

Neil Strauss

A New Look At Eminem

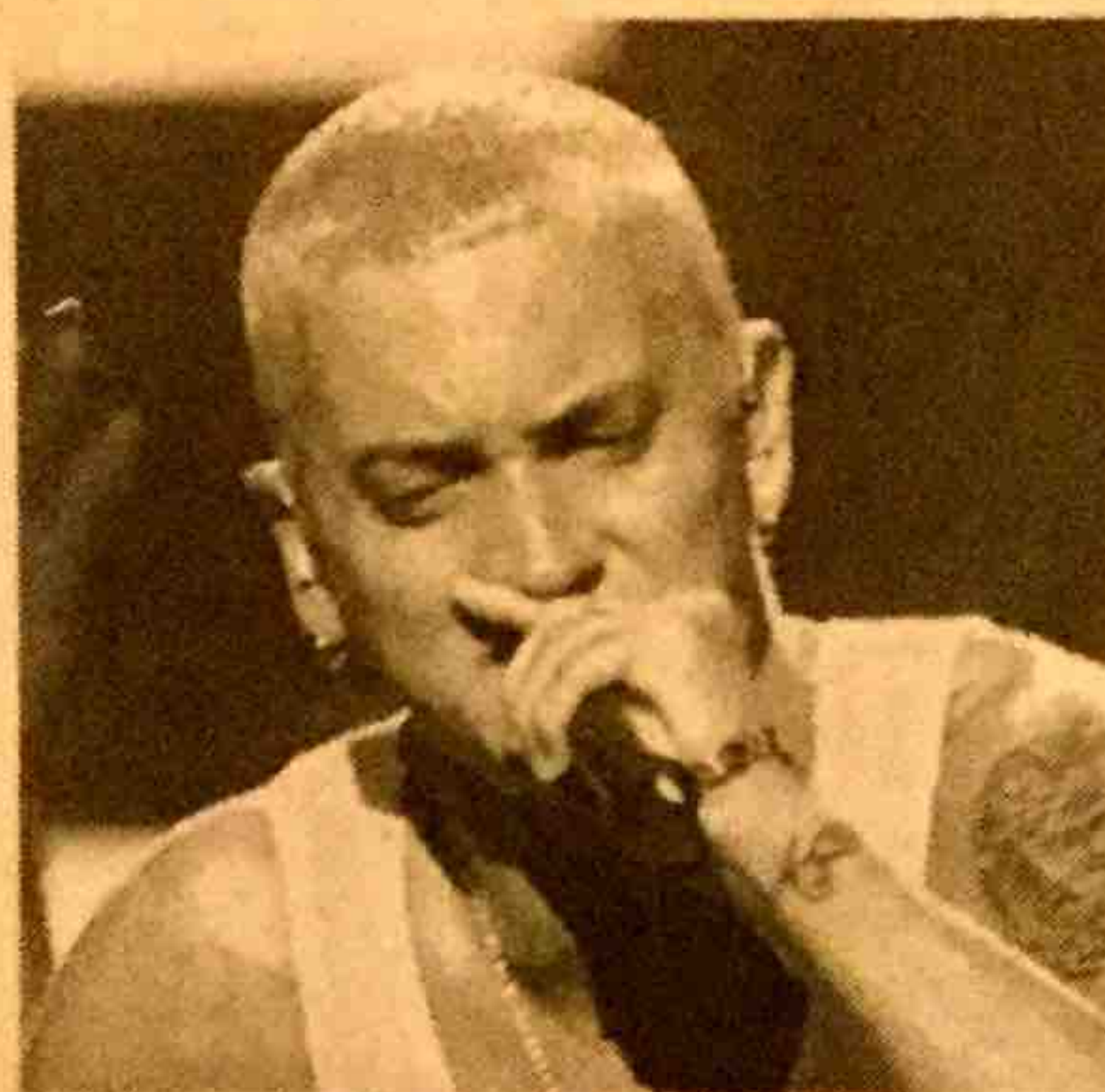
As 2001 comes to an end, I find myself thinking about an album from 2000. That year I wrote several articles praising Eminem's album "The Marshall Mathers LP." In my top 10, I wrote that it was the best but most reprehensible album of the year. Every time I praised the album, I was careful also to condemn it. Now I would like to amend some of the things I wrote about "The Marshall Mathers LP." Having listened to the album several times in recent months, I would like to rescind any apology I ever offered for liking the album.

