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The Uprising of Ibily:
A Violent Fantasy

He was known as a ruthless drug dealer who would kill for money without second thought. He survived two murder attempts and ten bullets, one of which took the life of his stepbrother. Confined to a wheelchair, he continued to manage his successful drug ring until met with a life sentence for conspiracy to sell narcotics. Through his own ingenuity he was released just three years later, and has since released a plethora of albums – including hip-hop’s first triple-disc release, *American Hunger* – and authored DC Comics’ first hip-hop graphic novel, an autobiography entitled *Sentences: The Life of MF Grimm*.

I e-mail him to ask for an interview on a whim, half expecting no response. I’ve almost only written about small-scale independent rock bands, and though MF Grimm is firmly rooted in the hip-hop underground, I doubt he has time to speak with a college reporter, much less one at MIT. But within an hour, he e-mails back. And he tells me he’s honored, three times. And he can’t wait to get started on our interview.

Percy Carey, the man behind Mad Flows (or Mother Fucking) Grimm has been on the New York rap scene a long time. Longer than friend-turned-nemesis Daniel Dumile a.k.a. MF Doom, who took his MF title from Carey himself. Long enough to have apparently ghostwritten for Dr. Dre’s groundbreaking 1992 album *The Chronic*.

He began rapping at age fourteen, after he'd already established a reputation of respect and fear as a drug dealer in the Upper West Side of Manhattan. He proved himself as a battle rapper after placing third at the World Supremacy Battle in 1993. Beaten by formidable freestyle opponents Supernatural and Mad Skillz, he recalls the day as one of regret.

“Earlier that day I was in a shoot out,” Carey told online magazine *Urban Smarts* in 2003. “My gun was still warm at my waist while I was battling Supernatural. I came from the streets, so I spoke with street anger. That was my only reason of being there; to let it be known that the streets had talent out there. All I wanted to do was get a better life for the brothers who were in the street with me, but I failed them.” Though his rhymes didn't earn him top prize that day, his tough words and street image attracted the attention of some smaller labels, and he released the single “So Whatcha Want Nigga?” and shared the stage with Tupac later that year.

He was pulling in tons of money as a dealer by then, and had already survived an attempt on his life eight years prior. Friends say he was a known killer and many dealers were envious of his wealth and power. The 1994 shooting, then, makes retrospective sense.

Carey was hit seven times, which put him into a coma, and his stepbrother, Jansen Smalls, who was at the driver's seat of the assailed car, was killed immediately. The two men were on the way to a meeting with an Atlantic Records representative who planned to release Carey's material.

It took months of excruciating recovery before his consciousness, hearing and sight returned, and the post-paralysis physical therapy was grueling. Considering these

outcomes, one might think 1994 would mark the end of Carey's, shall we say, less-than-law-abiding ways.

But although he came out of the hospital in a wheelchair, Carey refused to let go of the business he'd maintained. From 1994 to 2000, he used a network of friends to run his drug deals for him, all the while focusing on expanding a musical career that could turn the stories of street life into poetry. He worked with then close friend Dumile on a split called the *MF EP*, and also founded Day By Day Entertainment, a record label that would eventually release material by both Carey and Dumile. He then put together the Godzilla-themed MC collective Monsta Island Czars, commonly known as M.I.C., and released their self-titled album with Dumile, under the King Geedorah moniker, as producer.

Together, Carey and Dumile garnered some critical success around the New York scene, with plans to collaborate on many albums together. And then, in 2000, Carey was slapped with charges of conspiracy to sell narcotics and sentenced to a life in prison.

But Carey had money, and money could buy him something he desperately wanted: time. He spent \$100,000 on a one-day bail and illegally drove out of state to see Dumile. The two immediately got to work – with Carey supplying rhymes and Dumile creating beats – on what they both thought would be Carey's first and last full length, *The Downfall of Ibyllis: A Ghetto Opera*.

It's important to note here that Iblis is considered the primary devil in Islam. Although Iblis was once humble and powerful, he fell from God's graces after he refused to bow in front of Adam. According to the Qur'an, Iblis will roam the earth until the day

of Judgment, converting men into devils until their ultimate downfall – an eternity in hellfire.

Imprisonment at Staten Island’s Arthur Kill Correctional Facility was as close to hellfire as handicapped Carey wanted to experience. Many of the facilities were not wheelchair accessible, and medical staff put Carey on a drug that slowed his need to urinate so they could avoid changing his catheter; obviously, this made him very ill. Conditions like these inspired Carey to make the most of his prison experience. He learned to cook, he improved his chess game, he studied music business, and most importantly he studied law. He learned so effectively he was able to file numerous countersuits and reduce his sentence to only three years.

