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Isaiah Rashad Returns, Burns And All

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"It's just surreal to me," Isaiah Rashad tells NPR Music. "It feels like I'm still working in like my old fast food s***, no matter how many times we do this."

Spencer Sease/Courtesy of the artist

Isaiah Rashad uses the word "surreal" a lot. It's hard to blame him.

Consider the trajectory of his life and career over the last decade: In 2013, Rashad was still a relatively unknown up-and-comer from Chattanooga, Tenn., before he signed to Top Dawg Entertainment, this century's most celebrated rap label. Twice he released critically acclaimed projects — 2014's *Cilvia Demo* and 2016's *The Sun's Tirade* — and twice he disappeared from public view, folding inward as he struggled with substance abuse and his mental health.

After his longest absence yet, Rashad's second official full-length album, *The House Is Burning*, arrives today. For all the real catastrophes Rashad has survived, the house fire that forms the title and heart of the album is only a metaphor. It's a reference to the turbulent past five years during which he relapsed, hemorrhaged his savings, checked into rehab and started confronting his problems in earnest. With everything around him burning, Rashad got himself out alive and surveyed the damage.

For him to arrive where he is now, with one of the year's most hotly anticipated releases and fans lining up around the block to see him [premiere a new music video](#) in a parking lot?

"It's just surreal to me. I don't even really believe that s***," he tells NPR over Zoom. "It feels like I'm still working in like my old fast food s***, no matter how many times we do this. I feel fortunate, but it never feels like the real thing. Maybe in a couple of years."

In his return to music, Rashad adopts a variety of tones and aesthetics — he's breezy and confident on "9-3 Freestyle," understated and regretful on "All Herb," and a whirlwind to match Lil Uzi Vert on "From the Garden." Most often, he's gently pushing himself past the boundaries of what he's done before. The most fully formed version of Rashad's classic formula of kickback-meets-therapy-session arrives with "Headshots (4r Da Locals)." Sliding over a reverberating R&B groove with winding yet precise verses laced with bars about the fear of a sudden death, Rashad expands his sound at the margins. The addition of a pristinely arranged group vocal on the hook and a saxophone solo on the outro makes "Headshots (4r Da Locals)" feel larger and more carefully constructed than comparable tracks in his catalogue.



YouTube

Occasionally, Rashad is more boisterous, but even when he's flexing he wants to remind you of the fragility of it all. An obsessive comic book reader, when Rashad finds space in a storm of triplets to compare himself to a superhero on "From the Garden," he chooses Billy Batson — the DC hero who splits his time between the form of the all-conquering Shazam and a troubled teen always a couple steps away from disaster.

He reaches back to the South constantly, especially Tennessee: There are samples of the state's hip-hop past — Three Six Mafia's "Ridin' N' Da Chevy" and Project Pat's "Cheese and Dope" — and there are features from Memphis crunk revivalist Duke Deuce and Chattanooga's YGTUT, a pre-TDE collaborator and childhood friend.

"I be so gone all the time, and I'll never be at home," Rashad says. "So I just be making s*** that makes me feel like I'm at the crib, without making me feel like I'm harkening or harping back or in a negative way."

Despite its title, *The House Is Burning* is as much about salvage as it is about points of no return. After a five-year absence, Rashad is able to pick and choose sounds to revisit, and new ones to try out. Befitting an artist who is very much still in the process of figuring out what to make of everything he's been through, this is an album of gradual growth, of returning to foundations and building something more lasting than what was there before.

Rashad alternately exalts in the fact that he's still here and examines the damage he still carries. He made it through the fire, but not unscathed. He's stunting, but he's keeping track of his urge to self sabotage. He's living his rap dreams in southern California, but part of him still believes he's a kid dodging trouble in between shifts flipping burgers in Chattanooga.

In our conversation, Rashad discusses the challenges of finally putting together *The House Is Burning*, his community of musical collaborators and friends that helped make it possible and the range of art he looked to for inspiration, from DJ Screw to DC Comics.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Jon Lewis, NPR Music: I want to start in fall 2019. You were coming out of rehab, trying to get your feet back under you to get this project started back up. In that situation, what were the first steps?

Isaiah Rashad: The first thing that was really scary about leaving rehab was trying to create [music] without drinking. Not even as a dependency on it, but on some loosening up type of s***. When it's a time thing, I put pressure on myself. Trying to relax, that was probably the biggest hump. When you just been out living and compounding so much information — for me I go there and want to talk about everything. So I got to ease myself into that s***.

These songs you make are really personal. Are you ever surprised that people are like, "Yeah, that's me also?"

