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Cover Story: Isaiah Rashad, After the Fire

Five years ago, poised to cement his place as one of the most revered artists of his generation, Isaiah Rashad ghosted, winding up broke and in rehab. Now he's ready to return, with Hell in his rearview mirror.

By Jeff Weiss
Photographer Erica Hernandez


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Isaiah Rashad

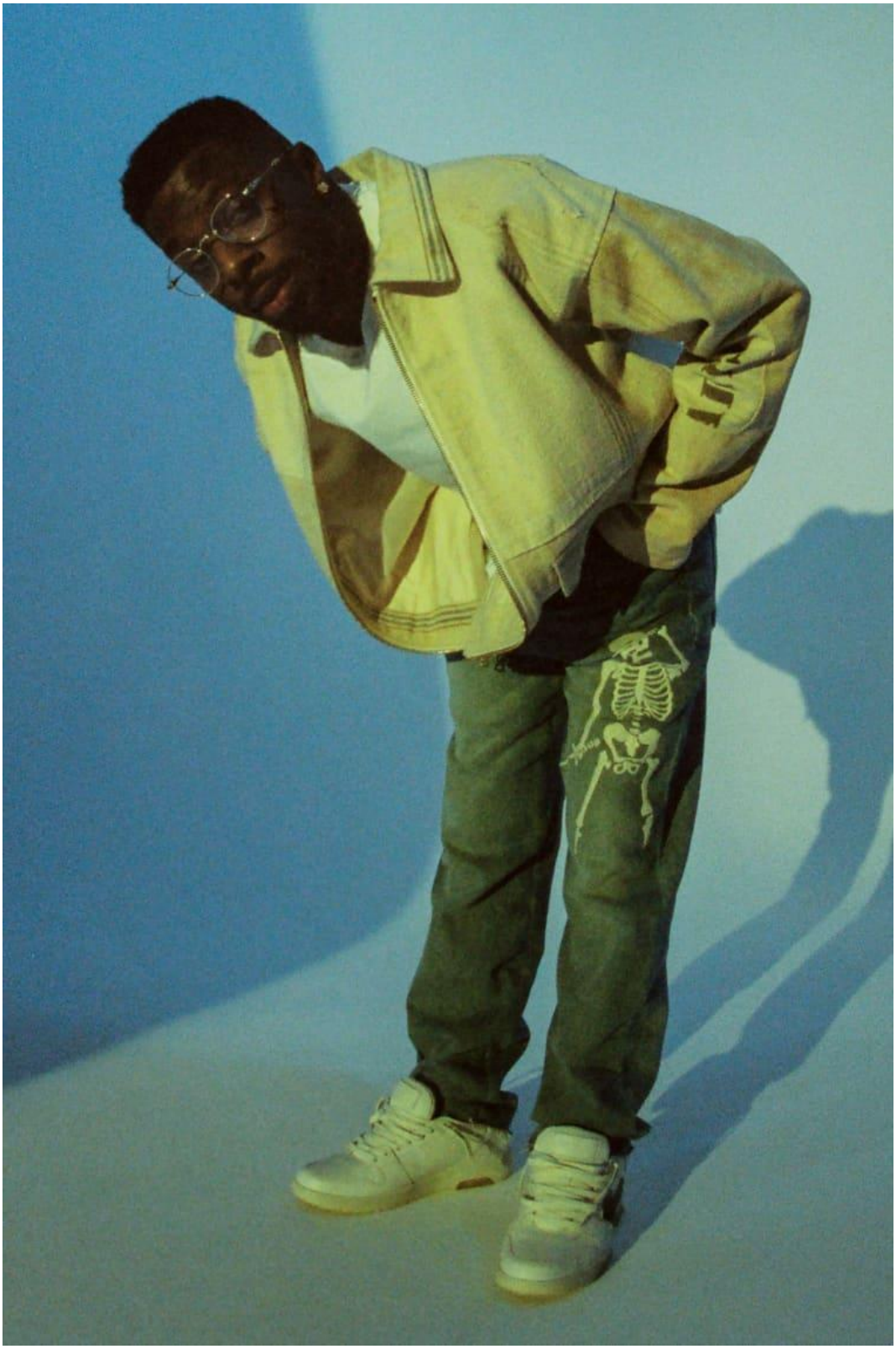
So where was he? That depends on where you want to start. Consider the 30 days detoxing and surrendering to a higher power in an Orange County rehab facility; the time he was so drunk boarding a flight that the cops nearly arrested him (he still isn't sure why they didn't); the time he wrecked his Jeep; the other time he wrecked Top Dawg's Honda but fixed it so that his label boss never found out. That time Isaiah — or Zay, as everyone calls him — returned home and swore he'd given up rapping for money, and the abyss he faced when he finally came back to L.A., dead broke, sleeping on a friend's couch, having somehow spent all of his money on supporting friends and family, buying clothes, and eating "really expensive sandwiches."

