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The dungeons of rap circa January 2008 are located in Westlake Studios on Beverly Boulevard, about two blocks from the Beverly Center. Michael Jackson recorded *Thriller* here throughout 1982 and this is where Nas recorded his new album, the one with the unprintable title. There is evidence that the album is still a work in progress.

While Nas is getting a haircut in another room, I flip through a pad and some loose papers resting on a studio console. It's Nasir Jones' book of rhymes. There's a title at the top of one page, "Memories of a Project." It sounds fake, like a bogus track listing that leaks onto the internet months before an album's release date, but there are lyrics scrawled below. The problem: Nas has awful handwriting and the only legible line is "My skid-row barrio."

Just as I'm about to look closer, I hear a voice booming from the hallway, "Come with me / Hail Mary, nigga run quick, see." Nas strolls into the lounge still reciting 2Pac, placing the emphasis on the last syllable of every half-bar, and takes a seat.

Today Nas will address the new album, but in the inaugural KING Legacy Q&A, he also tackles his entire 17-year career: the feuds with Biggie, 2Pac and Jay-Z; *It Was Written*; his overzealous fans; "Ether"; success; and "Success." And the answer to the million-dollar question: Is he the greatest of all time? — Thomas Golianopoulos

The hot rumor is that Def Jam will drop you if you don't change the album title. Any legs to that?

Somebody told me that [one] about me getting dropped. That sounds funny, though. I guess that just stays a rumor. But I enjoy those rumors too, because that means there's fear.

What will it say about the record industry if Def Jam drops you, 10 albums deep, over a single word?

That starts a revolution. It sparks something within the hip-hop community, within the streets, within the people outside the streets. It raises an eyebrow to the situation, you know? Nobody wants to deal with the word "nigger" because what comes with the word "nigger" is a whole history where you show so much injustice, and you show so much that has not been fixed yet. So it's a scary thing. But it's also uncomfortable when I'm dealing with it. Like, no one can tell me what to do. None of the black leaders, none of these motherfuckers, record companies, none of them can tell me what to do. Because you can't stop what I want to do, you understand?

Do you remember the first time you were discriminated against because you were black?

The first time I opened up a *Superman* comic book. The first time I saw *Flashdance*, with the light-skinned, beautiful bitch who's chasing after some white cat, which, I don't have nothing against interracial relationships — love 'em, actually.

Wait. On "These Are Our Heroes," you took shots at Tiger Woods...

A lot of times, when people look at me, they look too deep into it. Tiger Woods standing up for this white lady who said something about him being lynched is a coon move to me. God bless the brother. I like to see him doing his thing, but that's a flaw to his character. That's an issue I would have with Tiger Woods; not who he is married to. I don't even know who he's married to.

But on that record you also took shots at Cuba Gooding Jr. and Taye Diggs, both of whom are married to white women.

I saw Cuba Gooding do a hand spin or some shit on an awards show that was very coonish to me. I can't remember what Taye Diggs did, but I didn't know he was married to a white woman. You know who my hero is? Richard Pryor. He was married seven times. My favorite wife of his is Debra, one of the white girls.

Who else are your heroes?

Muhammad Ali, Malcolm X, John Lennon, Bob Dylan, Yoko Ono.

Yoko?

Love her.

Why Yoko?

How could you not love Yoko?

I'm not a Beatles expert, but the perception is that she broke up the Beatles.

That was a great thing, 'cause then she gave us "Give Peace a Chance." "Imagine." When John Lennon left the Beatles, he was able to do that shit.

OK, on to your music. I'm not making this up: On the flight here from New York, the person next to me asked why I was going to L.A. I said, "I'm interviewing Nas." She said, and I paraphrase, "I like Nas, except when he raps like he's a drug kingpin."

Oh, that's great, man. If you have a catalog, you go back to certain records guys did, and one record is for [one] crowd, another record is for another crowd. It shouldn't all be the same thing; it should be all different dimensions of yourself. I was talking about coke on my first album because that's what I was around. On the second album, you had to take it to the next level, that Escobar lifestyle with the hot shoes; a nigga was dressing up the way I always wanted to be. I kept it thorough with who I was. A lot of fans aren't into gangster rap. They are going to listen to shit they like, and that's cool.

Do your longtime fans have unrealistic standards for you?

