



GET CLEAN, COME BACK

'Relapse,' Eminem's first album in five years, chronicles the Detroit rapper's struggle with drugs

BY JON PARELES
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

IN late December 2007 a depressed, writer's-blocked, pill-popping, opiate-addicted Marshall Mathers, better known as the multimillion-album selling rapper Eminem, overdosed on some new blue pills someone gave him — they were methadone — and collapsed on his bathroom floor. Public statements covered up the reason for his emergency hospitalization and detox, claiming the problem was pneumonia. A month later Mathers had ramped up his habit again.

But the overdose scared him. Early last year he hospitalized himself, went through rehab and started the full 12-step program of a recovering addict, complete with meetings, a sponsor and a therapist. Mathers, 36, says he has stayed sober since April 20, 2008.

Far from concealing his addiction battle, he's making it the center of his comeback. The cover of *Relapse*, the first new Eminem album since 2004, builds his face out of pills, and in some songs he raps, as directly as a rhymers can, about how drugs nearly destroyed him. Elsewhere on the album Eminem resumes — or relapses into — his main alter ego, Slim Shady: the sneering, clownish, paranoid, homophobic, celebrity-stalking compulsive rapist and serial killer who plays his exploits for queasy laughs and mass popularity.

Eminem's four previous major-label albums of new material — *The Slim Shady LP* in 1999, *The Marshall Mathers LP* in 2000, *The Eminem Show* in 2002 and *Encore* in 2004 — have sold about 30 million copies in the US, according to Nielsen SoundScan. *Relapse* clings to the formula of its predecessors: it's partly truth and partly fiction, with personal revelations and sociopathic farce side by side.

"It's hard core, it's dark comedy, it's what Eminem has always been," said Dr Dre, his longtime producer, by telephone from his studio in the San Fernando Valley of Southern California. Eminem had been missed; the album's first single, *Crack a Bottle* — with 50 Cent and Dr Dre trading verses — went to No. 1 on the Billboard Hot 100 when it was released in February, selling 418,000 downloads in its first week.

Relapse is the latest episode in a soap-opera career that has always mingled

confession, melodrama, comedy, horror, media baiting, craftsmanship and tabloid-scale hyperbole on every front.

"I don't know if I'm exposing myself," Mathers said by telephone from his studio in Detroit. "I'm kind of just coming clean and exhaling."

He speaks amiably and coherently, without defensiveness, chatting with the zeal of a recovering addict about both his old excesses and his new clarity and productivity, sounding like someone relieved of a burden. "I was the worst kind of addict, a functioning addict," he said. "I was so deep into my addiction at one point that I couldn't picture myself being able to do anything without some kind of drug."

He has been watching videos of himself on-stage and in interviews from his drug days, including one from Black Entertainment Television that he said he has no memory of doing, when Ambien made him so befuddled he couldn't even respond to simple questions. "I want to see what I looked like when I was on drugs, so I never go back to it," he said.

In the five years between his own albums, he worked as a producer, making beats for other rappers, and occasionally showed up as a guest rapper; he now calls his verse on *Touch Down*, with the Atlanta rapper T.I., "horrible."

But last year, just two months out of rehab, Eminem met Dr Dre met in Orlando, Florida, to try recording. Eminem had been doing what he called "mind exercises" to get himself writing. "I'd stack a bunch of words and just go down the line and try to fill in the blanks and make sense out of them," he said. "For three or four years I couldn't do it any more."

When he was sober, he said, "the wheels started turning again." Working in Orlando and then in Detroit, Eminem and Dr Dre recorded hundreds of tracks and finished enough new songs for three albums. They have culled them to two; Eminem plans to release *Relapse 2* before the end of this year. "The deeper I got into my addiction, the tighter the lid got on my creativity," he said. "When I got sober the lid just came off. In seven months I accomplished more than I could accomplish in three or four years doing drugs."

From the beginning, Mathers has smeared the boundary between Eminem and Slim Shady. In *97 Bonnie & Clyde* from the 1999 *Slim Shady LP*, the rapper takes along his gurgly baby daughter — named Hailie, like Mathers' real daughter

(who lives with him in Detroit) — while disposing of her mother's murdered corpse. The new album traces Eminem's addictive tendencies to one of his earliest and most frequent targets: "My Mom," who, the song says, used to mix Valium into his food to make him manageable.

But the music for songs like those is reassuring, even perky. Dr Dre has long provided clean, crisp tracks that are far from ominous. Often they have the bouncy beat and singsong choruses of kiddie music. That smiley-faced nastiness was enough to make Eminem a target for the censorious, which in turn gave him a new bunch of antagonists to provoke. "It ended up pushing my buttons," he said. "You're only going to make me worse now."