"I was doing whatever I could to escape," Rashad tells me as we battle rush-hour traffic on the 101 Freeway, heading from his home in Long Beach to the Valley. "I admittedly liked the feeling of being numb. Everything that ain't good for me. Being out in L.A.

without anything anchoring me down fucked me up. You can float off out here. You can get lost in this bitch."

Somehow, he clawed back from the brink of oblivion to finish his third project. Scheduled for a June release, the deliriously anticipated, bourbon-drowned baptismal *The House is Burning* puts him in the elite stratum of artists who can successfully get away with a one-hot-album-every-half-decade average.

But these are merely the circumstances of his odyssey. To illustrate the saga, it makes the most sense to enter his sanctuary: Collector's Paradise.



On this Monday afternoon in April, we step out of my car and into this North Hollywood comic book store, where Rashad is greeted like a high roller at a Vegas casino. A dazed

exaltation sweeps over him as soon as he enters; it's clear that this is his Shangri-La. The only problem is that he already owns almost everything they can sell.

"It kinda helped me with my depression," Rashad shrugs, explaining his ever-deepening infatuation with comics. He's a few weeks shy of his 30th birthday and speaks with the fatalism of someone who understands that life usually comes with qualifiers. Depression and temptation are tumors, but they can be shrunk down, at least temporarily.

"Comics are a better form of escapism… a healthier form," he says.

"Than what?" I ask.

"Drugs," he reflexively answers, laughing. "Drugs and doing reckless, thrill-seeking shit."

For the next half-hour, Rashad offers a graduate-level tutorial on modern comics and graphic novels, a kindly gesture towards me, someone who hasn't read a comic book since DC killed and revived Superman shortly after Isaiah was born. I don't know Tom King from Chip Zdarsky, Ed Brubaker from Andrew MacLean. For the benighted, these are the kinds of guys who pop up in Google searches decked out in fedoras and newsboy caps and wispy auburn beards at Comic-Con.

Rashad dreams of one day writing his own comic and creating its soundtrack. It's the organic fate of the little boy who retreated into the computer lab after school, writing his own *Dragon Ball Z* strips while waiting for his mother to finish work at the beauty salon. He wanted to be a professional wrestler too, but genetics did him few favors on the height front. Much later, before rap took off, he seriously debated heeding his mom's advice and becoming an electrician.

But now, in comic heaven, Rashad points at the *East of West* series and tells me: “This is about death, famine, war, and the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.”

I ask if he thinks a lot about death. A new song from *The House is Burning* opens: “Feet don’t fail me now, I’m dead”; his lyrics have frequently thrown up suicidal thoughts and random morbidity.

“Nah. Kinda. I used to, but not so much anymore,” he explains. “I’m kinda okay with it, as long as it don’t hurt.”

This is part of what makes Rashad compelling. He has the gift of subverting clichés and expectations without coming off pretentious. He’s funny without being goofy or whimsical. On the first song I ever heard from him, a track called “Gusto” that predates his debut mixtape *Cilvia Demo*, he boasted: “I just ride around in my Bentley, it's a Civic.” He’s ready to die, but not if it hurts. Today, he wears a plain white tee beneath a grunge flannel, blue jeans, and Birkenstocks. Anyone who doesn’t notice the blinding grill hiding behind his surgical mask might mistake him for an animator who just got off work at Disney Studios in nearby Burbank. Well, except for the fact that he’s arrived with his 7-year old son, a photographer, his engineer, the TDE President (and son of Top Dawg) Moosa Tiffith, and me, a journalist attempting to heal from the concussive realization that the Power Rangers were recently rebooted as an adult comic book series.

