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Courtesy of Spencer Sease

Culture

Isaiah Rashad Comes Back From Rock Bottom With a Great New Album

The House Is Burning, out this Friday, sees Isaiah Rashad liberated from the pressures of his own mind.

BY CALEB CATLIN

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It's been almost five years since Isaiah Rashad released his first album. He'd flashed glimpses of stardom on his 2014 mixtape, *Cilvia Demo*, which was touted as one of the best projects of that year, and then his 2016 debut proper, *The Sun's Tirade*, struck a chord, combining trunk-rattling sonic homages to Master P and Scarface with verses packed with raw vulnerability and introspection. "Mix that Boosie with that boom bap," as Rashad said on the standout album track "Brenda."

Then things got bumpy. Self-doubt consumed Rashad and derailed his attempts to record new music. Fans were left with song snippets that popped up like Bigfoot sightings on sparse IG Live sessions. Alcohol was a crutch and panic attacks were frequent. Finally, he hit rock bottom, crashing on a friend's couch because he'd run out of money. Rehab and a fresh start followed. But Rashad never lost his audience, and at a recent press session after the release of "Lay Wit Ya," the first single from his long-awaited new album, *The House Is Burning*, he experienced real gratitude for that: "Seeing it [in person], I realize they really put some weight in my life."

It's this sort of vulnerability that makes Isaiah Rashad hip-hop's everyman. He's the lovable cousin almost everyone has in their family. Going to rehab and starting from scratch gave him perspective. Now there's an unmistakable light, literally and figuratively, radiating off him. The neon glow of producer Kenny Beats' mantra—"Don't Overthink Shit"—on the studio wall follows him the same way his gold grills shine when he warmly smiles. He absorbed it not only as studio rules but as a life lesson. *The House Is Burning*, out this Friday, sees Isaiah Rashad liberated from the pressures of his own mind.

Musicians sometimes distance themselves from distinct regionality in favor of appealing to everyone, but the influences in Rashad's work are clear cut. *The House is Burning* showcases how multifaceted Southern hip-hop is. Think Young Dro's *Best Thang Smokin'* in the world of Outkast's *Aquemini*. What if Project Pat hopped on guest features for *Mama's Gun* with Erykah Badu? Yet the album never sounds scattered: It's carefully crafted for the speakers inside an old Cadillac or the creamy leather interior of a '66 Chevy Impala. *GQ* spoke with Isaiah Rashad about *The House is Burning*, movies, mental health, and adjusting to life in Los Angeles.



Courtesy of Spencer Sease

Plenty of artists record in between albums. When did “album mode” officially start for you?

Last January, 2020.

What do you want people to take away from *The House is Burning*?

For new people, if they hadn't heard me before, I'd like them to walk away and be like, “Damn, he's good at making a lot of different stuff.” If you've been a part of this shit, I'd want you to be like, “Damn, he gave me a good update on his life and he's still giving me stuff that's going to help me during my day when I'm going through my own shit.”

Everything's been turbulent the past few years, but how are you feeling at this moment?

Right in this moment, I'm hungry. In all honesty, I'm kind of back at my base level where I don't know what's going on, I'm just happy to be doing it. I couldn't tell you for real how I felt—I'm kind of nervous, I'm kind of happy that stuff's happening again, even beyond the pandemic, everything. I'm excited, but I'm just nervous. I'm always nervous before stuff comes out.

You said a lot of your favorite songs were left on the cutting floor. Why is that?

The slow songs that I'm more known for, like real moody shit is what I'd cry to. Those songs that I would personally cry to aren't really on the album.

Do you think that you would make a full project full of slow jams?

I think it's very important to keep that balance at this point of my career. At some point in time, I'd like to make a short, little slow winin' shit, just for people who like that. I definitely should do that in my trajectory, it's in the things I would do.

The relationship you have with your fans is interesting because even after five years, they're still riding strong with you. Can you speak to the feelings you had when you saw people come out for the single rollout the way they did?

It felt like a family reunion. I've seen people message me and I message them back. Sometimes I've had deeper conversations with people about their personal lives but afterwards, I don't ever think about how they really support me, I never take that into account. Seeing it [in person], I realize they really put some weight in my life. I mean something to them, they mean something to me, I owe them something.

Sometimes fans can be so callous on Twitter, even when you post something vulnerable or personal. What are your feelings when you see people who are more concerned with your art than who you are as a person?

That's a given. People don't care about what Quentin Tarantino's doing, they only care if the movie's good, you know? You can only ask so much of people. As a person who doesn't really care for people to know about my personal life outside of what I want to share, I expect them to separate. I would *hope* they separate.



You like to compare your albums to movies, and you said this new one is like *The Hateful Eight* or *Blade Runner*.

The House Is Burning is like a passion project that I think a lot of people will like and other people just won't get it. Art is to be delivered and interpreted. I'm not supposed to sell you my art, you feel me? You really have to like the premises of those two movies to get into them, you're not gonna just watch *Hateful Eight* and be like, "This shit bomb." You have to like what movies are, you have to like character development, you have to like that the third or fourth character you're introduced to is the most important one. You have to like those types of small nuances or details.