I like to hear somebody else say it, 'cause I know I'm not crazy. Yeah, man, I got the craziest, most hard-core fans in the game, and I love them, man. I'm human and I show you that. I wear that on my sleeve. I'm honest to a fault most of the time. And if they hear you being honest about one thing, they think that's all you are. Then you might touch on something else, and it's, "Hey, what's going on." And they don't really know. It's like, I'm here recording, giving you guys a piece of me. I'm giving motherfuckers little bits and pieces of me.

If you stray from anything you did on *Illmatic*, it's, "How dare you?"

That's not me no more. If Preme got a track that I feel can fit on my shit, great. If Large Professor got a track that I feel can fit on my shit, great. But we did our project together. We done that.

Did you know that *It Was Written* would alienate your core fans?

I knew when we recorded "If I Ruled the World" that a lot of people were going to be thrown way off. That was the whole challenge of it. If you didn't feel nervous in your gut, then you were bullshitting yourself. At that point, everyone was doing *Illmatic*. People were sounding like me also. So with that, it was, "Now, let me do something they can't do."

Did you doubt Steve Stoute's vision for your career?

Nah, that was the whole point. When we met, it was both of our decision to take on the world. We needed to step into the million-dollar bracket now, and that's what we did together, along with TrackMasters. Everybody else had a squad, a team. The players in the game at that time were Puff and Biggie, RZA and Wu-Tang, Dr. Dre and Death Row. It only made sense for us to come together. Steve used to say that I'm scared of success. We would be doing stuff top of the world, and I would be like, "Nah, man, that's too much." I was straight out the projects. I wasn't used to dealing with these industry folks. I wasn't with it.

What did he want you to do?

Just go kill the game. That's not what I wanted to do. I done seen my pops come up and do his music thing and have his life. Around that time, people like Mase started to become really big, a lot of people were becoming really big, and it all seemed phony to me. I felt like I could maintain. I watched Scarface's career at the time, and he was doing a million off the underground, the streets. It was like the way I grew up listening to N.W.A., the streets, no radio. It started to get too big for me. The second album, the third album, it was starting to get too big.

Did you make bad decisions artistically during that time?

Nah, I was holding it down. I would do a Primo track, "Nas Is Like" for the lead single and then come with "Hate Me Now." I was playing the game, but there were other parts of the game that I had to play. I wasn't trying to show up for nothing — endorsements, tours. You couldn't put a gun to my head and make me tour.

Your concerts today are pretty eventful, especially when fans request "Ether."

What are you thinking when they chant for it?

Awww, man, People come to the shows and start to go through eras with me, and that moment right there is the greatest rap battle of this generation. So of course they're going to chant that shit.

When did you decide to stop performing "Ether?"

After the first year, there was no need to be out there yelling people's names and cursing them out and shit. In 2003 I brought KRS-One out to Summer Jam, and he told me he don't like doing "The Bridge Is Over" I understood. You're out there saying people's names that you've since reconciled [with]. You're talking about another person that's alive, and for the crowd it's exciting, but for the one who's saying it, that's some shit.

It's probably tougher for MC Shan.

I think it's tough for KRS-One because you're out there saying fighting words. It's fucked up. If there's no beef, that's fucked up.

At your show in New York City last December, Busta Rhymes came onstage and said you're the best ever. Are you the best ever?

Busta's my nigga. It's very humbling. I had to stop my head from swelling up after he

said that to me. But it's a great feeling to have anyone acknowledge, especially someone as great as Busta.

So, do you think you're the best?

[Laughs] Um, [long pause] I don't know. I don't know nothing about that word. At times, I do. Yeah, definitely there are some times I do, but I don't like that word. If I complete an amazing record, I'm like, "I got this. Niggas can't fuck with me. That's the attitude you have because, at that moment, you know niggas can't fuck with you. There are some great motherfuckers out there, so I'm going to watch what I say. There are some amazing niggas out there.

Do you think there is a best?

Right now in rap, nah.

Lil Wayne and Jay-Z continually say they're the best. But you have rarely, if ever, said it in a song. Why?

I said, "Niggas is this and that. I'm just the best." But Pun told me to say that. He was like, "You got to say that. Fuck that." It was on Fat Joe's record, "John Blaze." Me and Pun were in the studio having a ball, and I'm writing my rhyme, and Pun leans over and says, "Just say, Niggas is this and that, I'm just the best.' Just say that." He was not letting me go without saying that. I'm sure I've said it another time.