You don’t need a diploma in Jungian analysis to understand why all these fictional immortals appeal to Rashad. These are stories about conflicted people doing their best to handle the extraordinary talents that threaten to destroy them.
His favorite hero, the protagonist who best embodies Zay’s duress, quirks, and struggles, is Mister Miracle. “He was tortured his whole life, and he learned from being tortured,” Rashad says in his half-mumbled, hyper-musical drawl. His gaze stays locked on the metal columns stacked with comics. “[Mister Miracle] kept on trying to escape from hell and did it so much that it became a superpower of its own. Man, you got to read it to understand…”

He hands me a copy of Tom King’s 2017 *Mister Miracle*, a revival of an old school DC Comics staple, one of the final early-‘70s creations of the legendary Jack Kirby, the Promethean co-creator of Captain America, The Incredible Hulk, X-Men, and Iron Man. Its cover depicts a masked superhero who looks like The Flash in a green cape. Around a hundred pages in, the Job-like plagues leave Mister Miracle with a 2007 Williamsburg Hipster Jesus beard.

The parallels are obvious. No one is about to compare Chattanooga with the brimstone pits of eternal damnation, but no rapper had broken out of Scenic City until TDE made Rashad the face of its second generation, alongside SZA, in 2013. Until Rashad, the most famous piece of music to be associated with Tennessee’s fourth-most populous city had been the “Chattanooga Choo-Choo,” a swing anthem recorded by Iowa’s Glenn Miller in 1941. Rashad’s links to the underworld run deeper than that, though. And to fully understand them, we first need to run down the plotline of his DC Comics analogue.

Behold Mister Miracle, alter-ego of Scott Free, son of the kindly warrior-king Highfather. In a failed attempt to bring peace to the cosmos, Highfather swapped children with his nemesis, a wicked tyrant named Darkseid intent on pursuing the “anti-life equation,” a weapon composed of the fears and anxieties of the human mind. As a consequence of his father’s abandonment, Free is exiled into Hell and tortured by his caretaker, Granny Goodness, who ensures that the princeling remains unaware of his royal heritage. The indomitable Free refuses to let his spirit be broken, becomes a masterful escape artist, and manages to break out of his prison. This is where the dramatic superhero cartoon noises would start to crescendo. Finally unbound, he becomes Mister Miracle, a hand-drawn Houdini so ingenious that he kills himself in an attempt to see if he can escape death. The act leaves him in an interzone limbo, fighting demons, unclear whether he’s survived or not.

“It made me real emotional reading it; I don’t know why,” Rashad says, knowing exactly why. “During that time, I was going through some petty tortured shit: from rehab to going all the way fucking broke. Instead of leaping buildings, I was just like, ‘Nah I’m gonna just stay in the crib.’ The responsibility was just too scary.”

“I’m swimming in the trauma, baby. I’m accepting it and trying to figure it out if I’m going to be a patriarch in my family. You want your family to thrive, especially coming from an impoverished place.”

It’s all there in *Mister Miracle*: A familiar strain of father issues that once manifested in the first lyrics on the first song of *Cilvia Demo* (“My daddy taught me how to drink my pain away, my daddy taught me how to leave somebody); evil personified in a villain seeking to weaponize neuroses; a heroic protagonist who transmutes his traumas into strengths, constantly seeking to elude past and present sufferings. The ironies aren’t lost on Rashad, who is nothing if not self-aware.

“I’m swimming in the trauma, baby,” he laughs, when asked how he’s been handling stress. “I’m accepting it and trying to figure it out if I’m going to be a patriarch in my family. You want your family to thrive, especially coming from an impoverished place. But then somebody has got to deal with this shit in a healthy way to help out. Because it’s tearing people down.”

