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COMMON



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TRUE BELIEVER

**Rapper, actor, poet, author:
Common keeps it together**

By Chris Neal



The relief in Common's voice is audible. After much tinkering and a couple of shifting release dates, he happily declares the recording of his ninth album, *The Dreamer/The Believer*, officially complete as of earlier in the day. "Yesterday was supposed to be the last day, but I had to re-re-finish some things," he says with a chuckle. "The album is done now. We just wanted it to be complete the way we wanted it to be complete. When I sit down and listen to it, I feel pleased. I feel like I've done my best."

If Common has to squeeze a deadline a little harder than usual these days, he's earned the right. This has been an action-packed year for the man born Lonnie Rashid Lynn Jr., in Chicago 39 years ago. In addition to recording *The Dreamer*, he has been pursuing a flourishing acting career that includes a role in the new movie *New Year's Eve* and the hit TV series *Hell on Wheels* (which finds him playing a recently freed slave after the Civil War). In September he released his memoir, *One Day It'll All Make Sense*. And in May he made headlines after being invited by the First Lady to appear at the White House for a poetry reading. "Michelle Obama Hosting Vile Rapper at White House?" screamed the headline at Fox News Channel's foxnation.com website, and right-wing personalities like Sarah Palin, Karl Rove and Bill O'Reilly denounced him on the air. "I think they just didn't know who I was," Common says. "If they had looked at my character overall, seen my body of work and the things that I do, they definitely wouldn't have been able to use that as ammunition. They were just trying to find something to get at the president with. But it wasn't valid."

Indeed, fans familiar with Common's music knew better—for almost two decades he has been hailed as one of rap's most intelligent and sophisticated rhymers, addressing social and personal issues with a vulnerability and honesty rare in the genre. Raised by a single mother on the South Side of Chicago, Common rose to national attention in the early 1990s with rap hits like "Take It EZ" and "I Used to Love H.E.R."—the latter a scorching condemnation of violence and avarice in hip-hop. Much of his early work was produced by longtime friend and fellow Chicago native Dion "No I.D." Wilson. Common and No I.D. reconnected during sessions for mutual friend Kanye West's 2010 album *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*, and began recording together while Common was between recording contracts. "I was figuring out what I was going to do, and No I.D. was like, 'Man, come on, let's just work,'" recalls Common, who eventually



Onstage at the BET Awards, Atlanta, 2007

'This music is about feeling more than anything. This is music that you love.'

signed with Warner Bros. after a decade on Universal Music Group labels. "No I.D. and I started to get to know each other again."

The two got on a major creative roll, eventually completing a full album of material together—a rarity in the rap world, in which most albums bear the stamps of multiple producers. *The Dreamer* also features few guest artists, itself a hip-hop anomaly. The only star turns come from poet Maya Angelou (on "The Dreamer"), rapper Nas ("Ghetto Dreams") and R&B crooner John Legend ("The Believer"). The material ranges from the uplifting "Blue Sky"—built around a sample of the Electric Light Orchestra classic "Mr. Blue Sky"—to the gritty battle rap "Sweet." "This music is about feeling more than anything," Common says. "This isn't going to win because this person's on the song or that's a radio record—this is music that you love. Not because it's playing at a club or on a television show, but because this is good music." We caught up with Common during a West Coast trip to discuss his very uncommon life and career.

How did you reunite with No I.D.?

We had been talking about connecting on some music. I didn't know to what extent we would, but I knew I wanted him to produce some songs. The first song was "Ghetto Dreams." We got Nas on it, and we ended up starting on others. We were coming up with some incredible stuff, we were like, "Man, this is the sound we've been dreaming of. We've been looking for this sound." We grew up together, but we hadn't been around each other for a while. We got to remember how cool we were before, and remember what we love to do, which is hip-hop music. I look at him as a friend who's very intelligent and creative, and who has a purpose. His purpose is always to get the best out of you as an individual and as an artist.

Why had you drifted apart?

There was a point where I felt like I had to go see the world for myself, create things on my own and get my own strength up. I needed to go out and develop everything that I am, then bring that back to the table. My third album [*One Day It'll All Make Sense*, 1997] was where I was like, "OK, I'm going to try some new things." No I.D. gave me a lot—I had his loyalty and his respect, but I felt I had to expand as an artist. I'm always looking to challenge myself.

All portraits by Steven Taylor. Performance image: Timi Chappell/Fausters/Landov



Where did you record *The Dreamer*?

We recorded the whole album at No I.D.'s studio in Hollywood. It's very warm and spacey and—I don't want to say "bright," but it's really palatable for making music. It's a good environment for making music and enjoying yourself. You'll look up and see a poster of Bob Marley. You go around in the studio and he's got the best instruments there. And he's got a great kitchen.

