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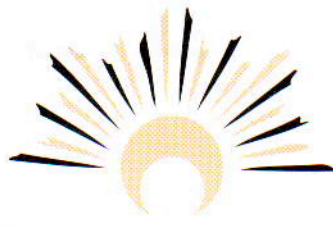
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A SPOTLESS MIND

Fay Electronica's mystery revealed.

By Jesse Serwer
Photography By Phil Knott



Almost as soon as we begin our interview at Brooklyn streetwear shop Boundless NY, Jay Electronica decides that the only way to properly tell his story is to hop a Greyhound to New Orleans. "Let's eat, meet my mom. Let her tell you what happened to her in the hurricane..."

While this plan ultimately goes unrealized due to his impending trip to Israel with Erykah Badu and the time constraints of magazine publishing, Jay is dead serious, and he follows up several days later with a phone call to see if it's still possible. Interviews are too forced, he argues, which is why he's avoided doing them, up until now.

"If I never talk to you again and then I see you in the street or at a party and say, 'What up, that's the guy who did such and such,' that's bullshit," he says. "That's not real life."

In recent months, the 31-year-old MC, who's spent the past dozen years roaming nomadically between nearly as many cities, has emerged as hip-hop's first real enigma of note since the rise of MySpace and MP3 blogs made ubiquity an imperative for all rappers on the come-up. But turning down interviews and holding back on the web (he doesn't have a website at the moment and deleted his MySpace account) wouldn't exactly be a formula for success if he didn't already have the Internet and insiders alike going nuts over his music, and his unique approach to releasing it.

Debuted through his now-defunct MySpace page last year, *Act 1: Eternal Sunshine (The Pledge)*—the first part of a trilogy, which will culminate in his debut album, *Abracadabra: Let There Be Light*—served as most people's introduction to the world of Electronica. Built entirely from Jon Brion's haunting score for *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, five "tracks" play across one 15-minute MP3. Following legend-stoking monologues about Jay from co-signers Just Blaze and Erykah Badu (who explains that he looks like an alien and "a mythical creature who'd have a bow and arrow on his back and wings under

that bow and arrow") cryptic sound bites (including one from 1971's *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*) intersect with lyrics tackling everything from a break-up to France's decision to reopen their files on UFOs. With no drums in the mix, it's up to Jay's cadences to hypnotize the listener.

"I'm very influenced by movies," Jay says, explaining his motivation for the project. "There's a scene [in *Eternal Sunshine*] when Jim Carrey's character has just met Clementine, and she's invited him up for drinks. It was the first time you saw him excited, and you could tell it was going to be a pivotal point in his life. But the music you heard—*do-do-do-do-do-do-do*—didn't make you feel so good. It created such a good contrast. I just wanted to do something that felt like that."

Act I received more than 30,000 direct downloads before Jay's MySpace suddenly disappeared at the end of last year (the current profile of a Honolulu photographer with Large Professor in his Top 8 at www.myspace.com/jayelectronica is someone else).

"MySpace is a good tool but it's only one avenue," Jay says by way of explanation. While he won't say where and how he'll be unveiling upcoming digital EPs with 9th Wonder and Guilty Simpson or his own *Act II: Patents of Nobility* (the second EP in his planned trilogy may likely be available by the time you read this), he's been known to make a game of uploading his tracks to obscure web forums.

"I wasn't really thinking, 'Let me put this music out on the Internet.' It was more of a test to see what kind of responses it would get," Jay says of a practice that began with the contents of *Style Wars*, a demo he had been using to shop for a record deal. "I'd go to a graphic design forum where [there were] people who weren't just sitting around looking for rap music."

In due time, tracks like "I Feel Good," an upliftingly sunny tune reminiscent of Jay-Z in "Izzo" mode, and the nightmarish "Dimethyltriptyamine" began circulating around the 'Net, though the pace resembled the word-of-mouth movement of yesteryear more than today's instant viral phenomena.