Have you ever been bodied on a record?

I'm always kind of nervous of that to some degree. I don't know. On "Fast Life," Kool G. Rap was so out of control. I was nervous to be on a record with him.

Did that thought cross your mind on "Black Republicans" or "Success?"

Nah, that wasn't even an idea with that. It was just a glory moment. It wasn't like, "I got to out-rap this nigga here," or nothing like that. It was like we were having fun. We weren't even thinking about it.

Most people wouldn't believe that.

I'm just basing it off the vibe and the way we were getting down and just having fun. Nobody was sitting there, like, "We got to make this shit incredible." It was like, "Let's go."

Have you talked to Jay-Z since he left Def Jam?

Yeah. Homie's chilling, man. He's plotting.

That's it?

That's it.

It was a five-second conversation? "How are you, Jay?" "I'm plotting."

Basically. Plotting.

On "Success," how did you get away with talking about Jay?

What do you mean?

"Worst enemies want to be my best friends." Can you see how people can take that as a diss?

But could you see how Jay couldn't relate to that in his own life with his own situation? Everything in Jay's rhyme, I relate to. "Is this what success is all about?/A bunch of bitch niggas running around with big mouths." I feel that every day. I'm sure he can relate to "Best friends want to be enemies like that's what's in." We can both relate to one another's verses. It's about success.

Then you say, "I walk into the lion's den and take everybody's chips." It sounds like you're saying the worst enemy who wants to be your best friend is Jay-Z.

And “walking into the lion’s den and taking everybody’s chips” is you signing a lucrative deal with Def Jam.

Yeah, that’s how a lot of people looked at it.

So was that line about him?

Of course, of course. But that’s what’s big about him. We don’t get into the studio and just start rapping about fantasy shit. We talk about shit that’s real. It’s not like a blow to nobody; it’s real. I don’t think he would have expected me to say anything less.

Going back some years now, did you expect Pac to call you the ringleader on *Makaveli*?

Yeah, honestly, I didn’t expect no less at the time. Pac now is Black Jesus in a sense; Pac is Lennon; Pac is Marvin. So, hell yeah, I love the fact that he starts his album off and says that about me. Hell yeah. I loved him before he died. I loved him before he said anything.

Did Biggie ask you to team up against Tupac?

Yeah, he called me. He said, “Let’s get together.” He said that everyone was a little nervous about it, but he was calling me about getting busy.

Why didn’t anything happen?

Getting me and Big in the same room wasn’t easy. I had just dropped my record, and my schedule was crazy. Biggie was in Miami recording *Life After Death*. It was just timing. We were supposed to get together and talk more, so who knows what would have happened.

Well, you guys were taking shots at each other.

On a song I did on my second album, Tupac thought it was about him, but it was really toward Biggie.

“The Message?”

[*Nods*] From the first lines all the way to “One life, one love, there can only be one king.” That was specifically going in that direction. The whole fucking song, really. Tupac was not even on my radar for going at him.

Tupac thought it was about him because of that line, “I got stitched up and left the hospital that same night.”

Nah, this is Queensbridge activities I am rapping about. I’m with dudes who have bullets in them, who just left the hospital, [and] we ride around smoking weed. So this is in my raps. We were in New York going at it. We weren’t even thinking about no other place — Cali, Georgia, nothing.

I didn’t think you were going at Biggie.

He did.

What did he say to you about it?

“Your reign on the top was short like leprechauns.” [*Laughs*]

Did you think you would still be making albums in 2008?

Did I ever see myself on a 10th album? No, because there weren’t long careers for rap dudes back when I did my first shit, especially in New York. You had your Dana Danes, Slick Rick, Beastie Boys, Rakim, Run-DMC, Kool G, you had your superstars; then you had your underground dudes who would survive for two albums. I always saw myself as the more polished underground cat. I didn’t see it really going past the first album. I did not see it. The plan was to get out of the P’s. That was it. Get out

the P's, set up a little something for the homies, go to school, try to learn how to write some other shit, novels, screenplays or figure out what you want to do in life. At the time, we didn't see any of our generation go platinum until Biggie. Him and Bad Boy showed me how to do it. I just thought it would be one record. At most, two.

Finish this sentence: Nas is like...

A father, a husband, a son and a brother. I'm all of those, to the true sense of every word.