The first song on *The House is Burning* is fittingly titled “Darkseid,” and it moves with a midnight-of-the-soul bounce. With beats that sound like they’ve been ripped from J Dilla’s Donuts and soaked in whisky, Rashad, once again, drags 4 a.m. despair into vivid daylight. He raps about praying, then offers the aside: “I heard they got new gods outside in this bitch.” He wonders what he’s supposed to do, other than try to get rich. His pledges to keep his son safe are interspersed with handwringing laments about being scared to feel. He offers an existential rosary for the toddlers with purple hearts. Death is a familiar specter. Rashad eulogizes those destined to “die on the cardboard” and those bound to “die in the feds.” It vaguely recalls Kendrick Lamar in a Coen Bros comedy (think Tommy Johnson in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*), but that comparison only makes sense because of a mutual gift for infusing life-or-death concepts with melodic lightness, a neck-snapping musicality to counter-balance the philosophical dread.

The epiphanies about mortality have not appeared from nowhere. Rashad's long been obsessed with the weight of memory and rapped about the generational lineage of racism and inequality. On "Ronnie Drake," his second single from back in 2013, he distilled the bitter cycle into a few bars: "Came a long way from a boat and an auction / Now we got names and a vote, then a coffin."

When Rashad was a small boy, his biological father, a construction worker, abandoned the family and moved a hundred miles away to Murfreesboro. When we last spoke in 2016, Rashad showed me a list of missed calls from his dad, who had fallen into the pattern of calling him drunk and sobbing. They've since partially mended their relationship. Understandably, Rashad's success has forced on him the same daunting responsibilities from which his father fled. He has become the vessel for the hopes of his entire clan.

"In my family, I got a cousin whose mom was trying to put her in jail for smoking weed and skipping school. Mind you, *everybody* in my family smokes fucking weed!" Rashad

says. “It’s a lot of generational dumb shit. And I tell my mom, *How do you expect any of these kids to be alright?* She’s like, ‘What do you mean?'”

The store clerk pauses the conversation to recommend *Department of Truth*, a graphic novel about a conspiracy theory scholar who stumbles upon the revelation that all of them are true: the JFK assassination, the flat Earth theory, the notion of reptilian shapeshifters. Rashad adds it to the pile.

Though he’s fascinated by the supernatural, Rashad doesn’t forget terrestrial concerns. He ruminates on his own familial lineage and the ingrained patterns he’s attempting to break.

“How do you expect a kid to be any better than that if you don’t make any changes?” he asks. “How do you expect kids to do anything if all their fucking mentors and heroes are people on TV and online who they’ve never met? When are you going to motivate somebody to do something or do something for yourself? It’s self-loathing and self-defeat. And it’s some shit, some trauma… I know that.”

With all this pressure, with all these expectations and flawed models, it was only natural that Rashad would want to flee. When you defy lottery odds through sheer will, talent, and luck, you can’t help but think you’re the recipient of divine fortune. But even the greatest escape artists fall victim to our human frailty. Eventually, we all start to discover that miracles are a form of superstition.

The website for the Dana Point Rehab facility features people in wetsuits frolicking in the surf, as if by allowing their staff to heal your addiction you'll end up bronzed and hanging ten like Kelly Slater. To be fair, Isaiah Rashad did learn how to make an exquisite summer salad while there. (Heirloom tomatoes, a little bit of white vinegar, salt, pepper, vegetable oil, cucumbers, and red onions. Thank him later).

Rehab also probably saved his life. His panic attacks were so severe that doctors prescribed him Gabapentin, an anti-seizure medication that they claimed would slow down his heart rate.

"There wasn't a whole bunch of recovery [after recording *The Sun's Tirade*]. I just went into the interviews and told n****s I fucked my life and health up," Rashad says. "Then I went on tour and it ain't like a lot of shit had changed. If anything it got worse, but it just didn't look as bad outwardly because I had so much going on."

It’s the same day as our comic book store excursion, but now we’re back at Rashad’s apartment in Long Beach. These are his final weeks here before he moves to a three-bedroom place in one of those slow and unassuming parts of the Valley where six frozen yogurt shops exist for every one resident. It looks exactly how you’d expect Isaiah Rashad’s home to look: part mystic traveler, part mess. There are Buddha statuettes and Vishnu figurines, sticks of palo santo, scattered packets of Raw rolling papers and dirty pots left over from last night when Rashad made stovetop caramel popcorn for his son. Afterwards, they watched *Roots*.

