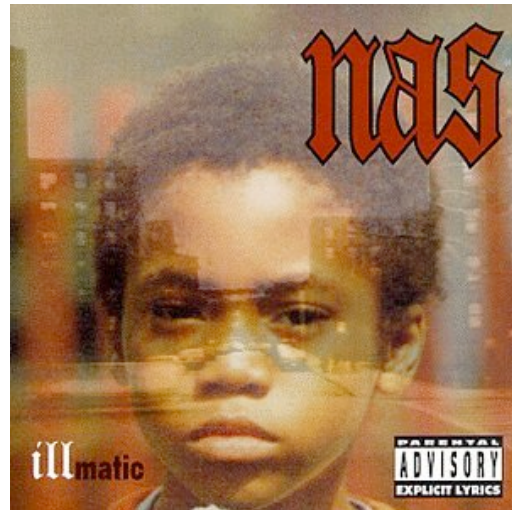


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Illmatic: A Journey Into Nas's State of Mind

I wasn't into rap much when Nas's first album, *Illmatic*, was released, but it's said that many true "hip-hop heads" were surprised at the way the cover of the album looked. Somehow it wasn't what they were expecting; maybe they were looking for something "harder," like a picture of "Nasty Nas" all grown up with an angry, threatening look on his face. But after listening to *Illmatic* enough times, I can't imagine a cover more representative of the album's contents. The whole image appears faded into countless shades of brown, worn down and having seen some tough times. Project buildings appear from either side, surrounding Nas's head, and continue into a vanishing point centered right between his eyes. On one side of his street, everything looks to be completely still, and on the other a car is in rapid motion, rushing to leave the frame altogether. And in the middle of it all is young, nappy-headed, squinty-eyed Nas, watching and searching, creating almost a hologram-type effect. Looking once, it seems like Nas is concentrating on the landscape in front of him, observing its every move. Look again, and Nas is emerging right out of their vanishing point, looking past the buildings straight at us with a wise, guarded distrust that is far beyond his years.



At the end of the first track on the album, "The Genesis," Nas prophetically proclaims to AZ and Cormega, "it's illmatic." *What is "illmatic"?* And why "ill, plus matic"? If "it" were "ill" alone, the genius (or illness) in Nas's creation would be remarkable, yes, but also finite,

static. The term “illmatic” implies continuity; it modifies not a motionless object, but a complex entity with constant activity—a function, or even a state of mind. As the face of *Illmatic*, the cover’s stationary and moving halves become a unified whole.

The truth is, *Illmatic* is the previously intangible vanishing point, the center at which the two halves meet, where everything in Nas’s physical, imaginary, and spiritual landscapes collides and flows in and out of itself freely and masterfully, magnified and visible at last. Through constant conversation with the music and rhythms behind him, the vivid characters and scenes he creates and recreates, and his listeners, Nas blurs his physical reality with his dreams, his revelations and his imagination. A graceful collision is created with thoughtful wordplay and loaded metaphors, and Nas steadily stirs his concoction—brimming with dichotomies of young and old, time and timelessness, dangerous and endangered, the factual and the hypothetical, the personal and the collective—into one cohesive sensibility.

The first full song, “NY State of Mind,” sets the theme of collision and blurred lines for the rest of *Illmatic*, and the contents of the song embody not only its title, but the overall spirit and meaning of the album. It begins with a steady rhythm, and a heavy, menacing, descending bass line that enters right before Nas announces his emergence right out of the “dungeons of rap,” establishing the dangerous, threatening tone of the bass line that remains throughout the rest of the song. A few bars later, the bass line is met with a high-pitched, slightly dissonant piano chord that continues in response to the bass line, constantly contrasting the thudding bass with a ring of instability and alarm. The resulting collision is translated and extended in Nas’s verses, beginning with the declaration that he is a “musician, inflictin’ composition.” In this first verse he portrays himself as a criminal, “inflicting” pain through threatening narrative rather than

physical aggression, and using “the pen” as his “M-16.” He seamlessly slips into a rampage provoked by his “thoughts of an assassin,” until he reaches a building lobby and finds that it is “filled with children” armed with guns. This is one of two points in the song where several components of Nas’s composition come to a collision. Up until this point, Nas was a proclaimed “assassin,” a danger to his “foes,” but just as the piano meets the bass with alarm, Nas himself becomes threatened by the realization that “the game ain’t the same.” The younger generation has become a sudden threat to the older, established people of power.

