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Isaiah Rashad Was Always TDE's Secret Weapon — Now, He's Ready to Own It

By Cydney Lee



Photo: Spencer Sease

For a certain time, it seemed like Isaiah Rashad might follow in Kendrick Lamar's immediate footsteps as the newest rap star of the formidable Top Dog Entertainment roster. Then, he went silent. The then-22-year-old Chattanooga native had left Middle Tennessee State University to pursue a rap career and, by 2013, signed to the California-based label TDE; the following year, he released his debut mixtape *Cilvia Demo*. With Lamar, Jay Rock, Ab-Soul, ScHoolboy Q (known together as Black Hippy) already leading TDE, Rashad — along with SZA — brought a new perspective and embraced his identity as the lone Southerner among a crew of L.A. heads. In 2016, he released his critically acclaimed debut album, *The Sun's Tirade*. A sold-out national tour and festival appearances leveraged his success — and lined his pockets — sooner than he could keep up.

After that first taste of stardom, shit hit the fan. Rashad succumbed to crippling alcoholism — a disease he revealed runs in his family — and financial hardships in the form of frivolously spending on himself and his friends to the point where he was forced to move back to his mom’s house in Chattanooga. Rashad learned the hard way that being signed to a major label, especially as a newcomer, means nothing when you can’t hold up your end of the bargain. Long, unannounced hiatuses seem commonplace with TDE artists; Lamar also went ghost after the release of his 2012 major label debut *good kid, m.A.A.d. city*. Between then and 2015’s classic *To Pimp a Butterfly*, the Compton rapper embarked on a journey to South Africa, an experience that allowed him to “see all the things he wasn’t taught.” At the time, Lamar said that on his followup he felt he had to be responsible for enlightening his fans on the struggles faced in the homeland while equally expressing and making space for his own vices. Rashad’s enlightenment came in the form of self-discovery, and he feels like he owes his fans some closure, telling *GQ*, “ I owe *finishing* what I said I was going to be.” In 2018, Rashad moved back to L.A. and nearly hit rock bottom. And after confiding in his boss, Anthony “Top Dawg” Tiffith, Rashad spent the majority of his 2019 summer in a California rehab.

This past spring, the artist with so much promise interrupted resurfaced with a tell-all *Fader* cover story about where he'd been all this time. He also unveiled the first single, "Lay Wit Ya," off his new album *The House Is Burning*, out today. A loose metaphor for his life the past five years, Rashad's new project — this one recorded fully sober — finds him at his most refined and self-realized. "It's saying your world's on fire, but you have the option to recover and bounce back — simple as that," he's able to reflect now, sitting in his new BMW X6. This album, Rashad is living fully in the present and no longer overcomplicating his raps; thanks to a mantra he adapted from working in the Cave with producer Kenny Beats, "don't overthink shit" has become the Chattanooga rapper's personal motto. "If you don't ever get yourself straight, who the fuck is you gon' help, main?," he ponders on the album's outro and longest track, "HB2U." *The House Is Burning* possesses his usual pensive, boom-bap odes like "Don't Shoot" and "HB2U," with a sprinkle of nonchalant bangers like "From the Garden" (with Lil Uzi Vert) and "Lay Wit Ya." He got crafty with his features, too, working with artists he's personally a fan of from Smino ("Claymore") to 6lack ("Score").

The 30-year-old is in a better place. He's "staying on his shit" by way of spending more time with his family and friends. He's reading more (mostly comics and, right now, Stephen King's *The Dead Zone* and Ta-Nehisi Coates's *The Water Dancer*). He's growing closer and more fundamental to his TDE peers. And on this album, Rashad is celebrating his personal and career rebirth. What hasn't changed? He was, and still is, TDE's secret weapon.



The House Is Burning
Isaiah Rashad

1 Darkseid 2:06

2 From the Garden (feat. Lil Uzi Vert) 3:09

3 RIP Young 2:38

4 Lay Wit Ya (feat. Duke Deuce) 3:22

5 Claymore (feat. Smino) 3:06

6 Headshots (4r Da Locals) 3:13

7 All Herb (feat. Amindi) 3:44

8 Hey Mista 1:55

9 True Story (feat. Jay Rock & Jay Worthy) 3:46

10 Wat U Sed (feat. Iamdoechii & Kal Banx) 2:56

11 Don't Shoot 2:01