

SPOTLIGHT



TALIB KWELI

Proving labels can't confine or define him on his latest project

TALIB KWELI HAS A WELL-EARNED reputation for being a smart, socially and politically aware lyricist. But with *Prisoner of Conscious*, his fifth solo album, Kweli is hoping to show he's in touch with his emotional side. "Just calling the album *Prisoner of Conscious*," says the rapper. "I don't see myself as a prisoner of conscience, so I set out to make an album that proved that."

Prisoner of Conscious is replete with insight fans have come to expect, but also reflects an effort to tap more personal sentiments. "I made the album less political. But some fans may not like to hear that," he says. "Hopefully that'll change when they hear what I did." More than just shifting the focus of his lyrics, Kweli also took a new approach to songwriting. "My focus has always been the lyrics first. But this time I put the music first. I've worked with great musicians—Kanye West, J Dilla, Madlib. But for this album, I stayed less in the confines of traditional hip-hop beats and picked tracks that musically take it other places."

Kweli, 37, went into the studio with a list of collaborators in mind, including hip-hop artists Busta Rhymes, Kendrick Lamar and Nelly, as well as singers including Melanie

Fiona, Seu Jorge and Abby Dobson. Kweli offered them a long leash. "I found tracks that went with them. I had the collaborators in mind, and I let people pick out tracks," says Kweli. "Kendrick and Curren\$y, they both chose 'Push Thru.' Seu Jorge and I sat in the studio for hours before he chose 'Favela Love.'"

Prisoner of Conscious is Kweli's second album through his own label, Javotti, named for his grandmother. Calling the shots on his own projects has altered how Kweli executes his albums. "I'm able to bring the record in under budget," he says. "I'm able to be more in control of how it's out there."

More than anything, Kweli sees his latest album as a chance to break free of certain labels that have been used to interpret his music. "I think despite my best efforts I have been pigeonholed," he says. "Most of the media outlets and industry types who really don't know my albums just deal with perception." But he doesn't feel the new record is a radical departure from his earlier work. "I'm on my 15th album. If you put it all together and listen to all the songs, you can't just say I'm a conscious rapper who only is known for one thing. I've done it all."

—Amanda Farah

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