In local terms, Nas is discovering that the guns in his Queensbridge, New York streets have fallen into the hands of younger hustlers, threatening the power of older men like himself—a description that in itself complicates Nas’s relationship with time, as he is both old and “high,” and part of the same young generation in question. Figuratively, Nas is also speaking from the position of older members of the rap game reacting to Nas’s youthful invasion, realizing that he is “bringing fame to [his] name” on this very album by pulling the trigger on his pen. At the end of the verse, Nas blurs the line between actual criminal “inside information” involving real characters (much like the “baseheads” selling “broken amps”) and the information gathered in his lyrics, which also blurs the point where his own narrative ends and the characters’ narratives begin. His reference to the “walls of intelligence” situates him within the realm of contradiction, and also “beyond” the point where his own mental intelligence is hindered by the physical walls and obstacles of his surroundings. This complex, personal and communal perspective is Nas’s proclaimed definition of the complete “N.Y. State of Mind.”

The following song, “Life’s A Bitch (featuring AZ),” not only focuses on Nas’s distinction between his physical reality and his metaphysical, heightened state, but

simultaneously captures Nas and AZ's surroundings and later renders them timeless. It begins with AZ's verse, which is rooted in physical observations and experiences, and revolves around sin and the moment of death. His lyrical journey culminates with the realization that "somehow we all gotta go" and leads into the song's hook and principle phrase, "life's a bitch and then you die." AZ's verse is concise, very literal and composed from a consciously mortal perspective, especially in comparison to Nas's verse, which begins after the chorus. By claiming that he "woke up early" the day he was born, Nas implies that he is a superhuman, godly entity who existed and lived before he was even born, a "blessing" by definition. In the lines that follow, he depicts himself as reborn immediately following the end of his adolescence, now "fresh in [his] physical frame" which is distinguished as only one part of his entire existence as a "godly like thing." Nas then creates a double meaning in the next two lines, specifically with the term "made" that establishes the co-existence of his physical and "godly" states. His "physical frame is celebrated" because he "made it" (survived one quarter of the human life span), and his physical frame is celebrated by others because he himself, in his godly form, created or "made it." Towards the end of his verse he refers to time as "*illmatic* keep static like wool fabric," a phrase that proves his ability to experience time at a standstill while others (like AZ) are living in anticipation of death, literally the end of their time. While Nas is able to exist with one foot in the mortal and immortal realms, this entire song spotlights his "godlier" side. The placement of his verse after AZ's verse as a human "sinner" establishes his words in comparison as heightened revelation, scripture coming from the "street's disciple."

Nas's proclamations of godliness transition smoothly into other, more complex metaphors on "Memory Lane." Not only does he remind us that his "duration's infinite," his

“rap [is] divine” and his intellect hangs from a “cross with nails,” but he also begins to blur the line more between his words in written form and the life experiences they depict. In his first verse on the song, he refers to a sentence that begins “indented...with formality,” making it impossible to know whether he is speaking of a jail sentence or an “indented” written sentence, both entirely capable of “formality.” Later in the same verse, while recalling an old friend who was murdered for his coat, Nas remarks that the “childhood lesson” forced him to watch the man “drop” in Nas’s “weed smoke”—an observation which not only describes the physical details of his experience, but suggests a correlation between his “weed smoke” and his lyrics, as he is also making us visualize his friend dropping to the ground in his words. Both techniques blend his creative expressions of imagination with his detailed observations of reality into one continuous flow.

Tensions between the contents of his lyrics and reality are furthered in “One Love,” a song that speaks directly to people close to him who are in prison. This song marks the point in the album and in Nas’s narrative where his understanding of reality and acceptance of the present grapple with unresolved thoughts of the past and the future through nostalgia and regret, as well as musings on imagined possibilities. This constant tension is expressed musically after the very beginning of the song, which starts off with a dialogue between several inmates. During their conversation, we can hear hints of subtle melody being played behind them along with heavy drums, but the two chords supporting the melody do not directly converse with each other until Nas begins rapping. As he begins with the first two lines of his verse, sympathizing with his incarcerated friend and wishing he had taken cover from the cops in Nas’s home, the bass and vibraphone dance around a single minor piano chord that expresses Nas’s unsettled reflection on