Dumile had only visited Carey once in the three years since his imprisonment – a statistic Carey took as an insult – but they shared the stage together at a New York House of Blues in 2003. Carey hoped their friendship and collaboration would continue after that positive performance, but it seemed as if Dumile’s career had bloomed and he had no intentions of looking back.

Carey maintained airs of neutrality until he heard MF Doom’s M.I.C.-dis track “El Chupa Nibre.” “Once joined a rap clique / Midgets into Crunk,” rapped Dumile, playing on the Monsta Island Czars acronym. “He did a solo on the oboe, could have sold a million / Then the Villian went for dolo and cited creative differences.” Carey’s response? *American Hunger* closing track “The Book of Daniel.” “You ain’t a man, you a character,” rhymed Carey, “I bet that mask make you feel a lot scarier / ‘Cause man to man is your doom / Like we’re parallels / M.I.C. will see you at your burial.”

Said Carey in a 2006 interview with *The Village Voice*, “I do mean what I say. If I’m going to kill somebody, I’m gonna kill them. Am I looking to go hunt him down and kill him? Nah. But can it get to the point where someone could get hurt? Yeah. It’s about respect. People get beat up for less.”

When Curtis Jackson, known to many as 50 Cent, ran for Town Council in Farmington, Connecticut, my friends were in uproar. “Maybe being shot nine times is a requirement,” we joked, but perhaps we were on to something. Although his encounter with multiple bullets has become the butt of several jokes in the past few years, the world might not know 50 Cent’s name today had he not escaped death. His seemingly impossible survival built up his tough and indestructible reputation, which allowed him to produce and sell records that told about street life in a way that appealed to the consumer. Who could be a better expert on the harsh realities of the gangster lifestyle than someone who was shot nine times and lived?

When you examine the Curtis Jackson model, it’s easy to wonder how that level of success has eluded Carey, who’s been in the game longer and suffered more bullet wounds. He certainly isn’t bashful about his violent past; Carey makes no qualms about telling the media he was shot more times than 50 Cent, though he’s certainly less romantic about it than Jackson. “There’s nothing cool about being shot,” Carey told *The Village Voice*. “It hurts. It changed not just my life, but also the ones around me. People have to help take care of me. I can’t do shit on my own sometimes.”

But Carey and Jackson both know how important street credibility is in the game of public popularity. And since he’s taken bullets in the double-digits, Carey should have

street cred down pat. It's curious, then, that 50 Cent is a fairly household name, and MF Grimm is unable to reach the top of the underground.

However, when you consider the aesthetics of the two artists, the divide in success is easier to understand. The 2003 video for 50 Cent's first single "In da Club" presented the rapper as a fully built man, exercising and training in the "Shady/Aftermath Artist Development Center." He has tests performed on him, and is brought back to life in a research laboratory by scientists Eminem and Dr. Dre; he comes across as a powerful rap Frankenstein, almost. Later, he's released out into the titular club, where he's an instant success. Carey's lyrical content as well as his documented past have been just as violent if not more so than Jackson's; he routinely raps about killing without conscience, and friends and enemies alike will back up his ruthless history. He's noted for his exceptional upper body strength, a result of years of self-disciplined training. But while Jackson trains to maintain his imposing video image, Carey trains to gain back mobility. Picture MF Grimm in a video similar to "In da Club": a wheelchair-bound rapper training to be an indestructible machine? It works as an SNL parody of an inspirational Disney film, maybe, but rest assured BET wouldn't touch it. Jackson's past is real, and audiences eat it up, but Carey's past is *too* real. Surviving nine bullets is impressive and boosts record sales; surviving *ten* bullets and losing mobility is a powerful story, but distracts the buyer.

In the *Urban Smarts* interview, Carey explained why he founded Day By Day. "Being paralyzed, every label turned me away because they said they couldn't 'market me.'" He also said he preferred to write from his "own perspective" rather than use "made-up concept stories." Maybe it was easy for Carey to write about his street lifestyle

when he was mobile, but no one will believe his murderous rhymes now that he's partially paralyzed. Who's afraid of an MC in a wheelchair?

And now I understand why Carey was honored to accept a college paper interview, in spite of his unbelievably newsworthy past. He'll take any press he can get.

Our interview gets shuffled around over the next few months. I'm all set to meet him at a Starbucks when he e-mails to tell me he's fallen ill, hours before our scheduled meeting. He offers up some dates for later in the month, but I'll be in school, and by the time I return to New York he'll be in California taking care of family. We finally decide to do the interview by phone; he tells me to call him at three o'clock the following Saturday.