That's why on the album, I put a lot of people whose music I like on specific songs that were more catered to them than to me. I think that's somewhat like being a director and treating myself, the rapper, as more of a character. Because at the end of the day, I'm more of a producer and director than anything else, I just happen to write the scripts too. The only actor who I can get to say these raps is myself right now, because trust me, if I had somebody else to rap these, a dude with a better voice preferably, I would. I just make these soundscapes that are in my mind and they're basically like soundtracks to certain times of day and certain things that are going on in my life, with the real intention that you should listen to this album at night while driving on a dark road, you should really *feel* that.

What movies and shows are you into now?

Loki went hard, it was good as hell. My favorite thing about it is that it introduced Kang the Conqueror, which I waited for for a long time. It definitely set it up for people who aren't privy to comics, but at its core, it's definitely for nerds.

I recall you discussing your dreams of writing and soundtracking a comic. Do you have a rough idea of what you'd want to do?

Yeah, totally. I don't know if I should tell you right now but it's about these kids dealing with family trauma. I'd probably make it a one-off unless someone reputable or respectful enough to the art wanted to make it an ongoing thing. That's the thing I like about comics, wouldn't that be tight? If you were a rapper and you could just give your legacy to another young n-gga and keep your name going, that's basically comics.

You've said that you felt like you owed something to people who believed you were a star before all this. How do you manage that pressure while balancing your own mental health?

I turn my phone off sometimes, sometimes I delete Twitter and Instagram, sometimes I talk to my mom. Sometimes I have to reaffirm this shit isn't about me, the world isn't about me, life isn't about me. The only time I ever feel some kind of real overwhelming, resounding pressure is if I decide, today, that I'm the center of the universe, and luckily I usually don't.

Nobody really owes it to somebody else to be a star.

But I definitely owe it to people! I owe finishing, not being something. I owe *finishing* what I said I was going to be. Somebody making me their role model, I didn't choose that—I respect that though, I'm not gonna say I'm not a role model because I totally am—but me knowing that and being aware of that, it's a process. Trying to cut out your bad habits just because somebody likes you? [laughs] It's a good pressure to have. Sometimes I think, "Pull your fuckin' pants up, somebody looking."



Courtesy of Spencer Sease

How do you manage good mental health, especially as a father?

Therapy from time to time, consistently talking to my people, my family, sharing some of that weight of life, and having a goddamn schedule, a schedule kind of solves everything. Having something to do will keep you from doing other shit. Having respect and expectation for yourself. Part of respect for other people is coming together and showing up with your shit together. If we have something to do at 11, before 11 I need you to call me or call whoever you have to call or pray to whoever you pray to, to get your shit together, because everything we do is a team effort. Everybody got to take care of everybody. Just have your shit together, or at least recognize when you're off your shit to try to get your shit together.

I recently moved to Los Angeles in the past year. In a *Breakfast Club* interview, you said you found it hard adjusting to life in Los Angeles.

I'm so Southern and so family-oriented, I just don't like being away from folks. I like doing shit squaddled up, I be out here bored as fuck. The beach is cool but I just like people, that's why it was hard for me. I just like my people, people I'm used to. Maybe it's because I'm a Taurus, but I like continuity. Where you from?

I've moved around a lot but I was born in Birmingham. I'd call Houston and Atlanta home.

It's just green out there, for one. There ain't no food out here, have you noticed that? Have you found anywhere that you really like to eat that your mom would be like, let's go? It's not like there's a shortage of food spots, it's like they just don't care. Seeing an El Pollo Loco or Del Taco every day is some shit.

Do you think you've adjusted between now and then?

Hell yeah, I just stopped harping on things I couldn't control.

I noticed you had TUT [the rapper from Tennessee] on the album. Do you feel like it's important to put on people from your own home?

It's important for me to be able to look out for a n-gga, but put on? You can't put nobody on. You can open a door for a n-gga, you can't make a n-gga walk through that door, but it is important for me to realize when there is somebody who needs a door.

Do you feel like it's important to bring different aspects of Southern music into your own art?

I always try to make something that I like hearing because I have to *live with this shit*. I gotta live with this for the rest of forever, so let's make it be something that y'all gon' fuck with. I especially like hearing other people's voices. I tried to get people on my album that I would usually cut my own music off to listen to.

You were talking about having Young Dolph on the deluxe version of the album.

I don't even like the idea of deluxes. I just put out the music, I'd rather just give you the songs. Sometimes, deluxe editions take away from the idea of [the album] being a tight-knit concept. It's like, "So you had other ideas?" Just call it something else.

You said back in 2016 that you were thinking of finally making *Pieces of a Kid* [an unofficial compilation of songs made by fans].

The actual concept that I came up with, I think this is pretty close to it. I don't think about old girlfriends, old anything, so when I do think about that stuff, I think maybe I'm harping too much. Because that came from the mind of a 17 or 18-year old, so I don't know what that feels like any more.

You're almost 30 now?

Like 40. I got three kids.