



Illmatic

Matthew Gasteier

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Nas was playing a role on *Illmatic*, even if it was himself. By constructing this persona, Nas not only laid out his own career for the next decade plus, but the careers of dozens of other rappers who were able to use their considerable skills to develop similar personas. His brazen ambition has become a road map for every rapper who hopes to reach an artistic peak. It seems right that Nas would make *Illmatic* at the age when maturity begins to turn boys into men. This was, in many regards, the first album of the rest of hip hop's life.

A decade and a half ago, *Illmatic* launched one of the most storied careers in hip hop, and cemented New York's place as the genre's epicenter. With this in-depth look at the record, Matthew Gasteier explores the competing themes that run through Nas's masterpiece and finds a compelling journey into adulthood. Combining a history of Nas's early years with interviews from many of the most important people associated with the

Illmatic Details

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From Reader Review *Illmatic* for online ebook

Chris says

Nas' debut album *Illmatic* has been my favorite hip hop album, so I picked up Matthew Gasteier's 33 1/3 book on it with great interest. Gasteier clearly loves the album but doesn't romanticize the impact it's had on his life. Instead, he tells the story of how the album came to be, getting first-hand accounts from many of the players involved (save for producer Large Professor and Nas himself). Gasteier is a smart enough writer and determined enough journalist to get some really great stories behind this classic album. The proofreading is a little sloppy, I noticed quite a few typos and *Illmatic* is only italicized about half the time. Still, it's an entertaining read by a writer who makes a strong case for this album's enduring greatness. While reading this book, I spent a lot of time listening to Nas' debut album and I have come to appreciate it even more since.

Helena says

Good little book for a bit of background on Nas and his debut album *Illmatic* which is considered to be one of (if not THE) greatest album in hiphop history.

Having been a Nas fan for a long time I didn't learn too much from this book that I wasn't already aware of however I think it is worth a read anyway.

There were no actual interviews with Nas done specifically for writing this book but even so it was very thorough and I especially liked the breakdown of each track which featured towards the back of the book.

I am hoping to read the 33 1/3 book about J Dilla / Donuts soon as that has just been released.

Ugh says

Illmatic the book helped me to understand why *Illmatic* the album has been such a favourite of mine (and everybody else) for so long now. If I'd ever sat and thought about it, I probably would have said Nas's intelligent lyrics and the album's blending of the bleak, the hopeful and the nostalgic. But Gasteier also talks about how *Illmatic* marries Nas's highly personal experiences with universal themes (think of the song titles: The Genesis, The World is Yours, etc), how Nas's lyrics are representational rather than judgemental, how they combine braggadocio with lament, etc. On top of which, Gasteier spoke to some of the key people involved, most notably DJ Premier, and gives you an overview not only of Nas's history and where hip hop was at when *Illmatic* was made, but also a brief walkthrough of each track and how it came together.

The book isn't perfect: Nas, Large Professor and Pete Rock all declined to be interviewed, and there's a small touch of repetitiveness here and there. But it's an intelligent, lively, informed read about one of the best albums ever made, and most importantly it does justice to that album. Representin', it's *Illmatic*...

Robert says

There's a lot of "arguably the greatest album," "arguably the greatest rapper," and other hedged appeals to meaningless critical rankings. And like a lot of hip-hop journalism, Gasteier seems reluctant to question the medium or the artists. A lot of conventional thinking and mythmaking (read: P.R.) gets parroted. Idol worship aside, and BAD copy-editing, the book has a lot of good info and is recommended for fans of the album.

Matt Neal says

4) This book is largely an analysis of Nas's honest, gritty, and infamous lyrics and their inspirations and effects from and on hip hop culture and beyond. Going in with no expectations other than my read of "Kanye West's My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy" (a similar book in the same series), I found that much less interview content was used as opposed to 'Twisted Fantasy', in favor of excerpts from the record, which I found to much better suit any reference to the album, given Nas's extreme lyrical prowess. No discernible 'propaganda' was found, and even touchy subjects such as race and death were handled with care and intelligence; the author sometimes swerving off deep into said subjects, only to arrive the unknowing reader back at the foot of the album's messages in order to demonstrate influence and connections. I found to be the points and analysis thoughtful and rare, always supporting with a lyric thrown in to the sentence which happens to quite recreate the atmosphere found in *Illmatic*.