Hundreds of comics and graphic novels are stacked beneath a flat-screen TV. A book called *Get Your Shit Together* slumps next to one that teaches you how to become a

better comic illustrator. There is a framed photo of Rashad with his son in a black durag, and another of 2Pac's glowering mugshot after he was arrested in New York. These days, he mostly listens to murder mystery podcasts, but vinyl records of Curtis Mayfield, The Commodores, and The O' Jays are scattered about. This love of classic R&B (and later, the paisley Soulquarian thump) is embedded in his artistic DNA, and explains why *The House is Burning* splits the difference between something that exists equally for those weaned on Rap Caviar and those steeped in the biblical Memphis testament of Stax and Hi Records.

The trouble really started when Rashad got off the road in late 2017. Having made what seemed like obscene sums of money, he fell into the conventional trap of the young and rich: he called up all of his closest friends from home and told them to move in. Magnanimously, he wanted them to have whatever he had, including nice clothes, expensive meals, and extravagant amounts of mood enhancers.

"And then…I ended up sleeping on my homie's couch for like four or five months," Rashad says. "It was the quickest fall from grace I could ever imagine."

How it happened wasn't pretty. He'd start drinking Jameson at 9 a.m. The studio was in his apartment, which theoretically should've made him more prolific, but he quickly grew bored with making music. The Topanga Mall in Woodland Hills became his kryptonite. He'd be faded before noon and impulsively figure out the best way to drain his bank account. He'd buy $300 shirts and wear them twice, and load up on gourmet sandwiches so lavish they could have been custom-made by Johnny Dang.

He ended up sabotaging himself. He'd enter the studio and everyone around him would challenge him to step it up, but that didn't work on someone as naturally complex and sensitive as Rashad. His motivations needed to be internal.

"I'm not somebody who needs doubt put into my mind," he says. "I don't like being told, 'I'm not sure if you can do this.' I'd rather ask myself, 'Why wouldn't you do this?'"

Besides, this was going to be his second album (or third, depending on how you want to classify *Cilvia Demo*). When arguably the greatest rap label of this century plucks you from obscurity, it engenders lottery-pick expectations. Rashad couldn't shake the underlying question: Would he become a star whose name appeared in the big font on festival posters? Would he stare out from the thumbnail header images of massive streaming playlists? Or would he just be a critic's darling, headlining 1,000-capacity rooms but never appearing on *Ellen*?

"I couldn't pull off even acting like I wanted to rap for money, or like I wanted to rap to express myself. I didn't know exactly how to put into words what I felt."

The further Rashad dipped into the music business and the algorithm industrial complex, the more frustrated he became. He didn't like the idea of a team of editors, everyone smearing their fingerprints on a pop song before it went live. And while his vulnerability and willingness to talk about depression felt novel in 2013, he knew that it had become a marketing tagline for a micro-generation of younger artists.
"I was really disgruntled," Rashad says, hitting an e-cigarette, a replacement for the half-pack-a-day of American Spirits that he smoked until recently. "Instead of just explaining myself, I just assumed that n****s knew. Or I would just be drunk spazzing. And nobody hears that. They just hear that you're drunk. You know they called me Bobby Brown? That shit hurt the fuck out of my feelings. That's the worst type of vibe ever."

The people who'd been there from the beginning either believed that Rashad no longer needed their guidance or felt unable to reach him when he was so unstable. He and his longtime day-to-day manager Matt Miller — who had come out with him from Tennessee in 2012 — didn't speak for a year and a half. (They've seen reconciled). So he

wandered L.A. alone, spiraling deeper, surrounded by yes men, unable to figure out who was trying to have fun with him at his expense and who was genuinely looking out for him. Then he wrecked his car and realized that his bank account was perilously low. So he dipped back to Chattanooga.