Nah. I model myself after OutKast, artists like Erykah Badu and Lil Wayne. Most of the artists I took anything after love music enough to be fans of it, enough to understand the impact of all this s***. I think I make music in a similar way; at the bottom line, it's meant to be felt, whether explained or not.

You hit on some of your influences there. You're someone who shouts out artists you like, names songs after people. Who were you listening to while you were making this?



THE RECORD

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I was listening to a lot of old school. I was listening to stuff from Dallas, from Texas, like the Entourage and DJ Screw. I also listened to a lot of old Motown stuff — Smokey Robinson and s*** like that. And I tapped back into listening to Cake, an indie rock sound from the '90s.

But it be more the energies that affect it versus the sound. Sometimes it be the sound of some s*** that I be like, "Let me do that." But most of the time I like the energy that came from it.

On that '90s, Texas vibe, the beat for "True Story" really kind of —

It sounds like some Scarface s***.

Yeah, it sounds like Scarface, it sounds like UGK.

It's a freestyle, like what the name of the song is. I was in the studio trying to entertain myself. So that's what I was on. It probably took about 10 minutes to do that.

While we're talking about the South, there's a lot of Tennessee on this album. You had Duke Deuce on the first single, and your friend YGTUT on "Chad."

The Tennessee vibe is 'cause I've been so away from home for so long. I be always trying to make some s*** that sounds like riding on the back streets of Chattanooga. Old Ringgold Road, where I used to live at. Warm wind: I always try to make some s*** that feel like that. Something to make me feel like I'm at home. I try to make sure that I'm reminiscing in a positive way. It's so that s*** exists! If I don't make that s***, who's gonna make that s***?

On social media there's this feeling that rap is really rooting for you, seeing tweets from people like [Kenny Beats](#) and [Vince Staples](#) and everyone like that. What's it like to see that much support from your peers?

Those guys are my friends, though. It feels good. To see [Vince Staples] having put out a project, and right now that's my favorite project of the year, that s*** is cool to me. I remember I was listening to Vince when I was Tennessee before any of this stuff, like 10 years ago. All of that s***'s kind of surreal again. Not to overuse the word, but it's the only way to put it. It's cool just to have support from people who f***ed with me when I was going through my little droughts with myself.

"Score" was produced by Kenny, a very close friend of yours, and you *sing* a lot on that song. I wonder if that's a comfort, sort of breeding a new sound?



EDITORS' PICKS

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Oh definitely. Kenny's like a sensei, man. Me and Kenny both are Taurus and so we have a weird connection in that we are real straight up when we're comfortable and kind of in your face sometimes. I challenge him with beats, he challenges me with raps. He'll play me some s*** from somebody else, and I'll be like "Man, I got to make something better than that." That n****'s like some Smokey Robinson s*** back in the day. Like whoever you would go to in the '60s or '70s, '50s or whatever, to automatically get you one — that's Kenny.

You got really into comic books over the past couple of years. I want to talk about if you've learned anything about your own art from getting really deep into comics.

I don't know where the interest came from, but I started getting into them, and then at some point in time I started looking at the comics kind of how I look at the movies. I started to see what the artists or what the author or the director were putting into the material: their own stories through the art, through the characters. Their own traumas. And I connected with that. Especially stuff Tom King writes, or Donny Cates or Ed Brubaker. It's a handful of them, even Robert Kirkman.

I can see somebody in their stuff, and I can really empathize. I feel it. It helped through a lot of my own s***, but it also made me realize that there are other mediums I could put my feelings and my imagination into.



YouTube

I want to talk about that premiere that you did for the "Lay Wit Ya" video. What was the feeling like seeing your online fandom translated to seeing people in person for the first time in a long time?

Oh man, that s*** was crazy. It felt like picking up where we left off. I guess if you go into some type of hiding or whatever, if you come out with some s*** they like, it don't matter. It was exciting to see people. I was kind of scared to get COVID again.

Were you expecting to see the first singles go so big so quickly?

I really never know. I don't walk into it with any expectation, especially coming after five years. It wasn't like I was some huge charting artist before. I just had a lot of love from certain people from around the world and the United States. I'm happy how it's been received though. I'm proud of that for sure.

You've said one of the reasons it takes you a little longer to make an album is you feel like they're summarizing chapters of your life. So if we're back here in three years and there's a new album summarizing the next chapter of your life, what do you hope it's going to be like?

I hope I'm doing some type of giving back. But I don't know, I don't think that far! I'm real grateful for what's going on in my life right now and how it's been going. I don't really think about that — not about music. I hope my kids are doing good in school and s***. Three years is kind of short, dog. Five years is a better range of rap time. It may not be a summary until five years but I got hella music, I got more s*** I want to do. Just come along for a ride.