"Remember when you'd get an album and that would be the only new music you had for a long time?" Jay asks, emphasizing a point. "You'd listen to it every day and really get to feel the songs. Maybe you didn't like a certain song at first but, three months later, it was your favorite. We don't have that anymore. Somebody hits you with a masterpiece today and you're first reaction is, 'So when's your next project?'"

One of the first things you notice when talking to Jay Electronica is that the native of New Orleans' Magnolia Projects—home of Juvenile and the cradle of Bounce music—doesn't have a southern accent. Chalk it up to his transient lifestyle that, like some sort of hip-hop Jack Kerouac, has taken him to Atlanta, Baltimore, New York, Philadelphia, Detroit, Washington DC, Denver and Dallas at various points in the last dozen years.

"People will say, 'How could he be from New Orleans and rap like he does?'" Jay says, echoing a common Internet observation of his abstract rhyme style, which is more traceable to Nas (who appears on *Act II*) or Pharoahe Monch than Wayne or Juve. "Fuck where I'm from. I'm from the moon. I love New Orleans, it made me who I am, but, at the end of the day, it's just a place. I rep man and human beings."

Born in 1976, Jay split his childhood between Magnolia and uptown's 17th Ward. "It was the hood, too, but you also had a place called Audobon Park with big oak trees and the trolley. You got a chance to see different things than in the projects where you really only see one type of life. So it was a nice balance."

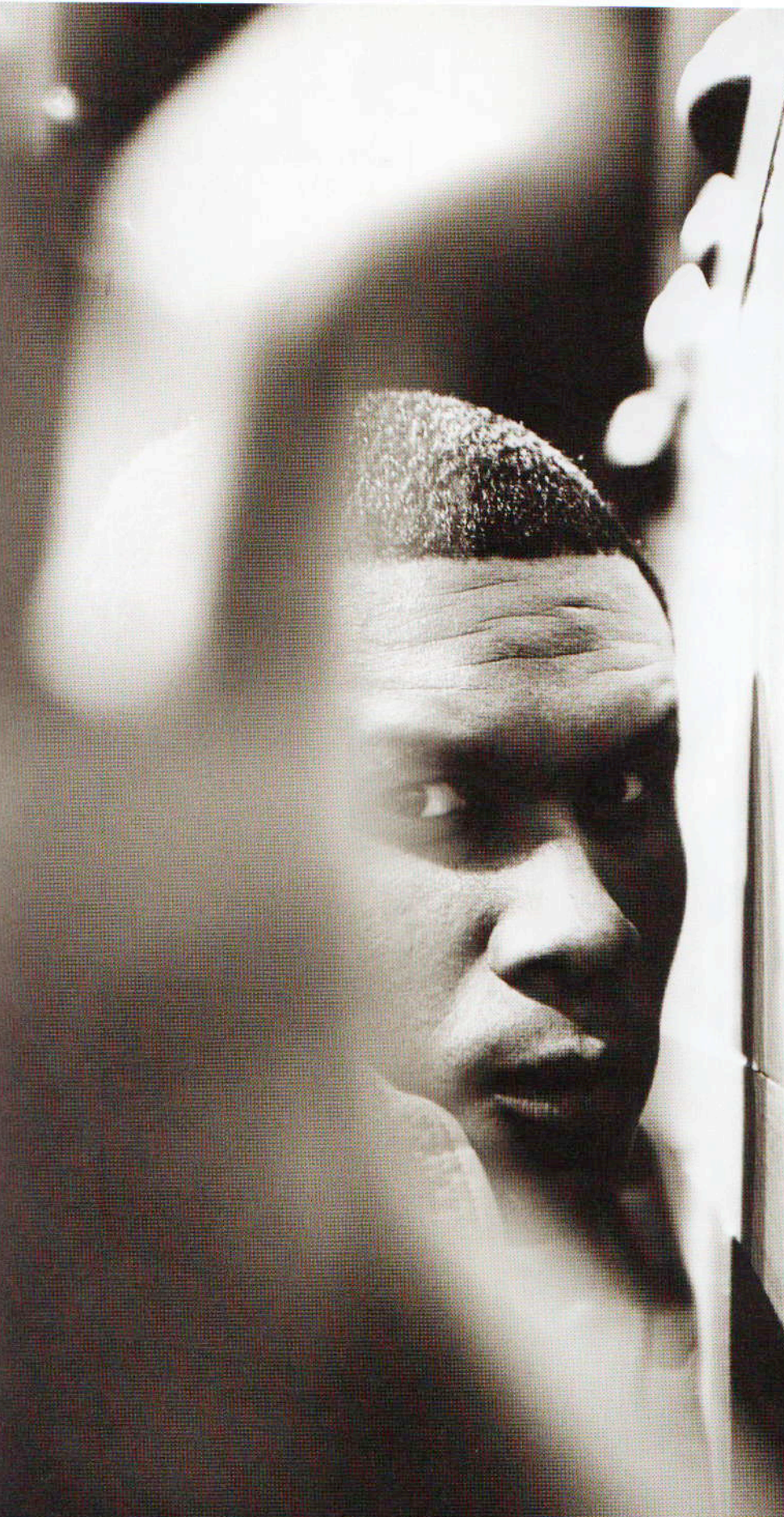
He cites his mother, who bumped Steely Dan's *Gaucho* non-stop growing up, and his MTV-obsessed cousin Roshanda for broadening his musical horizons. "I learned that songs were like stories and poems and books," he says.