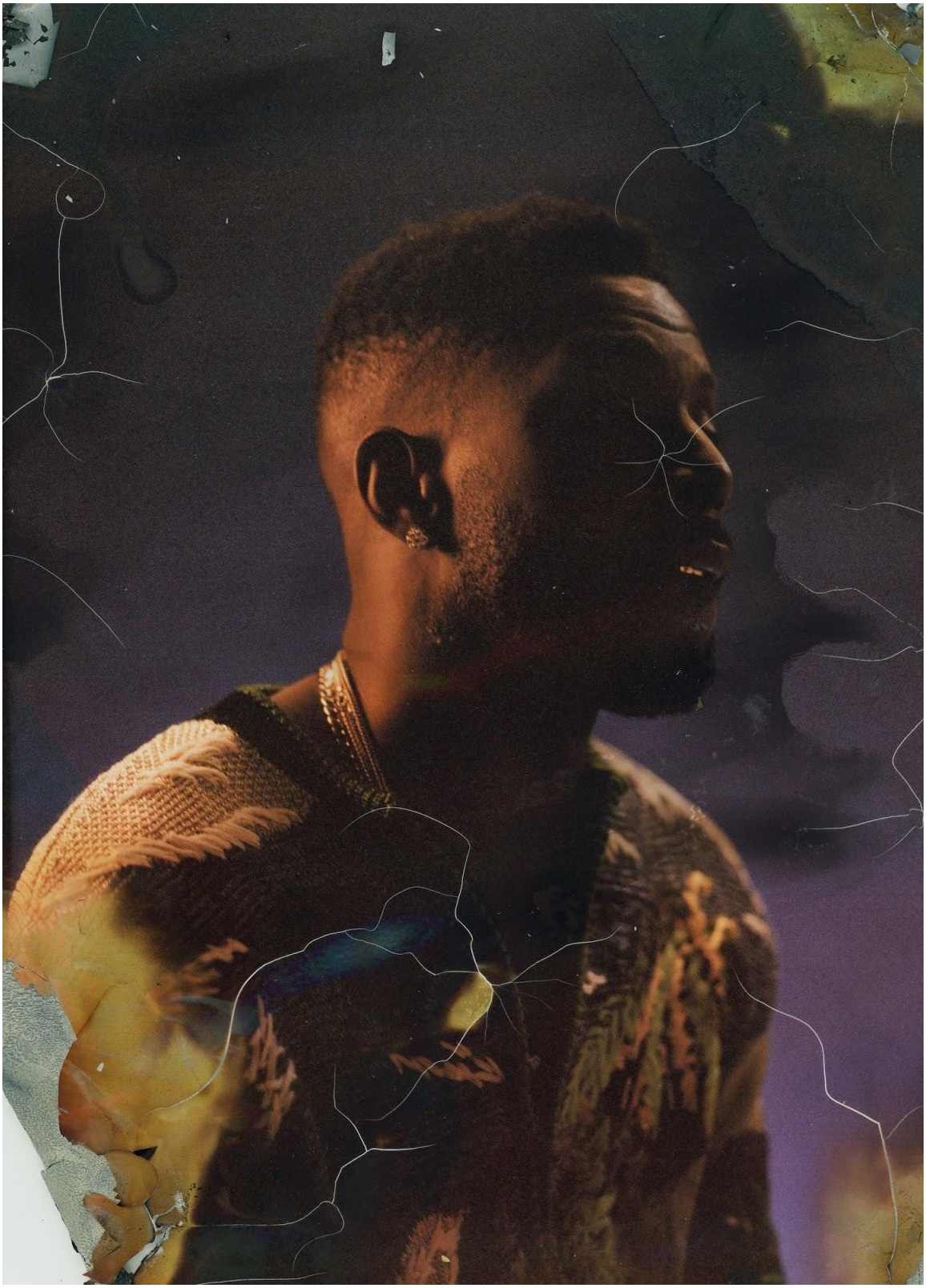
But you can't go home again. At least not after you're a relatively famous rapper, in a station of life completely alien to everyone who you grew up with. He was 27 years old and living at his mom's house. Dark, widow-making thoughts burrowed into his head: he was lost and only had himself to blame. Was it time to get a real job? Could he ever make anything creatively vital again? Top had told him to take some time for himself, but what exactly did that mean? Had he been shelved? Rappers don't get sabbaticals; the game waits for no one. Five years in this business might as well be 50. He kept drinking.

Top summoned Rashad to L.A. in an effort to help him recover. He put him in a hotel and got him back in the studio. But the failures kept mounting.

