

## Q&amp;A



## NAS

## The enduring hip-hop storyteller's latest title becomes his mantra

SEVERAL MONTHS AFTER RELEASING his 10th studio album, *Life Is Good*, Nas is revisiting the title. "I was watching TV the other night and saw this woman had survived pancreatic cancer," he says. "I was barely listening, because my mom passed from breast cancer, and sometimes it's just too hard to watch. But I heard her say, 'Life is good,' and I thought, 'If someone who went through that can say life is good, then you know what? It must be.'"

It's certainly a different message when you consider the pantheon of rap album titles, but not surprising when you consider the artist born Nasir bin Olu Dara Jones. Since his debut album *Illmatic* in 1994, he's become one of the genre's most diverse

artists, transitioning from street realist to political firebrand to motivational speaker within a matter of tracks. "I'm trying to inspire people to do what they feel," says Nas. "Don't do what's expected of hip-hop artists, do what you feel as an artist, period."

It's a philosophy that's worked especially well for the Queens native. He's enjoyed more than 20 years of hip-hop success, a near-impossible feat. Nas has notched eight platinum and multiplatinum records, four of which topped the Billboard charts. Plus, he's collaborated with nearly every name in music—including Lauryn Hill, who joins him on his current tour. Nas discusses his latest record, his inspirations and the state of hip-hop.

**What was your focus with this album?** ABCs. It's cool to go back to your ABCs after you've gone so far out. It's great to go back to the stuff that you know best, the stuff that's more you, straight up and down. This record has more of a '90s feel, and that was part of my goal. The album title was inspired by my reality and thinking. "Life is good" was the mantra, my daily psalm.

**Any challenges with the tracks?**

No, it was a simple breakdown, a simpler version of myself. So it was really easy to do it. It's like the flow that just comes naturally—where you don't have to think much—is already in you. You just have to let it out.

**Favorite moments in the studio?**

Yeah, when I was in the studio recording "Daughters," and my daughter walked in on me and said, "What did you say?!" And we just all cracked up laughing. "Close the door!" It was just one of those funny moments.

**What's your songwriting process?**

Once I decide on a track, then ideas flow instantly. I lay down a couple of ideas. Sometimes I'll finish a song in a day. Sometimes only a verse or two will come to me, and I'll go to a different record, then come back to it the next day. And then I'll see which verse fits best and finish it.

**Do you write the choruses, too?**

No, rappers don't usually add choruses to the track—the beat always has a chorus. Producers want to sell records. They don't want you to have to be like, "I like this beat, but I don't know what to do with it." They're like, "This is a hit. Here's the hook, just put some verses in it, and I'll get paid." The producers come ready.

**At what age did you start to get comfortable with your writing?**

I guess around age 15 or 16. I felt like I was a grown-up and my writing came from a more grown-up perspective.

**Who were your initial inspirations?**

As far as other rappers are concerned, it was Kurtis Blow, Kool Moe Dee, Starsky, MC Shan—early '80s rap artists. I was also inspired by the Jackson 5, Michael Jackson, the Police, Boy George, Stevie Wonder—all those '80s records.

**In a previous *M* profile, Damian Marley mentioned your large vocabulary.**

Oh man, Damian made me laugh when he said that. I don't think of myself as having a large vocabulary. I just think I catch some people off guard with the things I say and the way I say them. That just comes from my love of words, and my love for reading. There were a lot of books in my apartment in the projects. Sometimes we couldn't go outside and had to stay at home and read. My mother told me, "If you want to be a writer, you have to be a reader." So when I started to write rhymes as a kid, I was running out of things to say. I needed new words, so I picked up a dictionary.

**What are your favorite collaborations?**

There's the "Hip Hop" I did with Scarface, "My President" with Young Jeezy, "Hot Boyz"

with Missy Elliott and Eve, and "You Won't See Me Tonight" with Aaliyah.

**How's the tour going with Lauryn Hill?**

It's crazy amazing. I hear her music and can't help but think it's the next level. Musically, there's just no one with the ear, the harmony—it's a beautiful sound that she produces. We really appreciate what she brings to the table musically. She does all things her own way, and we don't get a chance to see that a lot. So this tour gives you an opportunity to catch her.

**What's in your set list? Old, new, a mix?**

Yeah, that's what it's about—a fusion. I really considered just doing material from the new album, but I love doing the older songs, too.

it makes me smile—to see that everyone who loves to do it, who participates in it, is making a name for themselves. I just sit back and smile at this art form that I watched not get any love from the mainstream world. Now it *is* the mainstream world. It makes it better for me when I go in and record an album like *Life Is Good*.

**Any advice for aspiring rappers?**

All you got to do is really care. About the art form. About wordplay. About music. If you want to really be the greatest, then go and be the greatest. Set your goal, and if your goal is to be the greatest, then do it. And that means you can't play around. It means a lot of writing, a lot of working, a lot of reading, a lot of practice.



On *Late Night With Jimmy Fallon*, 2012

**'I just smile at this art form that I watched not get any love from the mainstream world. Now it *is* the mainstream world!'**

So I had to include them. I also do some songs the audience doesn't expect.

**What are your thoughts on the current state of hip-hop?**

The impact the greats had on the game, the impact that people like myself had on the game, my peers—that impact is strong. It inspires artists today to want to have an impact as well. And they do. They've been delivering. The spirit of hip-hop is so alive that

**What's next?**

Well, I'm not 40, and I feel like that's the golden moment in my life. A lot of things are amazing, but that's like amazing on steroids. When I look at Bono, I model my life after him a little bit. You know, it's just trying to take it day by day and not worry about tomorrow. What happens is what happens.

—Christopher Pilny



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