Beginning his travels after he was kicked out of Louisiana's Northwestern State University during his first semester, the former Je'Ri Allah took on the name Jay Electronica while working on a short-lived project

Jacket & Crew Neck by King Stampede
Jeans by G-star Raw
Shoes by Alife

"Fuck where I'm from.
I'm from the moon."





in Baltimore. In Detroit, years later, he found himself in the same social circle as J Dilla, though the late producer had already moved to California in hopes of improving his health.

"When I first met Dilla, it was actually to get permission to use beats that I had just used from his beat tapes to shop for a deal," Jay recalls. "But I also wanted to get his feedback, to see how he felt about what I did to them. Don't get me wrong, cats ripped them beats but I really felt at home on them."

Another Detroit connection was Mike "Chav" Chavarria, the engineer responsible for the tweaked-out effects that add color to Jay's verses. "Jay Electronica the entity is me and Chav together," Jay says. "He's responsible for the sound."

Eventually, he found his way to the Brooklyn home of Erykah Badu who, as stated in her monologue from Act I, immediately decided to start a record label, Control FreaQ. Its first release will be *Abracadabra: Let There Be Light*.

"I don't know if he's going to put out actual albums—he's pretty successful with [Net-only releases], and that's the new realm of music," Badu says. Jay figures prominently on her *New Amerykah* LP, on which he's credited as co-executive producer, and also appears alongside her on 9th Wonder's upcoming LP, *The Wonder Years*. It's rumored that the pair are more than just friends though, when asked, they respectfully decline to comment.

With additional appearances on The Roots' upcoming album and another long-awaited release we're not at liberty to name, Jay's days of anonymity are quickly coming to an end. He is currently developing a performance he says will "raise the bar on the show, not just in hip-hop, but music in general."

"It's like a revue from the '30s or '40s that comes to town and for maybe three days in a week," Jay explains. "You sit down and you're served food and a curtain opens and I come out and talk to the people. A ventriloquist's dummy might walk out of a wooden cabinet and perform 'Voodoo Man.' The curtains may open and you see me performing a song chained in a tank of water. I'll be performing magic. It all builds. Even if someone didn't like it, it will be an experience that will stick with them."

He plans to debut the show in New York and New Orleans this year. Not that he's in a rush.

"Most people wake up everyday and are worried about doing stuff based on time," Jay says. "I used to feel like I gotta do this, this and that before this time, but I don't feel that way anymore."