possibilities of the past. Then just as the instruments follow a new, murkier chord and descend into lower notes, he too changes his tone, admits there is “no time for looking back,” and congratulates his friend on the birth of his son, suddenly shifting his perspective into forced acceptance and optimism of the present. The sentiments of these two complex chords are placed directly next to each other again at several other points throughout the song, one example being the end of the first verse, where Nas mentions money he has left in his friend’s commissary (thus giving his friend hope for the future), and then returns immediately to their past, reminiscing that Nas’s friend had his back when “push came to shove.” By ending his expressions of the present and the past with “one love,” Nas is defining the song’s title as the collision of these two heavy, seemingly opposing perspectives into a love that welcomes, and even necessitates this opposition in order to exist and survive.

The construction of the narrative in “One Love” also involves the metaphor of his microphone as a joint or an “L,” a current that runs persistently throughout *Illmatic*. In “Life’s A Bitch,” Nas introduces this concept with imagery of “loading up” his mic, puffing on it, and exhaling smoke clouded with the complexities of his imagination. The image is sharpened in “One Love,” during a scene where he sits with a younger boy on a bench and smokes weed with him. After “talkin’ mad shit,” the boy passes the blunt to Nas, who only warns him to “take heed” and “make the right man bleed” after he has taken the “L.” The bulk of Nas’s rhyme scheme in this section rests primarily on the final words of each line. In the context of the scene, this sonic pattern might function as a cautionary mechanism that emphasizes the potential for fatality in his message to the younger generation—and in a larger sense, Nas’s generation. The fact that Nas only begins responding to the young boy after he is passed the “L” suggests that the

blunt functions as a microphone shared between them, amplifying their words. Nas provides words of wisdom once again in hypothetical terms, but here his lyrics express ideas for the future prevention of mistakes, rather than regret of the past and rumination on what could have been. Further, he positions himself physically within the scene but also in a place of transcendence. As he rises, “wiping the blunt’s ash from [his] clothes” he shows his ability to cleanse himself of the chaos in a way that his younger, inexperienced friend does not, or cannot. After stopping to “blow smoke through [his] nose,” he declares that he has planted “some jewels in the skull,” suggesting that the “words of wisdom” were passed on through the smoke he exhaled, in hopes that his listener can “rise up above” just as he has.

In the scheme of things, this scene is one of many “snapshots” that together compose the bigger picture. From looking at this complex image we can see that the vanishing point of *Illmatic* exists, but one must travel before reaching that point, and the entire album is structured to reflect that journey. It begins with a first song that defines the “state of mind” necessary to embark on the journey, and progresses with spiritual revelations that must be realized between the physical and metaphysical states; reflections bouncing between composed art and reality that must be seen; and tensions between the hypothetical and the factual, the metaphorical and the literal, that must be successfully understood and balanced in order to arrive at our destination.

Naturally the last song, “It Ain’t Hard To Tell,” is a celebration of this journey. With blazing, triumphant horns, heavy drums and harmonized voices singing and hollering, the song carefully brings together many aspects of *Illmatic* to create a sense of experienced survival and accomplishment. By calling his mic check “life or death,” Nas constructs the microphone as a weapon with violent potential, but more importantly with the potential for “life.” Through this

metaphor he inspires listeners to now use microphones the way he has used his, as a figurative tool for artistic respiration and a guide for taking “righteous steps” to their next destination. He later triumphantly declares that in his “physical” self, he can “express through song” and “delete stress” after he has given Medusa “shotguns in hell” from his spliff, a journey presumably taken while in his godly form. With his technique, he is able to express himself musically in his physical state and use “song” to alleviate stress for the people around him, but he can also travel to hell in his godly state and pass on “shotguns” of knowledge through his L to even the most condemned and hopeless of spirits, as he does in “One Love”.

And Nas is right. By the end of the album, it ain’t hard to tell that he has created a masterpiece of an album: a tangible embodiment of the point where every dichotomy in Nas’s personal and communal consciousness collides, converses, and becomes one. As the image on the album cover shows, Nas is physically young, but behind his eyes is the constant crafting of collision into intricate, elaborate music that transcends space and time altogether. *Illmatic* is the amplification of Nas’s timeless, self-proclaimed enlightened journey from the depths of Queensbridge Projects to the vanishing point in his eyes where every shade of brown, every moment of fast motion and reflective stillness, every tough time and consequent revelation together becomes supernatural, organized chaos—a state of mind.