What appealed to you about a single-producer album?

The plus is that you create a sound and a vibe. You can create a complete album that, if the material is great, people can play all the way through. It's like a director who makes a movie—if he creates that world, you're going to go to that world.

How do you two build a track?

Usually it'll start with him listening for samples. He'll bring in some old records and we'll be like, "You like this one?" "Yeah, you like *this* one?" He'll find something that motivates him and that I like, and start creating with it. Once he creates the music and adds drums, I might have a thought for a verse—"I'm gonna write this song about this." We have some great songwriters around, like James Fauntleroy II, Makeba Riddick. We also had musicians around—keyboardists would start playing, Steve [Wyreman] would play guitar, and that's how a song would come about. It was a collective. I'd do the lyrics, No I.D. would do the beat and all the other colors would come falling in.

Do people around you feel free to critique your rhymes?

Oh yeah. We're all going for the best, so they definitely will shake their heads like, "Nope, nah!" (*laughs*) There has to be honesty in a creative space.

Does this record have a lyrical theme?

There are different subject matters, but the theme is to dream on—that you can achieve the things you want by believing in what you're doing. It's motivational. The spirit is, "I'm going to go get it, so *you* go get it. All the dreams you want."

Any tricks to writing a good lyric?

I like going for a ride in my truck to think. I really don't have a science to it, I just know that I love to do it. But driving is one of my favorite ways to create.

What have you learned from acting?

The freedom of acting. Acting is a free art. You can't be reserved and afraid. You've got to give everything and not be so self-conscious. When you're in character, you just have to be that. I think I've been able to get looser as an artist because of what I am as an actor.

Do you take on characters in songs?

Yes. Even on my song "Ghetto Dreams," I was in and out of the character. Some of it was me, some of it was me being this character. I don't smoke cigarettes, but on the song there's a line about a woman "not wanting me to smoke," so she's stealing my "squares"—taking the cigarettes. So I'm not afraid of taking on characters.

Where did the ELO sample in "Blue Sky" come from?

No I.D. bounced on that and I was, "Man, I really like that." It just felt uplifting to me, motivating. I was just thinking, "What's the blue sky to me?" When I see the sky on bright days, I feel I can go do anything, I can conquer the world. So that's what I wanted that song to be about.

By contrast, "Sweet" is really hard-edged.

Yeah. I've been able to express all of me and not be like, "OK, dang, my mother knows that I'm a good guy and these people see me as a conscious artist, so I shouldn't say that." No—if I feel that, I need to say it. It's hip-hop so let me say it, let me express myself, let me show that side of me.

How did Nas get on "Ghetto Dreams"?

He's one of my favorite artists. He and No I.D. had been working together. He and I had "Ghetto Dreams" and we had sampled Nas' song ["Hope"] already. Once we had that it was like, "Man, you need to hop up on that." I was so glad he wanted to get on it, and he just smashed it.

Is there a sense of competition being on a track with Nas?

Oh yeah, you definitely don't want to get burned on that. *(laughs)* You've got to give it your all because at the end of the day it's still a sport. You're still rhyming to be the best. I want to be the greatest when I do stuff. Even if you're my best friend, even if you're family, I'm still going to try to be the best.

When you share a track, how do you pick the subject?

Usually one person will have already initiated the subject matter. That's what happened with "Ghetto Dreams" for me. Ironically it was initiated by Nas' sample, so it came full circle. Then I had some thoughts about what ghetto dreams are to me, he came back with his thoughts of what ghetto dreams are to him and he wrote about that. One person usually takes the lead, then the other can get on that subject matter.

What did you take away from the White House incident?

The fact that they used me as the "vile rapper"—it made people see how far the media can go. I think *Hell on Wheels* actually brings up those [racial] issues and deals with those things that we ignore: "That really still exists?" Yes, it exists. It's just covert now, under the table. I'd rather have it out on the table. With what Fox News was doing, I was just getting caught up in politics.

How do you think you've evolved artistically?

