

“Illmatic”—Nas (1994)

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Essay by Candace McDuffie (guest post)*



Nas

“Illmatic,” the debut album from hip hop savant Nasir “Nas” Jones, opened the world up to a poetic and daring emcee who famously illuminates what it’s like to be a young Black man in America. Released on April 19, 1994, the blistering record contains ten songs--all of which are poignantly told from the 20-year-old Queensbridge native.

Nas’s storied career began in 1991, where he made an appearance on Main Source’s “Live at the Barbeque.” The cameo showed off the artist’s verbal dexterity and featured lines like “*Verbal assassin, my architect pleases/When I was twelve, I went to hell for snuffin’ Jesus.*” Shortly after, MC Serch, a member of 3rd Bass, signed Nas to a publishing deal and worked diligently to procure a record contract.

Nas was ultimately signed by Columbia Records. Just one year later, the young rapper started working on his definitive debut. His first solo recorded release was called “Halftime” and appeared on the soundtrack to the film “Zebrahead,” yet wasn’t as commercially successful as projected.

However, after another guest cameo on MC Serch’s “Back to the Grill Again,” the anticipation around Nas’s first album grew. For “Illmatic,” he would work with rap’s most legendary producers at the time including DJ Premier, Q-Tip, Pete Rock, Large Professor and L.E.S. to cement himself as the genre’s most promising prodigy.

The cover of the album shows Nas’s seven-year-old face juxtaposed with a granular shot of the Queens neighborhood where he grew up. Serving as “Illmatic’s” initial and immediate form of messaging to fans, the image represents a plethora of themes including how Black innocence is often lost in the throws of poverty and how brooding creativity can serve as the ultimate escape.

On “Illmatic’s” introductory track, “The Genesis,” dialogue is sampled from Charlie Ahearn’s 1983 cult classic “Wildstyle.” Nas’s own recorded debut, “Live At The Barbecue,” was sampled on the track as well. Not only does it set the stage for a sprawling and emotional project, it displays just how ambitious and creative Nas really is. “N.Y. State of Mind,” the album’s second song, features chilling piano from DJ Joe Chambers, courtesy of DJ Premier.

Here, Nas talks about the brutal reality of selling drugs to survive and the danger it inherently entails. The artist understands it’s his lyrical brilliance that will become his saving grace but paints a gritty picture with his words in the meantime: “*Holdin’ an M16, see with the pen I’m*

extreme/Now, bullet holes left in my peepholes/I'm suited up with street clothes, hand me a 9 and I'll defeat foes."

On "Life's A Bitch," "Illmatic" gets a cameo from A.Z. Like its title implies, the track embraces bleary-eyed pessimism over a unique sample (producer L.E.S. loops a section of The Gap Band's "Yearning For Your Love"). The chorus is simple and one of the most memorable refrains from the album: *"Life's a bitch and then you die/ That's why we get high/'Cause you never know when you're gonna go."* However, on Pete Rock's jazz-infused "The World Is Yours," Nas crafted one of the most seminal songs in his arsenal to date. The anthem serves as inspiration for a generation of go-getters as Nas relies on his own resolve to obtain wealth--but only on his terms.

"Halftime" also appears on "Illmatic" with Large Professor's exemplary production remaining as timeless as ever. Nas continues to demonstrate his songwriting prowess on "Memory Lane (Sittin' in Da Park)" with attention to detail that only he could execute.

The DJ Premier produced track is where Nas shares those he considers his key demographic: *"I rap for listeners, blunt heads, fly ladies and prisoners/Hennessy-holders and old-school n****s."* Despite just being 20 at the time, the rapper's sagacity was palpable and impressive. On "Memory Lane," he proudly represented Queensbridge to the fullest.

On "One Love," Nas's sentimentality is alluring as he recites descriptions from a letter to friends who are incarcerated as telling them what was happening in the neighborhood: *"But yo, guess who got shot in the dome-piece/Jerome's niece, on her way home from Jones Beach/It's bugged-- plus little Rob is sellin' drugs on the dime/Hangin' out with young thugs that all carry 9's."*

The moving track was produced by Q-Tip who repeats the phrase "one love" and samples The Heath Brothers' "Smilin' Billy Suite Part II" and Parliament's "Come in out the Rain."

With "One Time 4 Your Mind," Nas tries his hand at a more syrupy flow which is seemingly an attempt to impress West Coast audiences. He riles things up again, though, on "Represent" with his spitfire delivery of bars over Lee Erwin's "Thief of Baghdad" which DJ Premier brilliantly samples.

"Represent" was also the first song Nas made for "Illmatic" and one where his imagery is ferocious and pungent: *"This n****a raps with a razor/Keep it under my tongue."* The project wraps with "It Ain't Hard To Tell," a song from his 1991 demo tape that was previously titled "Nas Will Prevail."

"It Ain't Hard To Tell" was also the lead single for "Illmatic" and produced by Large Professor. Michael Jackson's 1982 hit track was centered on the track and is a compelling initiation for fans unfamiliar with the emcee. Nas's pension for constructing staggering lyrics were illustrated with bars like *"I drink Moet with Medusa/Give her shotguns in Hell/From the spliff that I lift and inhale/It ain't hard to tell."*

"Illmatic" will always be regarded as one of rap's most vital pieces of work that seamlessly combines its old school principles with a futuristic outlook. Nas used this critically-acclaimed project to sustain his artistry—one that has lasted over three decades. The album would also inspire writers and rappers alike, reminding them that their stories do--and always will--matter.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.