5) This book raves about Nas's ability to express the duality of man (or, rather, the duality of a struggling black man) so much that, typing this, I'm beginning to question the possibility of bias. He highlights Nas's strengths and weaknesses (along with most other subjects in the book) with a positive attitude, perhaps to better draw out the positive messages hidden in often harsh rhymes on *Illmatic*. Readers who enjoy the record and want to learn more about its influence and influences will be quite happy with this read, and there is plenty for seasoned listeners who would like a fresh take on the themes discussed on the album.

chanel nouseforaname says

You can tell when someone really really loves what they do.

Writer, Matthew Gasteier is someone who really loves hip hop, but is real as fuck and honest about his place as a voyeur of the culture. I really appreciated his viewpoint and the fact that he really jumped down into the nooks and crannies of this legendary record and delivered all the pertinent information regarding Nas and the state of the culture at the time.

I like that Nas didn't give anything to this book because I think there's an element of true artistry in just letting things take shape, allowing people's visions/interpretations of your work to breathe without adding any post-op care into the fold.

I read this book on a short plane ride and wasn't bored by it, not once. I felt no need to escape it. There were a few errors here and there but the overall crux of it was perfect. A great contribution to the 33 1/3 series and a great look into a legendary album.

Joseph says

Not as much about the album itself I would have liked. Also the version I had (eBook from Amazon) constantly had replaced the word "notorious" with "notonous" which is not really a word.

Dusty Henry says

This one started off a bit rocky. The introduction spends a lot of time talking about the author's own experiences with hip-hop, particularly as a white guy. It worried me that this would be the tone of the whole book, but it actually serves more as a disclaimer or author's note than interconnected with the rest of the book. Once it gets going, it's all about Nas. Each chapter centers on a different dichotomy within the record and Nas/his career. The quotes from the producers do a great job of painting a picture of not just the record's birth but of its legacy. Everything in the book is built around explaining the different pieces in context of then and now, which is really the best way I could imagine doing a Nas book. Even the track-by-track breakdown in the end feels like it gives greater depth than the typical "this is what I think about each song" that comes up in many 33 1/3 books. It's a quick read that doesn't totally demystify the record, but it at least gives a more in-depth look at the enigma that is Nas.

Ben Winch says

Despite that I consider Nas my favourite rapper, generally I'm distrustful of anyone who says *Illmatic* is their favourite rap album. Why? For one thing, everyone seems to be saying it these days, from rock to rap fans; for another, few of them (especially rock fans) have bothered to listen to the rest of Nas's catalogue, parroting the righteous party line that after his first album he 'went gangsta' and ceased to say anything meaningful or realistic. Me, I'll take his second album, *It Was Written*, over *Illmatic* any day, because the beats are fresher, starker, darker, and because I don't buy the line that Nas was ever saying anything all that deep to begin with. I mean, sure he was, the way he always does - mixed in with the random stream-of-consciousness there's always nuggets of meaning. But from the moment the teenage Nas spat his few bars on 'Live at the BBQ' he was hyperbolic:

Street's disciple, my rap's a trifle
I shoot slugs from my brain just like a rifle...

Kidnap the President's wife without a plan
I'm hangin' niggas like the Klu Klux Klan.

Check the the first track on *Illmatic*, 'NY State of Mind':

Niggas be runnin' through the block shootin'
Time to start the revolution...
Once they caught us off guard
The Mach 10 was in the grass and

I ran like a cheetah with thoughts of an assassin
Picked the Mach up, told brothers back up, the Mach spit
Lead was hittin' niggas, one ran, I made a backflip
Heard a few chicks scream, my arms shook, couldn't look
Gave another squeeze, heard it click, yo my shit is stuck
Tried to cock it, it wouldn't shoot now I'm in danger
Finally pulled it back and saw three bullets caught up in the chamber
So now I'm jettin' to the building lobby
And it was full of children probably couldn't see as high as I be
(So what you sayin'?)
It's like the game ain't the same
You got younger niggas pullin' the triggers, bringin' fame to their name...

Pretty tight, huh? And if it weren't for the backflip and the apparent confession that he shot a few guys with a Mach 10, I guess you could call it a kind of realism. But quickly enough he's back to his usual tricks:

Been having dreams that I'm a gangsta
Drinkin' Moet, holdin' Techs
Makin' sure the cash came correct...

And did I mention how he starts it?

I'm like Scarface sniffin' cocaine, holdin' the M16
See, with the pen I'm extreme...

