

COMMON LAW

Love reigns supreme in this hip-hop artist's domain

Hip-hop audiences are usually more wild than wistful, yet at a performance in New York City last December, Common turned to see a man holding a sobbing woman tight. Common was performing "The Light," one of his many meditations on true love. He had no idea why the woman was crying. He continued to sing: "I never

knew a luh, luh-luh, a love like this/Gotta be some-thin' for me to write this...signed sealed delivered for us to grow together/Love has no limit, let's spend it slow forever."

Such romantic rhymes aren't often heard in hip-hop songs, where the bump and grind and making money remain the obsessive topics of many rival lyricists. But Common is no ordinary M.C. Exalting women and penning verses about black pride, spirituality and the state of hip hop, Common appeals to a crowd that is, he once joked, composed of "backpackers, white dudes and coffee-shop chicks."

With more important things in mind than cliché gangsta riffs, Common's lyrics hit a deeper chord. That weeping woman, Common later learned, had received a marriage proposal during that very song, and the pair met a year earlier at one of his shows. "It's an honor to create music to affect someone's life like that and have something so special be done at one of my concerts," Common told *Bullseye*.

That emotional power is just one of the many things that's uncommon about Common. In a genre where sampled riffs rule, he employs a six-piece backing band. His words fill the spaces between their sparse, jazzy beats. He won't often be found wearing sweats or sports jerseys, preferring instead trousers, colorful crocheted caps and paisley shirts,



JACK CHUCK/CORBIS OUTLINE

TARGET APPROVALS

Anderson, Jen	Handtmann, Angie
Brands	King, Tifanie
Bracker, Will	Lazarowicz, Karie
Clauss, Kerrie	McBurney, Moagan

COMPLEX APPROVALS

Balestrino, Richard
Doyle, Matt
Howe, Jeff
Parcal, Malka

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like a hip hop hippie. And while other rappers boast of their conquests, Common is a one-woman guy, living with the soul songstress Erykah Badu, who is known for her gravity-defying headdresses. "She's my queen and sister, my best buddy in the world," he gushes.

Now Common hopes to expand his appeal beyond the granola crowd with one of the most ambitious hip-hop albums yet. *Electric Circus* lives up to its celebratory name, shaping guitar solos, techno bleeps and big-band orchestra swing into a carnival of sublime noise. "I wanted to take this record out somewhere to a new place, beyond what hip hop should be and black music should sound like," he says. "The sounds and different textures started developing themselves."

The unlikely inspiration for the disc was old-time rock 'n roll, says Common, who immersed himself in popular sounds from 30 years ago, including Pink Floyd, Traffic and Joni Mitchell. He recorded the album at Jimi Hendrix's old Electric Lady Studios in New York, and even the album's cover is an homage to the Beatles' famed *Sergeant Pepper* cover: It features the rainbow-hued headshots of 85 people who inspire him, from Mary J. Blige to the bellman who works at the House of Blues. "It's good to get up on new joints with all that old music," says Common. "It was something new for me, but I'm really digging it"

Born Lonnie Rashid Lynn in 1972, Common grew up in a part of Chicago not known as a hip-hop breeding ground. Instead, he fell for hip hop during frequent family trips to Cincinnati to visit his cousin and his aunt. It was the '80s, and they played him *The Message* by Grandmaster Flash & the Furious Five and songs by Afrika Bambaataa. Back in Chicago, Common would share new break dancing techniques with his friends and track new dance moves the

a friend for Badu's telephone number because he wanted to invite her to perform on his album. They became friendly but at the time were in other relationships. (Common has a daughter, Omoye Assata Lynn, and Badu has a son, Seven.) They didn't get together until four years later. While the pair is coy about marriage plans, they both say their relationship is "sacred." This year, a song they recorded for the *Brown Sugar* soundtrack, called "Love of My Life," was nominated for three Grammy awards. "We definitely want to create more music," says Common. "We'll be working together for a long time."

Awards are just one sign that Common's career is in ascent. His major label debut, *Like Water for Chocolate*, in 2000, sold more than 700,000 copies. The recently released *Electric Circus* shows similar breakout potential. No longer known by just the art rap crowd, Common has begun doing star turns, such as a cameo appearance on the UPN sitcom "Girlfriends" and a series of commercials for Coca-Cola. He can even be seen promoting the joys of vegetarian living in ads for the group People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA). Even if Common winds up crossing over to a larger audience, the idiosyncratic artist will continue to record on his own terms. "I'm making music to try to innovate," he says. "I'm not making music for radio, or no particular people. It's a universal way of communicating. It's free." Spoken like a true hippie.

—Warren Cohen

"I wanted to take this record out somewhere to a new place, beyond what hip hop should be and black music should sound like."

way others followed sports. "We even went to see *Breakin'* [the movie], which real break dancers thought was corny," he recalls. "But it was dope to us"

In 1992, he recorded his first record, *Can I Borrow a Dollar?* for a small label. But Common—performing as Common Sense at the time—broke through the underground with his second disc, *Resurrection*, in 1994. The single "I Used to Love H.E.R." received the most attention. "H.E.R." referred to hip hop, which he believed had lost some of its spirit as gangsta rap grew popular. (The song still resonates years later; it served as the inspiration for last year's movie *Brown Sugar*, which starred Taye Diggs and Queen Latifah.)

Common's views drew the wrath of some California rappers, like Ice Cube, who felt that Common disrespected the West Coast in the song. A rap beef ensued, with each artist recording vicious attack singles until the two called a truce and hugged at the Nation Of Islam Hip Hop Peace Summit in April, 1997. "I have much love and respect for Ice Cube and how he's expanding his career," says Common.

Today, Common lives in Brooklyn and spends time at Erykah Badu's house in Dallas. The two met in 1996, when Common asked



MARC BAPTISTE

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Bracker, Will	Lazarowicz, Karie
Clayton, Kerrie	McBurney, Meagan

COMPLEX APPROVALS

Balestrino, Richard
Doyle, Matt
Howe, Jeff
Russell, Malika