"I took it seriously, but I was drunk in the studio and trying my best to make my confidence swell way larger than it actually was at the time," Rashad says. "I couldn't pull off even acting like I wanted to rap for money, or like I wanted to rap to express myself. I didn't know exactly how to put into words what I felt."

His house finally turned to ashes in the late spring of 2019. The benders got so out of control that even Rashad knew he was losing his grasp; everything he had worked for was rapidly disintegrating. So he got in touch with Top and told him about everything: the extent of the drinking, the financial ruin, how he barely had money to eat. He knew

he needed some form of salvation. Within an hour, he was on his way down to Dana Point, where he would spend the next month detoxing and trying to understand the last three years and the previous three decades.



The routine was the same every day:

7 a.m. — Wake up

8 a.m. — Breakfast

9:30 a.m. — group therapy

11:00 — audience with a speaker or some type of skill building

12:00 — lunch

1:30 — free time

4:00 p.m. — more group therapy

After that there was a cool-down period, then dinner, then lights out by 9:00 p.m. It's hard to imagine the scenario. This thoughtful, anxious, brilliant rapper from the South surrounded by middle-aged white people who wouldn't know him from NBA Youngboy. He tried to keep his identity a secret because what was he supposed to say? *I'm Isaiah Rashad from TDE, you might remember me from such songs as "4 Da Squaw" and "Wat's Wrong" featuring Zacari and Kendrick Lamar.*

Then the workers' children discovered who the new guy was. "When their kids came to visit, I was like, 'Why's this fucking child looking at me so weird?'" Rashad laughs. "The very next day, all the nurses were sneaking autographs for their kids from me. That was weird."

In what could have been a plot point from a heartwarming and lighthearted decade-old Searchlight Pictures dramady, Rashad forged indelible bonds with the other patients. A new buddy who ran a Waste Management company in the Napa Valley (it was he who put him up on the summer salad game), and a 23-year-old named Kaillie (not her real name), a former heroin addict who had been using right up until she gave birth to her infant child. They all became close friends, played basketball, walked on the beach, and shared lobsters, steaks, and hot dogs on the Fourth of July. Rashad killed time by reading a book called *God is Disappointed in You*. A very tall counselor offered Rashad some valuable guidance, and Rashad swore that he would shout him out when

everything had settled down. He swears that his name was Saul Goodman, just like the shady lawyer from *Breaking Bad*. Google contradicts him, and says that it's actually Howard Goodman, but the thought still counts.

In the process, Rashad learned that health comes from structure. Therapists imparted the wisdom of being kind and honest to yourself and other people. By focusing on his breath to calm himself down, he could stave off the worst of the panic attacks. Crucially, he learned about the genetic component of addiction. He realized that his father had been an alcoholic, his brother was an alcoholic, and now it was finally time for him to admit that he was too.

"If I drink a small quantity of alcohol, I can find myself going back to the store like a zombie for more," Rashad says. "It's some shit that a lot of people don't understand. A lot of people think it's like a game. I didn't know how strong alcoholism is either. But you really can't fuck around with that shit if you know that you have it in the family."

When he finally emerged from Dana Point in the late summer of 2019, *The House Is Burning* was still a long way off. His stepfather headed west to live with him for a few months and provide familial support. But Rashad found himself constrained. "I can't rap that grimy shit at all, the real experiences I be having, with family around me," he says.

After years waylaid with writer's block, Rashad recognized the importance of updating his style. Listening carefully to new rappers, he studied song structure and experimented with flows and tempos in an attempt to stay current without compromising his core artistic instincts. But he says that the most important thing he did was learn to freestyle, for which he credits the producer Kenny Beats, who he calls his “rap coach.” Liberated from the laborious process of writing in his phone, Rashad absorbed the wisdom of the neon mantra hanging in The Cave, Beats’ studio: “Don’t overthink shit.”

“It always felt like Isaiah was hiding in plain sight,” says Beats, who produced two songs on *The House is Burning*. “There was always something in the way that he veiled his metaphors and the way he brought you into this non-TDE story that had TDE depth. He’s very intelligent and feels things in a really empathetic way, yet it’s car-ready and so quintessentially Southern. His music feels familiar and nostalgic, yet I can’t point to anything I know that sounds like it.”