Truth is, it's that 'with the pen I'm extreme' that saves him. 'Slugs from my brain just like a rifle' - it's a metaphor, duh! He *dreams* he's a gangsta. Yeah, by *It Was Written* the exaggeration is in full force, but in the very shamelessness of it is a sort of honesty. Nas doesn't want you to think he's some drug kingpin, nor does he want you to see a literal truth in a rhyme like:

Rap hero, black De Niro
Federal Bureau tapped my line and got zero.

You put on *It Was Written* and you're enveloped by a fictional world much like that of the Hype Williams film *Belly*, Nas's only starring role that I'm aware of, his only screenwriting gig too. It's a modern noir, set to rap and R&B, with a super-stylised look supplied by music-video director Williams that is designed to be anything but realistic. The thing is, Nas is still dreaming, and the further he goes the less he feels the need to remind you he knows it.

I never brag how real I keep it
Cos it's the best secret.

Realism? It puzzles me that half the people who deride gangsta rap for lacking realism are fans of crime novels and Hollywood blockbusters. Raymond Chandler's motto for those suffering writer's block: have a guy with a gun come through the door. So how is this different to Nas's dropping a gun into the flow whenever it threatens to dry up? Shit, in 'I Gave You Power' he even casts *himself* as the gun:

My body is cold steel for real
I was made to kill
That's why they keep me concealed under car-seats
They sneak me in clubs
Been in the hands of mad thugs
They feed me when they load me with mad slugs
Seventeen precisely, one in my head
They call me Desert Eagle, semi-auto with lead...

How you like me now?
I go 'blaw'
It's that shit that moves crowds
Makin' every ghetto foul
I mighta took your first child
Scarred your life, crippled your style
I gave you power, I made you buck wild...

But yo I had some other plans
Like the next time the beef is on I make myself jam
Right in my owner's hands...

You don't think that's as powerful and real, in its own way, as anything on *Illmatic*? That's *experimental*, man! It's out there. But he means it.

Besides which, I don't know how many people realise it, but to conjure words at speed to music is a hard thing. Nas has the flow - he raps as if he's been rapping all his life, in parks and on streetcorners and in the schoolyard and on the subway. The point isn't that everything you spit be autobiographical, but that it be *natural*, that it come from the rhythm of *your* breath and *your* heart and not somebody else's. The violent subject matter - that's something that's circulated, become part of the back-and-forth between rappers, part of the tradition. And rhyming is a competitive thing, the aim of which (in battle) is partly to humiliate or intimidate the opponent, often through exaggerated threats of violence. Yeah it's gotten out of hand these days, and even rappers themselves seem to have forgotten the humour, but fuck this anti-gangsta orthodoxy that's grown up in response! I'm gonna listen to what I want, and take pleasure in the sheer atmosphere of the best gangsta albums (*It Was Written*, *The Infamous Mobb Deep*, *All Eyez on Me*, *Life After Death*) the way I do in a good Chandler or Chester Himes novel, or a great Hollywood thriller, unrealistic and violent though it may be.

Illmatic? Yeah, it's good, the first half especially, and 'One Love' (the famous letter-to-a-friend-in-prison lyric) really *is* something close to the revolutionary social realism that the rest of the album is purported to be; but to me, from that track on, the beats always seemed kinda stale, and I've rarely listened through the whole thing in one sitting despite its brevity. You think *It Was Written* is too slick? Try *The Infamous Mobb Deep* - now *that* is a contender for greatest rap album for real, and if you're going around trumpeting *Illmatic* without even having listened to the Mobb (who came out of the same Queensbridge projects Nas immortalised in *Illmatic*) then you're missing out.

And the book? It's OK - not jam-packed with information but it puts the album in context, sticks to the facts and doesn't treat it *too* reverentially.

Nas, baby - King of New York. Oh yeah, and fuck Jay-Z. Eminem murdered him on his own shit, after all.

China Bialos says

I'm only a casual fan of Illmatic, so this book was a good education and, surprisingly, convinced me that the record is sort of brilliant and embodies New York's less glamorous neighborhoods in a way that not much can, musically. Very well written, though I'm deducting a star for the few typos/grammatical errors within, as well as a miscredited author in the book's first footnote (somewhere, Bakari Kitwana's weeping a little).

Steve Wilson says

It was a trip down memory lane reading this little book about the best hip hop album in history.
