

Early Simmons, known in the hip-hop community as DMX, created numerous classical hip-hop albums. Characterized by less-polished and yet aggressive beats, hardcore themes, and sensational rhymes within the lyrics, his first album *It's Dark And Hell Is Hot* came out in 1998 and sold over 200,000 units within a week.

When I first came to the U.S., I was dominated by fear and lack of confidence. A skinny Asian kid who does not speak perfect English, what would you expect? Physical competence and the lack of understanding of American society got me. But I got my fear by listening to my empowerment: DMX's first album.

*Intro*, the first song in the album, was made popular not only by its quality but also by its exposure in one of Mike Tyson's fights, in which the commentator said it was some sort of scary, imposing music. This could not be more true from a white man's perspective. Starting with a tense, dark, slow introduction, DMX and another vocalist exchanged words. "I heard these niggas is for real"; "But I heard these niggas' posed to be like locking down the industry on some shit"; all the words built the tension and the impression that what comes after is a final boss in the video game, so to speak. Niggas didn't listen, and they got what they asked for. The verse transitioned into a fast, compact pace with tight rhythmic flow. Perhaps the beat itself is simple and repeats throughout, but it is this very simplicity that made it a 90s hit and classical rap song. "I'm the hardest rap artist," as in, I'm a different breed of Asian kid in this school. "Shit up for real, get up and feel," as in *Imma mess you up if you cross me*. That convict mentality DMX got from his jail time empowered me. It is me versus them.

Fast forward: the second song, Ruff Ryder's Anthem, began with a crude melodic riff sounding like made by a 12-year-old guitar beginner, but it is never the melody the hip-hop fans look for. Niggas wanna try, niggas wanna lie, then niggas wonder why niggas wanna die. Exactly, there are too many mean kids and people around me who never know the boundaries. Instead of explaining principles, I may as well "resort to violence", which is easier. Only in my case, I do not have friends who identify as niggas that "move in silence". Much like the first song, it conveys a hidden superiority, a not-to-be-fucked-wit mentality under the humility, until the niggas step over the bounds.

If the previous two songs are not direct enough, then give the third one a try. "Fuckin' wit' me. Y'all know somebody has told you about fuckin' wit' D". Okay, we get it, D. You have gone through a lot inside, a place filled with violence. But behind the crude lyrics is perhaps more than the provocation, given the albums' sales revenue. It was the desire to be respected amid the chaos in the streets of New York, in the crime-infused neighborhoods of Brownsville, on the west coast, where sets and cliques were fixated on wars. The beat itself is slightly more complex than the previous ones, at least with bass lines, keyboard, and drums. But again, it is not the musical complexities that hardcore listeners focus on. It is the empowerment or the icing on the cake of that buzz when smoking a bowl in the car while nodding to a beat and hardcore-themed lyrics.

I would have reviewed more songs, but given word the limit, this was it.

*Dr. P. Vessav*