the guy who shoots himself in the foot and squanders every opportunity," he says. "Now it's like, 'Do I throw it all away—or just try?'"

PESSIMISTIC, NIHILISTIC, AND SELF-LOATHING, Cage is basically a glass-half-empty guy. He has even jokingly assumed the role of a superhero: Captain Bumout. His superpowers: "Bumming everyone out." It's no surprise that Morrissey is his favorite artist.

Cage's upbringing reads like Dickens, only crueler. As a child, he was forced to pull tourniquets for his heroin-addict father, a dishonorably discharged military policeman who once reportedly held the family hostage with a shotgun. He says he later endured beatings from a stepfather, and it was his mother who urged that he be committed at age 16 because he faced three months in jail for drug possession and public fighting. While institutionalized, Cage was diagnosed as bipolar and prescribed Prozac, which made him suicidal and perhaps delusional (he now claims he tried to hang himself with an unwound cassette tape of Big Daddy Kane's *Taste of Chocolate*).

Right now, he isn't taking prescribed medication. "The last time I took antidepressants, it felt like I was on Ecstasy without the euphoria," he says. "Pharmaceuticals have come leaps and bounds from the last time I took them, but I don't think I need them in my life to manage."

After his release from Stony Lodge, the 18-year-old Cage seriously pursued rapping, making a three-song demo that reached 3rd Bass' Pete Nice, who had a label deal with Columbia. Typically, Cage blew the opportunity. "I was in the studio taking tons of acid," he says. He retreated to his Middletown home, sold PCP while working at Burger King, and wrote the fantastical "Agent Orange" on a Whopper wrapper.

The song landed him on college radio, but in the late '90s, Eminem was the white MC du jour, bum-rushing pop radio with his own explicit tales of drugs and gore. Cage took it badly, charging that Em had stolen his persona and repurposed it as "Slim Shady." "[Cage] naively put his foot in his mouth," says DJ Stretch Armstrong, former cohort of an influential radio show on New York's WKCR, who helped publicize Cage in the mid-'90s and later worked with Eminem. "Everything from their subject matter to the way they rhymed—they were serious close cousins. But it was just a coincidence. Both are supertalented. But who knows what would have happened if Cage hadn't accused him of biting [his style]? He once was on my radio show eating M&Ms and talking about biting."

Cage sums it up curtly: "[Eminem] went at me. I went at him. His songs were heard by millions. Mine were heard by thousands. Do the math." The damage was done. During a meeting with Interscope chairman Jimmy Iovine, Cage's then-label head, Eastern Conference Records founder DJ Mighty Mi, blurted out, "What about the whole Eminem thing?" Cage remembers Iovine saying, "I'll talk to Eminem. Hey, [rivals] Fred Durst and Trent Reznor are on the same label." Interscope later ceased efforts to sign Cage.

"I was definitely interested in Cage," says A&R

executive Jeff Fenster. “He was clearly going to be a meaningful artist, but I was never 100 percent convinced he’d gain a mainstream audience. He talked about mental institutions and drug usage in his music; you didn’t have to go below the surface to find out that was an issue. I’m sure that was a caution for me.”

Cage did find constructive criticism in one rejection. “Being dissed by Rick Rubin was good for me,” he says of the famed producer-executive. “He flew out one of his guys, who watched me perform for, like, 30 minutes. We hear back, Rick said that I looked like another typical—what was the word he used? *Wigger*. A typical wigger from Long Island. Punishing blow. I’d never thought in terms of packaging and marketing before. I found the art in that with this new record.”

ON TOUR TO PROMOTE *HELL'S WINTER*, CAGE

and his best friend and closest musical collaborator, MC-producer Tero “Camu Tao” Smith, conducted postmortems of their performances. During those late-night chats, they pledged to purge hip-hop clichés from their stage shows. Pantomiming every word with your hand or instructing the crowd to shout “ho!” were now forbidden. “We were going to perform like we were in a punk or hardcore band,” Cage says. “We noticed the reaction. The next step was getting the music to match the performance.”

