



The Artistry and the Ecstasy

Strife in Marvelous Times with

MOS DEE

BY CORD JEFFERSON ■ PHOTOS BY LEGO



“Republicans buy sneakers, too.” -Michael Jordan, in response to a Democratic politician who asked for his endorsement

“The best art is political and you ought to be able to make it unquestionably political and irrevocably beautiful at the same time.” -Toni Morrison

In New York City, the simplest rubric for assessing a neighborhood’s real estate prices is its noise—the lower the volume, the higher the rents. On a warm spring day in TriBeCa, all is silent, save for Mos Def. Modestly clad in a simple T-shirt and overalls number and a denim baseball cap yanked low on his head, Mos, aka Dante Smith, is loudly singing bits and pieces of various songs by Death, a revolutionary but underappreciated ’70s punk band made up of three raucous brothers from Detroit. “Roll yourself another stick of grass,” he intones in his patented lazy croak, beating the thick air with his hands as if it were a drum kit, “Jump on the seat and start to *move your ass*.” Occasionally he’ll just shout, “Death!” mimicking the way the erstwhile power trio would kick off its noisy jams and causing bystanders to look over their shoulders and think, “Did Mos Def just scream ‘death’ at nobody in particular?” Indeed he did. “These dudes were pre-Sex Pistols, pre-Bad Brains, pre-all that shit, and nobody knows about them,” Mos says, baffled. “I don’t understand how the world could forget them.”

While music historians may have shafted Death, it would be damn near impossible to forget Mos Def. Possessed of a résumé that reads like an ambitious art student’s dream diary—actor, rapper, singer, poet—the

35-year-old has tiptoed onstage at Carnegie Hall and stomped around in freestyle battles in his native Brooklyn, along the way earning himself a loyal fan base as sizable and diverse as his professional accomplishments. In fact, as we stroll around lower Manhattan, feeling each other out on this bright Friday, the polar opposites Mos’ oeuvre has managed to bring together are quickly and unequivocally revealed. Everyone from fragile grandmothers to teenagers in Timberlands and Yankees fitteds excitedly call out his praises. And after each new exhibition of affection, Mos is quick to graciously reciprocate the flattery. When one young man with cornrows approaches, arm extended, and says, “Yo, it’s an honor, man,” Mos grabs at his own chest like his heart’s just grown a bit, then takes the boy’s hand and responds, “No, the honor is all mine.” As the kid walks away, looking high now, Mos must notice my surprise at his congeniality, because he smirks before saying, “You know, you could allow the public’s interest in you to put these messianic ideas in your mind, but the problem with that is that you become a caricature of yourself.” Motioning to the people trying not to stare at him, he adds, “To a certain degree, larger-than-life means *not life*.”

Besides his love of its driving, leftist anthems, which tested the border between garage rock and punk rock well before the Sex Pistols got loaded, one probable reason Mos is so enamored of Death lately is his plan for a documentary about the group. He mentions the project but seems hesitant to discuss it further until we unexpectedly run into his friend, Damon Dash, on our walk to the Greenwich Hotel for a late lunch. Mos and Dash, the co-founder and former CEO of Roc-A-Fella Records, have apparently talked previously about collaborating on a

Death documentary and now, while waiting for his driver to arrive, Dash reaffirms his interest, which excites Mos even more. “I’m telling you, man,” he assures Dash, who’s nodding and grinning, “It would be great.” The two men part when Dash promises to come by the hotel later to talk more shop. Mos practically bounces away from the conversation, eager at the thought of crossing off “filmmaker” from his checklist.

If the Death movie comes to fruition, it will be a sad one: In what should have been Death’s heyday, visionless record companies were reluctant to sign a black hard-rock outfit, especially one with such a grim name, and so the band’s sole 1974 demo, *...For the Whole World to See*, went ironically unseen for decades. Now that music fans and industry alike have started taking notice in Death’s dusty old tapes, making it a prime time for a reunion, it’s too late—David Hackney, the band’s guitarist and songwriter, died of lung cancer in 2000. That Mos’ eyes dance with joy while considering sharing such a heartbreaking and little cared about piece of history speaks to something larger in the man himself, a boldness in the face of awful circumstances that’s exactly the opposite of the cowardice record executives felt when they heard Death’s demos. A few seconds after we’ve left Dash, with a smile so big it runs the length of his fledgling beard, Mos is rubbing his hands together the way a touch healer might in preparation for a uniquely difficult patient. He says again, “It’s going to be great,” perhaps assuring himself this time. It’s a display of the sort of

unabashed self-confidence a person has to have to name their first demo *...For the Whole World to See*. It’s also the sort of confidence a person needs when the world, cruel as it is, refuses to look.