Now, a decade into his major-label career, "I'm done explaining it," he said. "Here's my music. Here's what it is. Get what you get from it. I didn't get in this game to be a role model."

Eminem was always an anomaly in hip-hop, not only because he's white but also because he presents himself as multiple personas — rarely ingratiating, often belligerent or psychotic — rather than a single heroic face. Yet he was accepted within Detroit hip-hop, where he made his reputation in battle raps that were later depicted in the quasi-autobiographical 2002 movie *8 Mile*. (The rapper Proof — his mentor, best friend and "ghetto pass," as Eminem called him in his 2008 memoir, *The Way I Am* — was shot dead in 2006, and the grief was a factor in Eminem's addiction.) And he was abetted by the leading hip-hop producer of the 1990s, Dr Dre, who also helped establish Snoop Dogg.

From the beginning Eminem was perfectly attuned to MTV: making videos full of snide pop-culture sendups and catchy pop hooks as well as news headlines with his marital and legal troubles. (Mathers has divorced, remarried and re-divorced Kim Scott. His mother, Debbie Mathers-Briggs, sued him in 1999 for defamation for US\$10 million but later said it was her lawyer's idea and settled out of court for US\$25,000, most of it legal fees.)

As Slim Shady, in a tight white T-shirt with his hair bleached blonde, Eminem quickly became an offensive scourge to those who took Shady's fantasies literally, or worried that others might; that made him a surly antihero to some fans. At the same time he was a pop pinup who made girls squeal. But he stayed in his hometown, Detroit, and never joined the celebrity culture.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 15

[CD REVIEWS: TAIWAN]

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
AND DAVID CHEN
STAFF REPORTERS

The battle between reality "talent" shows *One Million Star* (超級星光大道) and *Super Idol* (超級偶像) can be said to have reached its end point with the release of Jing Chang's (張芸京) album *Out of the Blue* (破天荒). TTV's *Super Idol* never quite had the legs of *One Million Star*, but if nothing else, it discovered in Chang, a 25-year-old graphic designer, a talented performer. With her androgynous features, a dress sense that skirts butch-lesbian clichés, and her boyish voice, she garnered a solid fan base as she worked her way through the show with songs like Jet's *Are You Going to Be My Girl* and Mandarin songs that could easily be given a lesbian frisson if the listener so chose.

Out of the Blue hit the charts last week at No. 3 and has since climbed to No. 1, not a bad effort given that Chang's victory in *Super Idol* is now nearly a year old.

The album, which is a tad rough around the edges, includes some quality songs that have an appeal that goes beyond their popularity with the KTV crowd. This has as much to do with Jing's style as her talent, for *Out of the Blue*'s sound is very much mainstream Mando-pop, and it is Chang's slightly prickly personality and style that gives it that little bit more, making tracks like *Let Me Look After You* (讓我照顧你), *Unreasonable Love* (偏愛) and *Fly Away Then* (你飛吧), memorable. Lyrics such as, "I hear no reason, by love is unreasonable/feel my love/I'll wait until you depend on me/my unreasonable love/that makes me happy even though it hurts" (講不聽偏愛/靠我感覺愛/等你的依賴/對你偏愛/痛也很愉快), are nicely evocative and play off against Chang's style and speculation as to her sexual orientation.

There are a couple of write-offs, such as the wildly over-produced *Cymical* (玩



OUT OF THE BLUE (破天荒)
Jing Chang (張芸京)
Gold Typhoon Entertainment Limited

世不恭) in which sound engineers and producers trip the singer up. However, for an album generated through a TV reality show, this is one of the few that deserves some attention.

There must be nothing more irritating for an artist than critics and reviewers incessantly comparing their mature work unfavorably with their early work. But in the case of Lin Sheng-xiang (林生祥), who emerged as a creative powerhouse with the release of his early protest music, such as the album *Let Us Sing Mountain Songs* (我等就來唱山歌), it must be said that he seems to have worked desperately hard to lose his broad appeal and disappear into a minor musical tributary that will only appeal to a small number of fans.

Listening to *Growing Wild* is frustrating for anyone who has experienced the combustible energy of his work as lead singer for *Labor Exchange* (交工樂隊), whose music was inspired by the fusion of traditional Chinese instrumentation and the culture of rock 'n' roll pioneered by Chinese rocker Cui Jian (崔健). Now, Lin has



GROWING UP WILD (野生)
Lin Sheng-xiang (林生祥)
Trees Music and Art (大大樹音樂團體)

retreated into a self-consciously rustic abode in which guitar and voice are his only tools.

Growing Up Wild sets out to tell the story of a young boy who grows up with a little sister and experiences the trials of a family breakup. It seems to have the same kind of aspirations as songs like Bruce Springsteen's *Down to the River or Badlands*, but it remains, both in sound and lyrics, relentlessly small. There is a soap opera baldness to the story, and this rarely transcends the clichés of domestic tragedy to embrace something bigger.