Depart From Me’s recording process was grueling, as Camu’s bout with lung cancer (he died in May 2008) caused Cage’s self-destructive impulses to resurface. He overdosed on Vicodin and Xanax, and says he’s suffered “a couple of nervous breakdowns.” After moving to Connecticut with former Hatebreed guitarist F. Sean Martin, who produced much of the album, he found inspiration listening to Shellac and Nine Inch Nails. The pair tried incorporating a similar abrasiveness, but first had to deduce why most rap-rock hybrids hadn’t worked. “I was like, ‘What was it with these pseudo-rap records that are like rock records?’ Huge rock hook, but the verses, the rap, is garbage. Anthony Kiedis can’t rap for shit, but [the Red Hot Chili Peppers] hook is so amazing it just lights up my life.”

Though the music is hardly easy listening, the expressive, thoughtful lyrics may be *Depart From Me*’s boldest departure. This sensitive side has enraged his old meathead fan base, who clog message boards with slurs like “soft,” “emo,” and, of course, “gay.” “Where the fuck were all these people supporting [my music back then]?” he asks. He’s obviously angry, but his voice is calm. “Well, maybe if you put a couple of dollars in my pocket, I’d be living off the fuckin’ shit.”

Instead, he’s offering chunks of his story and trying to frame his pain in a more approachable way. “I wanted to make a record that young people would get into,” he says. “You’re not in this business to sell records to 30-year-olds.”

He climbs off the couch and rallies his ten-year-old pit bull, Kubrick, for whom any move-



Cage and Shia LaBeouf on the set of a video shoot, downtown Los Angeles, 2009

“CAGE’S PAIN RINGS TRUE; IT’S LIKE LISTENING TO A DOCUMENTARY,” SAYS LABEOUF.

ment is a chore. Kubrick prefers napping and blasting explosive farts in his sleep. During a walk down the block, I ask Cage if he has health insurance; he does not. He does have a 15-year-old daughter, and their relationship is one of the few topics that’s off-limits in his music. “I have to have something private in my life,” he says. “I’ve had a hard time being a good father. She’s probably going to grow up and hate me. What am I going to do, write songs about *that*? Does anyone want to hear me write a song about how I don’t think I’m the greatest dad in the world?”

Maybe not, but when it’s time to shoot the Hollywood version of his life, will Cage be able to keep those boundaries? “His pain rings true; it’s visceral, like listening to a documentary,” says LaBeouf, who compares Cage to Jake LaMotta, the subject of Martin Scorsese’s *Raging Bull*. “I just thought the idea of the underdog cockroach, who nobody had any business rooting for, actually winning, is the best story ever told.”

The two met in 2005 after LaBeouf e-mailed Cage; they quickly became friends, with the actor even joining him on tour. So far no writer or director is attached to the film, a situation that has Cage a little freaked out. “It’s just a ridiculous thought to have—‘When is this movie about me going to be made?’” During our interview, the only time he answers his iPhone is when LaBeouf calls. He jokes, “Should I answer this on speaker?” before picking up. It’s a quick conversation about the *Subterranean* shoot. They also trash-talk about a mutual friend who is apparently in dire need of a haircut.

“I’m just trying not to blow it,” says Cage. “I’m trying not to fuck myself. Even the video shoot

was nerve-racking. It was like, *This has to work. This has to work. This has to work.*”

He’s even asked his friends to monitor his negativity. “Of course I’m worried about him,” says El-P. “This record is the truest representation of who this dude is, so if people hate it, in his head, that means people don’t like him.”

IT’S NOW 10 P.M., AND CAGE SITS IN EL-P’S

upstairs studio feeling no pain. Maybe it’s the frozen moritas (a potent margarita/mojito combo) he had with dinner. Or the positive feedback from MTV on “I Never Knew You.” But he remains wary, remembering the last time the stars aligned for him—and he choked.

It was the week of his 30th birthday, when his dad resurfaced and called. They hadn’t spoken since before Cage’s institutionalization. “I was immediately filled with rage,” he says, sitting slightly hunched, shoulders angling inward. “I had fantasized about this, like the scene in *Magnolia* where Tom Cruise is cursing his father to death as he’s dying—‘You piece of shit!’ All the things I had fantasized that I could say to him. And then the only thing I could think to say was, ‘I’m going to have to look into that.’ *I’m going to have to look into that*. After I hung up, I was like *Fuuuuck!* and I thought of all the brilliant hurtful things that I could’ve said, and none of them came to mind when I was on the phone. I was just stuck like a scared little kid that wanted his dad.”

Cage repeats in a mocking voice, “*I’m going to have to look into that*. Ugh.” Despite all the encouraging career news, he just stares blankly ahead, shaking his head in disgust. ❧