I call at the scheduled time, but no response. A robotic voice reads an automated message, and then a recording of his *own* voice plays right before the beep: "Percy Carey." I've read somewhere that his speech was permanently damaged after the shooting, but no signs so far. I leave a message and wait around with my tape recorder for a call back.

It doesn't take long. Ten minutes later, the phone rings.

"Hi, is this Percy?" I ask. It is.

He tells me about California – that he's been busy working on projects, taking care of family, and enjoying the weather – and we chat for a while about his current favorite TV shows, "Heroes", "Lost", and "Chuck." He is able to talk about himself for long periods of time without seeming too egotistical, which is a rare skill for an

interviewee, and I never once feel that being on the phone with me is a burden or annoyance for him.

He is telling me about his plans for a children's album when I realize that this is my first phone call with a known murderer. But his polite and soft-spoken voice reflects a change in attitude from his past interviews. He's older, wiser, and ready to take on the marketplace in a way that makes sense for his life. We talk some more.

In 2005, Carey began working with DC Comics to formulate a graphic novel about his life. It wasn't a shocking turn; Carey has often incorporated science fiction and comic lore into his albums. When he released *Monsta Island Czars*, Carey took on the identity of robot Jet Jaguar to rap about life on the alien-occupied Monster Island. He also appeared on ex-M.I.C. member Dumile's spin-off album, *Take Me To Your Leader*, for which he artfully rhymed about King Geedorah's mongoose-like ability to destroy snakes. And then there's *The Hunt for the Gingerbread Man*, which Carey began working on in 2005 and released earlier this year on Day By Day. The concept album follows the rise to power of Candyland gangster Gingerbread "Gingy" Man, who sells cakes to the street so he can bring in candy. The forty-five minute musical metaphor is fraught with enough sweet references to give the listener a toothache.

"When I did that album, I was in the realm of DC Comics, and around those great writers, and people who show you structure and how to capitalize off your ingenuity," said Carey of *The Hunt for the Gingerbread Man*. What came out of this comical/lyrical pairing was a harsh reality literally sugar-coated in fantasy. Gingy kills, rapes, deals and steals, but he does it all in a picturesque story world filled with half-baked nemeses and

cookie dough banks. Using this character, Carey, who has always been concerned with his realness and street credibility, is able to effectively synthesize an overt fantasy with the learned truths from the life he used to live. From his wheelchair, he's able to portray the way he was before the shooting and before the jail sentence. Though he can't walk, he can be the most powerful man in the city, at least on recording.

“Certain people were upset about that album. They were like, ‘Oh, man, he ain't kicked his old street stuff.’ You know, I'm an old man now, I have family that relies on me, children that rely on me, and my mentality is just elevated. I think there's more than just streets and guns and selling drugs. Not everybody likes *The Hunt for the Gingerbread Man* and they wanna see me get back to my old stuff. But you know, you're living in the past, man, I don't wanna do that no more. I want to show my creativity. *The Hunt for the Gingerbread Man*, that's got a whole animation, that's what I'm working on right now. And I just want the opportunity to go. I want my supporters to allow me to move out of a box where I'm just supposed to be tough and talking about violent situations.”

This response confuses me. Despite its poor critical success – Pitchfork Media ranked it at 3.5 out of 10, a shockingly low rating even for such a hyper-critical music review site – *The Hunt for the Gingerbread Man* is an unbelievable show of imagination from Carey. The connections he makes between Giny's Candyland and New York crime culture are insightful, comedic and upsetting all at once. But while I understand what he means by the desire to show his creativity, I can't see how he's arguing that it's a step away from talking about violent situations.

“As violent as that album was, or however much it talked about drugs, it’s also about sugar, it’s about cake, and it is what it is.” He discusses his desire to incorporate more politically charged rhymes into his music before guiding himself back on track to the future of his lyrics. “Creating characters, whether they’re violent characters or not... I’d rather do that than write about my personal life. Everybody wants to know about my personal life and sometimes that’s not for everybody to hear. The things that I would prefer to do are create. But people say, ‘Oh, no, we don’t wanna hear that. We wanna hear about you in this situation, or what you gonna do next.’ Sometimes, it’s not about that.”

A smart response from someone who once swore off concept writing, but the answer doesn’t quite align with the fact that *Sentences: The Life of Grimm* deeply explores his personal life, and brings to light facts that could easily take away from the hard street background with which MF Grimm is associated. *Sentences* begins with young Percy’s life under the care of his respected and strong mother. It then reveals that the MF Grimm now synonymous with multiple bullet wounds was once a child star on “Sesame Street”, and that he landed the job through his mother’s friend and neighbor, actor Morgan Freeman.