Lin strives for an unadorned simplicity, and perhaps there is something solid in the relentlessly undramatic treatment that he gives his story. I can't help but wonder whether Lin believes that a lack of artifice equals a more truthful and powerful revelation. In *Growing Up Wild*, Lin has sincerity and commitment by the bucket load, but for this reviewer at least, this is no substitute for musical and lyrical invention.

The Shine & Shine & Shine & Shine is the latest standout among a growing number of non-mainstream Taiwanese



THE SHINE & SHINE & SHINE & SHINE
Meet Me When Your Are 25
Hinote Records

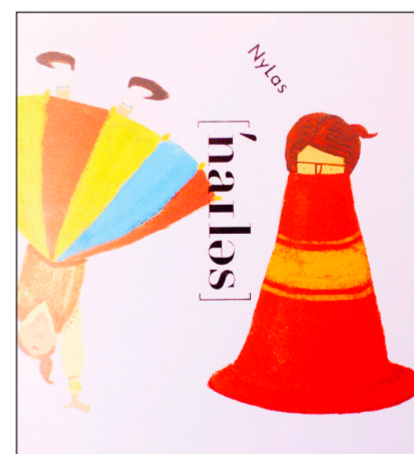
bands putting out smarter and more sophisticated music.

Meet Me When Your Are 25, the indie-pop group's debut full-length album, has all the ingredients of a hipster party: lots of dance rock beats, spacey pop sounds and lyrics suited for 20-somethings waking up from a long spell of introspective navel-gazing.

Female lead singer Meuko sounds cutesy but suitably detached on songs like *Song 1* and *Sweetie*, and hysterical and manic on *Cut My Hair*. She writes and sings in both Chinese and English. With the latter, she takes a few grammatical liberties that will befuddle native speakers, but it doesn't matter much.

The weird and zany *I Know What You Say*, which has obtuse English and German lyrics sewn together, is one of the album's most fun and infectious tracks.

Meuko's vocal delivery, if sometimes strained or occasionally off-key, has an urgent, raw energy that keeps your attention. It plays off well against the funky drum rhythms, synthesizer flourishes and clean guitar lines that



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prop up the melodies.

Another strong track, *Sudden Light* (一瞬之光), written by guitarist and synth player Dixon (小妹), waxes bittersweet and nostalgic about youth; the smooth J-pop style vocals and arrangement leave the song with an optimistic and hopeful sheen.

The song's refrain inspires the album's title, which touches upon the theme of aging and moving "on to the next stage of life," according to a press release by the band's label, Hinote.

But in terms of overall feel, the album suggests a youth unrealized. For all of the highly stylized and slick songwriting, the band has room to channel more of its exuberance into musical expression. If they keep at it, *Meet Me* may eventually be seen as a snapshot of a band just starting to bloom.

Good things have come to those waiting for this first full-length album from Nylas. The electronica duo, which formed in 2005, has weaved together a set of musical vignettes full of beautifully dense synthesizer sounds, ethereal vocal harmonies and pop verve.

But there's more than just style and aesthetics here. Peel away layers of beeps, chirps and keyboard splashes, and there's a warm, playful soul behind numbers like *Trash Taking a Sunbath* (廢物曬太陽) and *Madam Butterfly* (蝴蝶夫人).

Childhood imagination inspires all of the songs, which are supplemented by a book of illustrations and short stories (in Chinese) created by lyricist and singer Labi and guitarist and synth player Army. The physical copy of the CD is worth picking up just for the charming artwork, which looks like it belongs on a child's bookshelf but is something adults could enjoy.

Bright calliope tones leave *Sun Circus* (太陽馬戲班) with a touch of *kawaii*, but there is also an allure to surreal characters such as two tigers "that share a tail." *Arnica* (午後的山金車), a Mando-pop type number, is less challenging than the earlier tunes but makes for a fun, refreshing break halfway through the album.

The music never gets dark, but it grows stranger and more fantastic with the spacey and hypnotic grooves of *Broken Crayon* (幽魂暗語) and *Tails Catch Your Tongue* (小尾巴).

The dreamy and escapist mood throughout the album yields a few quirky stories, such as *Stephanie's Candy House*. The main character talks about her best friend, Stephanie, who "wants to marry a white policeman" named Magic, who is "amazing like angel Valentine." But she casts doubt over Stephanie's romantic bliss: "Yellow and white/A wonderful life/Yellow and white/A wonderful lie."

The album only sounds better with repeated listening. The songs are well-conceived and stand on their own as self-contained stories. Labi's intimate, transparent voice firmly grounds each tune, but never distracts; Army's arrangements are ornate but not overbearing.