Lucky for Mos Def, the world usually looks. Since arriving on the hip-hop scene in the mid ’90s with several impressive mix-tape appearances and the critically acclaimed albums *Mos Def & Talib Kweli are Black Star* (1998) and *Black on Both Sides* (1999), Mos has come to embody that

“You can positively affect and change a social circumstance with art, and it’s vital that a change happens now.”

decade’s specific style of rap. Alongside contemporaries like Kweli, Jeru the Damaja, Pharoahe Monch and Common, Mos made records that were largely influenced by jazz and soul musicians, not the funk bands from which West Coast rappers were taking their cues. His lyrics included talk of guns and drug deals only in the context of brainy discussions about political oppression and the black community’s internal struggles. And most visibly, there were no scantily clad *boricuas* in his videos, not even the one for “Ms. Fat Booty,” which, despite its risqué name, is mostly just a tongue-in-cheek tale of unrequited love, no dirtier than the average sitcom.



To a public that had been assaulted for years with misogynistic and often frivolously violent gangsta rap, Mos Def's music was a soothing return to the middle ground—sexuality without the sexism and rage without the violence. In 1999, when Rawkus Records closed out the decade with its mesmerizing, star-studded compilation, *Soundbombing II*, it made perfect sense when Mos' was the picture at the center of the record's cover.

In the years since, while other once promising emcees have petered out (Can-I-Bus, anyone?), Mos has time and again proven himself to be a capital-A Artist. He's starred in Oscar and Golden Globe-nominated films—*Monster's Ball* and *Something the Lord Made*, respectively—performed on Broadway in the Pulitzer-winning *Topdog/Underdog*—*The New York Times* called him “inspired”—and released two more solo albums, *The New Danger* (2004) and *True Magic* (2006), the former of which

instance, America's preeminent baller, made the decision early in his career to think of himself as little more than a blank canvas with hops, something on which companies of every stripe could hang their logos and slogans—just as long as the price was right.

For others, being like Mike is not so easy. Regardless of the paychecks or consequences, divorcing themselves from their beliefs is as simple and rational as divorcing themselves from their hearts and lungs. Here, consider political pugilist Muhammad Ali, who, at the risk of jail time and losing every one of his championship titles, refused to fight in the Vietnam War, famously noting, “I ain't got no quarrel with them Viet Cong ... They never called me nigger.”

Which of these two men is truly “The Greatest” is up to you.

After sitting with Mos Def for a spell, one gets the feeling he's an Ali man. More than just a bona fide artist, he speaks like a scholar of famously outspoken freedom fighters, adeptly quoting everyone from Gandhi to Malcolm X to Nina Simone, sometimes in the very same breath. Often, a discussion about something else altogether will meander into a short dissertation on the

current state of global human welfare, like when I ask him to talk about his recent trip to Africa, where he says he'd soon like to buy a home. “I'd never had that feeling of being in a majority black nation. It's not a majority black neighborhood or section of town—or even region—it's the entire continent,” he says with the unique zeal of a man who's found what he's been looking for. And then: “That place is the foundation of black culture, which is expression, identity, perspective. You can positively affect and change a social circumstance with art, and it's vital that a change happens now.” He stops and leans back in his chair, pondering and choosing his next words carefully: “To quote Malcolm X, ‘It's time to be extreme, because we are living in a time of extremism. The people who are in power have abused it and change has to come.’ That's where we're at. We can't have moderate responses to extreme circumstances.”