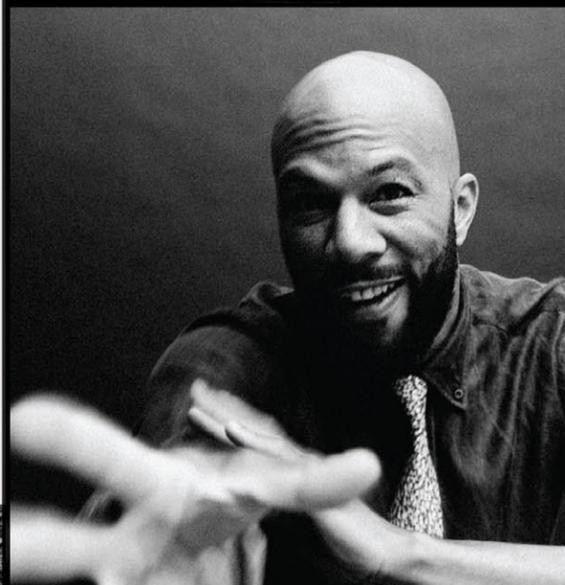
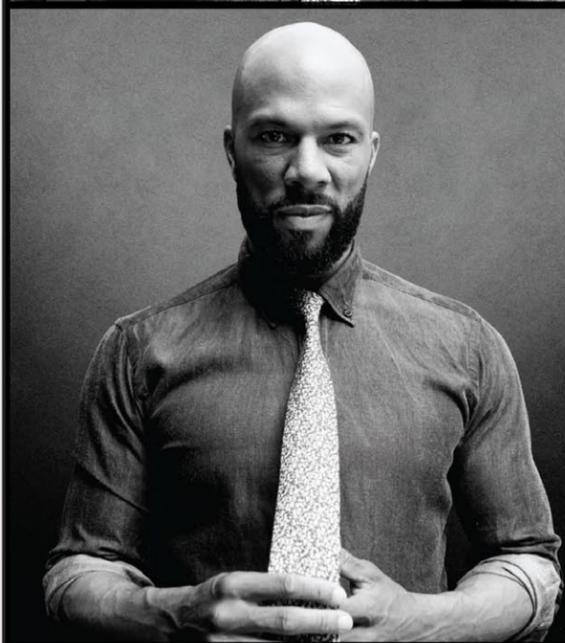
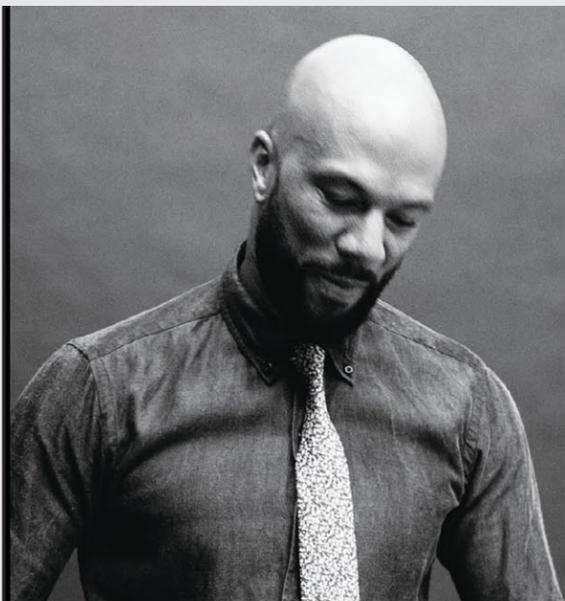
My style has progressed. It grows as I grow. I've got more things to talk about, I know music better, I'm using my voice more, I'm more confident. I feel I'm more experienced. I'm more open to collaborative things.

What are your hopes?

I would love to grow as an actor. I want to produce film and television. I definitely want to see Oscars in my mother's trophy cases—and some Emmys, and eventually a Tony. I want to become a better human being and a better father. I want to do a lot of good in the world. I'm going to aim high and I'm going to reach it. **M**

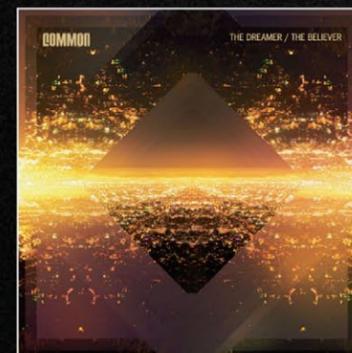
POET TO POET

"The Dreamer," the opening track from Common's new *The Dreamer/The Believer* album, sports an unusual guest for a hip-hop album: Maya Angelou. Common met the venerated poet, 83, when he recruited her to participate in a charity function. "She's just the most incredible woman," he says. "Such a beautiful human being, such a powerful soul and voice. She means so much to American history, and the fact that I got to meet her was incredible. I had a song called 'The Dreamer,' so I asked her if she would write something about dreams and being able to dream. She was like, 'Yes, I got it, let's go.'" Common feels that rap and poetry are deeply connected. "The great Rakim said that rap is rhythm and poetry," he says. "Rap is poetic, but it has rhythm to it and a musical backdrop. Some of the great raps are definitely poetic."



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-Common



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