Carey fondly recalls his days on Sesame Street in interviews. He told *The Village Voice* about the time he lost a tooth on set, and Big Bird helped him look all through Sesame Street for it. And when I ask him about important influences on his childhood, he doesn’t hold back from singing its praises.

“I guess I have to say Sesame Street first and foremost. Aside from that, *The Hulk*, *Marvel Comics*, *Batman*, *Superman*, *Spiderman*, “Tom & Jerry”... the usual

suspects. I watched “Gilligan’s Island”, you know.” He goes on to tell me that “Sesame Street” nearly inspired him to pick another career. “For some reason, believe it or not, I always wanted to be a television programmer after ‘Sesame Street’ ... I was obviously into television, but I was more interested in how they put the shows together than the shows themselves, like what made them put it on at a certain time, why they picked certain commercials to put between, I was always amazed by that.”

For someone struggling to reach the levels of success other MCs have twice attained, it seems strange that Carey puts his privileged background right out there for scrutinizing hip-hop fans to consume and tear apart. But in spite of its revelatory nature, *Sentences* is a comic book, after all, and is just as fantastical as his albums. Carey’s mother is not only portrayed as an important role model and supporter, but she’s also depicted knocking out a large man with just one punch. Violent scenes such as this are strewn within and tastefully illustrated, but they’re balanced with an underlying current of perseverance that makes the comic inspiring.

Here, once more, Carey synthesizes harsh reality with imagination-provoking fantasy. Since his physical state prevents him from marketing himself in the same way 50 Cent can, he has ingeniously developed a new model of self-representation that just may carry his name outside of the recesses of indie blog culture.

As of 2006, Day By Day was handling several hip hop artists, a few rock groups, and had plans to release cosmetics and perfume starting next year. But when I ask Carey about these plans, he tells me they’ve changed pretty drastically from last year. “The only thing Day By Day is working on right now is MF Grimm,” he tells me. “I released

the other artists from their contracts. It wasn't fair to hold on to them when I couldn't devote my full energy to them."

Considering the number of projects he's taking on right now, I'd say the drop was a wise decision. When I prod him for more info on upcoming MF Grimm material, he doesn't hold back. "I'm always working on stuff, I can't stop, I'm not ever gonna stop working on stuff, that's just how it is," he tells me. It seems artists are always bragging about how much material they're putting out, but I've gotta take Carey seriously; he did, after all, record aforementioned 3-disc *American Hunger* while simultaneously recording *The Hunt for the Gingerbread Man* and writing *Sentences*.

"So I'm working on two albums right now, and I have a side project that involves a children's album." Before I can even ask him about projected timelines for release, he makes his plans clear. "I'm taking my time. People are like, 'oh, it shoulda been out already,' but you know, I don't believe in that shit. Hip-hop didn't start that way. Now, you create your material and you put it out there and try to make as much money as you can. I'm trying to get away from that, and it's hard. But I'm taking my time."

Just as his self-presentation has shifted from a tough but damaged street exterior to a culmination of imagination, violence and obstacle, Carey's new endeavors will surely reflect this hybrid. When I asked him how he applied his lyrical background to writing for comics, he told me it was hard at first.

"The biggest difference to me is that for an album, you're working on music you really, really love, writing lyrics to it, and if you have to tell about yourself, so be it, but you're doing it in a real lyrical way, using different rhymes or even putting different styles in it," he explained. "Sitting down and writing a graphic novel seemed like it was

the most boring thing in the world. I was like, ‘Oh God, I gotta sit here and write about myself?’ I really wanna work on a story for Superman, use my imagination. But I had to bring a lot of things from my past and start writing it out.

“As far as musical writing, the structure is just totally different, and I guess that’s what makes my book different. My wording and my bad grammar is what makes me, so it came out in my book. Right now I have a chance to work on more books of those mediums. I can make an album that’s a comic book and a comic book that’s musical or music related. I learned how to apply both of those and I think that the music I come out with will have more, entertainment-wise, than me just rhyming.”

I transcribe the interview and type it up for publication in MIT’s *The Tech* the next morning. I include his impressive back-story; it’s the kind of narrative that draws a reader into an interview featuring a relatively unknown artist. I know this, and Percy Carey knows this. In the not-too-distant past, he’s relied on his history of violence to attract new fans in an increasingly image-based rap game.

But Carey is different now, older; he’s learned, and now I understand what he means when he says he wants to keep his private life to himself. If he has any hopes of making his fantasies a reality, he has to deliver his reality under the veil of fantasy. He has to hold back on fully embodying the street life that he sells, otherwise he’ll become as much of a character as the ones in the comics he writes.

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