Of course, for the politically-inclined music fan, in an era when many young black musicians at the forefront of culture are hitting it big with club bangers wholeheartedly devoted to praising genitalia, even moderate responses to abuses of power would be welcomed. Mos calls this lack of political interest on the part of today's black leaders—and

There's a difference between wanting to be the president to help people and wanting to be the president to ride in Air Force One.

included Mos' own earnest attempt at a rock band, Black Jack Johnson. (Composed of heavyweights from Living Colour and Bad Brains, like Mos' beloved Death the group was over almost as soon as it began.) This summer brings Mos Def's fourth record, *The Ecstatic*. And next year, the goal is to give the world a new Black Star effort, though Mos, who asks for an al fresco table at the Greenwich bistro when we return, cautions that fans desperately awaiting that release are actually going against the spirit of Black Star itself. Lowering his slight frame into a plush club chair, he says, “The inspiration for Black Star was jazz cats—these fully developed artists—who would get together for one album and then that was it.” After a nostalgic pause, he says, “I would have never imagined that 10 years later people would be talking about Black Star with quite the enthusiasm that they do, but at the same time, I just want to go in and have a good time with it; I don't want to be thinking about them.”

Though Mos Def's successes are all quite impressive, he insists repeatedly that he would be just as happy sans all the acclaim and awards. Closing his eyes and tipping his head back to enjoy a cool breeze that's just hit us, he says, “My main ambition was to be able to sustain myself professionally working in art, so to do that in any capacity is a huge victory for me.” Perhaps considering how generically humble he's just sounded, he adds, “I definitely want to be remembered as vital, unique, great, attractive—all of that shit—but it was more important to just be able to have this be the work I do effectively enough to call myself a professional. I'm an artist, man; I put that shit on my W-2.”

Certain people, when they attain a particular level of success, choose to forsake their right to opinions for financial gain. Michael Jordan, for

I'm an artist, man; I put that shit on my W-2.

yes, like it or not, celebrities are often leaders—“sickening.” “Celebrity creates that illusion that you're above it all,” he admits, moving his hands like a magician whose act has gone awry. “But celebrities' examples become a philosophical cornerstone for young people. It's like, ‘Well, so-and-so's behaving like that, so that's the way I need





STYLED BY CARMEL LOBELLO

to get down.’ Exacerbating this problem is that what some of these celebrities are doing has a violent overtone to it... Schools are overrun with gangs; there are 11-year-olds with no boundaries or concepts of fear.” Lowering his voice, as if this last part is a secret, he whispers: “That’s the culture that certain people in leader positions, whether they realize it or not, are bequeathing to the young.”

As politically-minded as he is, it follows that Mos Def is also democratic. He won’t give the names of the leaders he considers “hazardous,” but his critiques are painted with strokes broad enough to suggest that these hazards are many. “When Mychal Bell went to jail on some

stupidly excessive charges [as part of the Jena Six, the Louisiana teenagers who were charged with attempted murder for what was actually just a fistfight], for so many black leaders to do nothing on his behalf is inexcusable.” At a rally for the Jena Six in September 2007, where Mos, UGK emcee Bun B and singer Lyfe Jennings were the only musicians present, Mos expressed disappointment in the low celebrity turnout, saying, “If you ain’t gonna use your voice, then be quiet.” Today he furrows his brow and adds, “The problem with a lot of these black leaders is that they don’t love the people, they love the positions. There’s a difference between wanting to be the president to help people

and wanting to be the president to ride in Air Force One. I know a lot of folks like that, and I love them, but I can’t condone what they’re doing. They have to be stopped.”

In the modern rap lexicon, there’s a word some people might use to describe Mos and his opinions, an H-word, synonymous with criticism, and used as an accusation of jealousy in lyrics, song titles and on T-shirts. With a knowing smile and eye roll, Mos rubs his closely cut hair and picks apart the slur, “hater”: “That word is some new terminology for anyone who’s not being silently complicit. I can’t have an opinion about a pop star? I can’t be critical of a media figure without you calling me a hater? Well, fuck that. Because if I’m hesitant to do that, where’s my energy level going to be when it comes to critiquing the government officials?”