After several months of regaining equilibrium, Rashad began recording the album in earnest last January. Moosa booked a month-long block of studio time and Rashad laid

down roughly 20 songs. The final track listing was culled from a master vault that contains about 60 songs. In typical Rashad fashion, he says that the ones he's most proud of were left on the cutting room floor. Practically ballads, they were deemed too slow for the more mid- and up-tempo pace of *The House is Burning*. "Something slow and swinging always sounds the best to me," he says. He hopes to release them soon. The challenge lay in creating something that didn't sound morbidly desolate. Rashad anticipated the questions that would arise if he fixated on his despair: Why are you still so depressed? Why are you still going through this? He wanted songs about overcoming the struggle — the journey, not just the condition.

“I just wanted this shit to sound fun,” he says. “If I’m sad, people don’t need to be able to tell. And this is probably my most depressing album.”

The House Is Burning is also Rashad's most complete project, even though he openly laments its lack of a real tearjerker. "From the Garden" and "Lay Wit Ya" are the closest things he's made to club bangers or radio songs, but neither sacrifice his inner vision. The former opens with a Saturday morning cartoon sample that nods to Ghostface Killah and finds Rashad unleashing a staccato flow about "fucking on your cousin" before rapping about being too poor for cable as a kid and watching it as his uncle's house instead. The shroud of death is typically everywhere, but the lyrics lean towards imagistic splashes rather than linear, classic rap storytelling.

As Beats pointed out, Rashad continues to hide in plain view. On "Headshots," he admits that it feels good to be back but says that he's changed; setting things on fire didn't allow him to "cover his pain." He repeats "pain" like an exorcism, imperfectly rhyming it with "lean lean lean." It's a subtle allusion to Young Thug euphorically yelping "lean lean lean" on "2 Cups Stuffed," but in Zay's version it sounds submerged, like he's drowning inside a styrofoam cup.

As a rap technician and raw but effective singer, Rashad has taken a dramatic leap. His flow sounds greased and nimble, as elusive as his personality. He has the gift of paying homage without seeming imitative. On the title track, he flips the famous hook to Goodie Mobb's "Cell Therapy" to an interior examination of the demons "creeping in my conscience." After soul searching with a "lack of purpose" he deploys Missy Elliott's "The Rain" flow to describe his own trip to the beach. Throughout his career, Rashad has seemed to suggest that he wants to answer the question, What if Frankie Beverly rapped? Or what if Rashad divined orphic inspiration from Erykah Badu instead of Andre 3000? This is the closest he's come.

"He's a true writer. Zay still feels like a regular person who can relate to both the average everyday human and the rich guy going to the club," says Moosa, who has worked with Rashad since he first signed to TDE. " Most of the great artists have the

ability to take their troubles and turn them into art. Zay is just preaching. He doesn't have to make nothing up. His struggles have created real character and he's come out the other side, strong and unbroken."

Still there remains the sense that these vicissitudes will endure. Rashad is all too aware that everything is fragile, that it's essential to find a structure that will allow him to stay on the path. He cites the importance of having privacy and a quiet place to read a book. He's begun hiking weekly and tapping back into his spiritual side. He's letting himself cry more too. Then there is the responsibility that naturally comes with age. He's about to have his third child and is acutely aware of the need to set an example for them and his nephews and cousins. He doesn't want to self-destruct; he has a family.

That's not to say that things have been perfect. Over the last 18 months, there have been short bouts when he's hit the bottle again, but they didn't result in wrecked cars or emotional carnage. A few weeks ago, he recommitted himself to staying sober, or at least California sober.

"God's not going to save you. I mean, he can. Because I believe in God. But God alone is not going to save you," Rashad says, back in this cramped transitional apartment that he's excited to escape from. "The world's on fire. The water is polluted, there's so much CO2 pouring into the ozone. But when you take it to a micro level…when your house is on fire, are you going to go into that bitch to get the personal possessions, or are you just going to trust in yourself and in God that you're going to be able to bounce back?"

I ask him if this is really the overarching meaning of *The House is Burning*, and he nods his head.

"I was dead and now I'm alive," he says, letting the words linger in the air for a few seconds, hopeful but unable to forget these last five years of chaos. "I guess."