I was motivated to write this after conversations with several people who condemned Eminem. In their minds he was a foul-mouthed rapper spewing small-minded bile for shock value. Each time I asked if the holder of this opinion had actually heard the album. And each one said no. One symptom of living in a society saturated with entertainment and media is that no one has time to take it all in, so people rely on others to form their opinions. Thus, the story of a person or artwork diverges more and more from its reality as it is perpetuated and embellished. As Eminem says on the album, "I'm not going to be able to top what my name is."

In all cases, I played the album, and the listeners were amazed to find themselves liking it not just musically (it contains some of the best work of one of the most important popular musicians of our time, Dr. Dre) but also lyrically. They found the epistolary story-song "Stan" a moving response to fans who form irrational attachments to pop stars; "The Real Slim Shady" a funny commentary on current culture; "Kim" a harrowing murder ballad; and "Who Knew," "Marshall Mathers," "Criminal" and "The Way I Am" valid answers to the criticisms they previously had. In short, they were surprised to find real substance and well-expressed ideas about the society of which Eminem is a symptom. There were also plenty of profane, violent, hateful, insensitive and just plain crude lyrics, and some listeners will probably never get past these, but at heart this is honest art — in possession of the rare attribute of not taking itself too seriously. It is, in parts, a very funny album.

There is little that anyone has said about Eminem that he hasn't al-

ready said about himself: every complaint leveled against the album is already anticipated in the lyrics and answered. One of pop's thinnest-skinned performers, Eminem has internalized his critics, and he creates a running commentary from his superego, so that when he gets flippant about Sonny Bono's death, his superego responds "Hey!" letting him know that he's gone too far. Rarely has an album said so many times in so many different ways that kids who try this at home are stupid, or shown



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The rap performer Eminem.

people that it really is sad, lonely, aggravating and stressful at the top. He uses the structure of rap, but inside Eminem is every angry white boy from Richard Burton in "Look Back in Anger" to Kurt Cobain.

Our society needs its Eminems because they are our polarity responders. They do what they're not supposed to. Eminem is the smart-aleck school kid who, when an authority figure says, "I don't want to hear one more word out of you," replies "one more word." In classic mythology, characters like Eminem, who buck the conventions of society to follow their own path, are not the villains but the heroes. Joseph Campbell, in discussing the story of the Holy Grail, which he considers one of the defining myths of Western civilization, described the wasteland as a place where people do and believe what they are told, where any spark of rebellion or individuality is instantly crushed. The hero, he said, is the person who possesses the attribute of spontaneity, and this spark, once ignited in one individual will flare up in thousands of others. ("Every single person is a Slim Shady lurking," as Eminem raps.) In the myth, Campbell continues, the knights split up and begin their journey where the forest is darkest and there is no path because where a

path exists it is someone else's.

In an early attempt the hero, a fool named Parsifal, fails in his quest for a simple reason: instead of following his own instinct, he follows the advice of an authority figure. Eminem's message is essentially the same: society is hypocritical and most parents and teachers have failed their children, so it is up to individuals to live in accordance with their own free will. This is, many of Eminem's religious-right critics will be surprised to discover, a fundamentally Christian message.

While some parts of the album are pure stupidity (like the sophomoric skit "Ken Kaniff"), some of the album's most criticized moments are its most redeeming. In "Kim," for example, Eminem doesn't exactly rap, he rants, playing both murderous husband and cheating wife. The emotions he goes through as the husband vacillate wildly between hate and love, madness and sanity, hurt and hurting. Criticizing Eminem for this song is like getting upset at Anthony Hopkins for killing all those people as Hannibal Lecter. Eminem is playing a character, a very flawed one, and it is to his credit as a writer and performer that he plays it so convincingly. True, the character may have an element of the real Eminem in him, but for some that is often what art is for, finding a constructive outlet for certain antisocial tendencies.

The great joke of "The Marshall Mathers LP" is that it begins with an announcement saying that Eminem doesn't care what anyone thinks about him and then continues with song after song revealing a thinnest-skinned rapper who is obsessed with every comment made about him. By all accounts, Eminem's next album will bring this to a new level, shooting barbs at family members and musicians who have criticized "The Marshall Mathers LP." Thus, we leave Eminem at a critical juncture, in danger of becoming a self-perpetuating response loop: he creates controversial music, is criticized for it and then makes even more controversial music in response. But before you re-enlist with either the Eminem allies or enemies when his next album is released in 2002, listen to his music yourself (or listen to it again) and form your own opinion. Don't take mine for fact, because when I listen to "The Marshall Mathers LP" a year or even a day from now, it will no doubt change again. Eminem is that kind of artist.