After watching him request an assortment of side dishes—French fries, steamed broccoli, vegetable antipasto—in order to maintain his vegetarian diet at a meat-heavy restaurant, it seems only natural to ask Mos how and why he remains firmly rooted in his ideals with such rich temptations all around. How does a man—a wealthy, famous man—stay content with steamed vegetables when the prime rib is well within reach? “To quote the Dalai Lama, ‘I’m being wisely selfish,’” says Mos, humbly shrugging his shoulders. “It’s in my best interest to have the best interests of the planet in mind. It’s one thing to be the greatest; it’s another thing to be necessary, and that’s the aim for me. The best are the most necessary: those who take less than they give and love more than they hate.”

At least partially, it’s Mos’ love for and dedication to tradition and idealism that has always endeared his music to so many. Never have these commitments been more apparent than they are on *The Ecstatic*. Throughout the 16 tracks, there’s no Autotune, no Daft Punk rip-offs, no stunt cameos by girl groups designed to get a track on the pop charts, no thug posturing. Much of the production was left to either Madlib, the jazziest hip-hop DJ working today, or Oh No, Madlib’s younger but similar-minded brother. Ironically, *The Ecstatic* is progressive because it shuns all the schemes, tweaks and digital enhancements many rappers and music industry insiders consider to be progress. At the slightest suggestion he’d even consider incorporating these tricks of the trade (“tricks” being the operative word), Mos stretches his head upward and back, as if he’s just gotten a whiff of shit. “I’m not mad at all those dudes for using all that stuff, but that’s just not my vibration,” he says, wagging his hands in front of his face as if to say “no thanks.” “I like to come from the most natural space. There’s a line in the Suzan-Lori Parks play I did [*Topdog/Underdog*] that goes, ‘You’re only yourself when no one’s watching.’ For me, the technique has been to behave the way I do when no one’s watching when everyone’s watching. That’s a scary proposition sometimes, because people are not kind or understanding. But I’m not gonna let that stop me.”

As an unabashed Islam devotee, one serious enough to have journeyed

to Mecca on *hajj*, bravery in the face of unkindness will serve Mos well. Just last year, far too many Americans spat the word “Muslim” when trying to slur then-presidential candidate Barack Obama, and stories of Muslims being harassed while traveling continue to plague airports around the world. Yet despite the shameful fearmongering leveled daily against Islam and the Middle East in general, *The Ecstatic* bursts with more Arabic lyrics and references to the Muslim world than any of Mos’ previous works. It’s a true coup of pride in the face of historic hate, and according to Mos, it came as second nature. Soberly sipping a decaf cappuccino and shaking his head at the hatred, he says, “I’m a private person, but I’m certainly not ashamed of what I believe. To not speak about my faith for fear of reprisal would be terrible. If people are

It’s one thing to be the greatest; it’s another thing to be necessary. The best are the most necessary: those who take less than they give and love more than they hate.

uncomfortable with my Islam, they should check *themselves*.”

A standout track from *The Ecstatic* is the Mr. Flash-produced “Life in Marvelous Times,” in which Mos proclaims, “Great heavens/Good grief/Hungry bellies, bright gold on they teeth/The windows on the Ave look like sad eyes/They fix a sharp gaze on you when you pass by/ And if you dare to stand, you can see ‘em cry.” The tone is urgent, almost a moan, and despondence permeates everything. Nevertheless, after several more lines describing the agony of modern life, the conclusion is distinctly cheerful: “This raw cold life is a beautiful thing/And we are alive in amazing times.” The song’s sentiment is strangely reminiscent of the theme from the ’70s sitcom *Good Times*, which paradoxically shouted, “Temporary layoffs/Good times” and “Hangin’ in a chow line/ Good times.” The times are certainly not good, and yet, for some, hope survives. But how?

Mos hunches forward and stirs his coffee. “To quote my refrigerator magnet,” he says, chuckling quickly to himself at how extensive his quote collection really is, “Peace is not about the absence of trouble; peace is about being able to keep stillness within your heart no matter what’s going on.” Wisely refusing to let a magnet get the last word, he adds, “Also, your curiosity and your hope has to be greater than your fear. The better world belongs to those of us who believe it’s possible.”

As usual, it seems that Death said it first: “Don’t let your head keep running/Whatever it is behind you/Leave it past/Can’t you see what’s coming?” **F**