

TALIB KWELI

Hey, yo, my silent moments [are] loud as the crack of thunder/ My hunger's like the crocodile that attacks the hunter/ It ain't commercial or underground, it's true/ 'Cause I'm gonna be good to you
-Talib Kweli, "Good To You"

A Brooklyn native, Talib Kweli Greene is the eldest of two sons born to parents who were both educators. Considering that the Arabic translation of Talib Kweli means "student of truth," it's obvious that his cerebral and socially relevant approach to MCing was destined from Day One. As a kid, Kweli was an avid reader and gifted writer. In elementary school, he began writing plays, poetry and short stories, however, he had his eyes set on becoming a baseball player. "I wasn't really one of the cool kids," Kweli recalls. "Hip-hop became a way for me to write and be cool; it gave me a language to speak to my peers," he continues. "In junior high, I started writing rhymes for my friends, and then I eventually began writing rhymes for myself."

In high school, Kweli found a kindred spirit in a kid named Dante Smith, who shared his passion for hip-hop and who would eventually go on to gain notoriety as Mos Def. The two began hanging out in Washington Square Park in downtown Manhattan, where aspiring MCs from all five boroughs of NYC would converge to battle each other. Then, in 1994, on a trip to Cincinnati, Ohio, Kweli met Tony "DJ Hi-Tek" Cottrell, who at the time, was the producer for a local hip-hop group named Mood. Impressed by Kweli's rhyme style, Hi-Tek tapped him to appear on several tracks on Mood's 1997 album, *Doom*. That same year, Kweli and Hi-Tek released "Fortified Live" as a single on Rawkus under the name Reflection Eternal. The track, which appears on the first volume of the *Soundbombing* compilation series, became an instant underground classic that immediately established the duo as an up-an-coming force to be reckoned with.

The following year, Kweli teamed up with Mos Def to record and release *Mos Def and Talib Kweli Are Black Star*. The disc was widely hailed as one of 1998's finest albums. At a time when mainstream hip-hop was dominated and stifled by self-indulgent, materialistic boasts about money, cars, jewelry, hoes and clothes, Black Star offered a much-needed breath of fresh air by articulately addressing issues of social consciousness and self-love, inspiring folks to pump their fists and shake their asses.

Later in 1998, Kweli continued to strike a chord with fans by backing his thought-provoking words with action. When Brooklyn's oldest black-owned bookstore, Nkiru Books, was in financial trouble, he and Mos Def purchased it and eventually converted it into the Nkiru Center for Education & Culture, a non-profit organization promoting literacy and multicultural awareness for people of color.

"As a resource, hip-hop has been greater than any music we have," says Kweli. "The possibilities for what we can do in our communities, for people's self esteem or their economic situation is what is so exciting. It's beautiful that I can use this resource, sell records and still just be Talib Kweli."

In 1999, Kweli and Mos Def teamed up once again to spearhead the making of *Hip-Hop for Respect*, a four-song maxi-single featuring 41 MCs—including Kool G. Rap, De La Soul, Common and Dead Prez—who collaborated to protest the murder of Amadou Diallo, an unarmed African immigrant shot 41 times by New York City police that same year.

Kweli's next creative project dropped in 2000 when he and Hi-Tek reunited to record *Reflection Eternal*, an unyielding and symbiotic aural journey into the creative minds of a brilliant emcee and talented musician that offered an idyllic remembrance of things past, present and yet to come. Without coming off as preachy or dogmatic, *Reflection Eternal* was widely praised as musically solid and thoughtful, as well as a testament to the versatility and smooth-spoken genius of Talib Kweli.

Kweli's lyrical dexterity and rapidly expanding popularity soon established him as a hot commodity among his peers, as he was invited to tour with many of the artists he had grown up admiring. In 2000, he practically lived on the road, first traveling with the Okayplayer Tour, which was headlined by the Roots, and then embarking on the Spitkicker Tour, which featured De La Soul, Common, Pharoahe Monch and Biz Markie. Kweli has also toured with Dilated Peoples and Erykah Badu, and in the spring of 2002, he headlined his first solo outing, dubbed the Quality Tour. Most recently, he joined Jay-Z, Nappy Roots, Blackalicious, N*E*R*D and others on the Sprite Liquid Mix Tour (Summer 2002), gilding his reputation as an irrevocable crowd pleaser and natural live performer.

Despite his many recordings and achievements, no album exemplifies Kweli's tremendous ability better than *Quality*. The disc is a compelling sign of his artistic and personal maturation, in which Kweli delves into an even greater variety of subject matters, with a skillful mix of braggadocio and vulnerability. Deceptively fillant at ever turn, he knocks heads over again and again on "Shock Body," in which he states, "Cats take a Vicodin pill to numb the pain that they're feeling pertaining to stealing my rhymes/ And findin' their brains on the ceiling/ I'm blowing their minds wide open when my flow is divine/ Hey, yo, my whole style's bangin' like I'm throwin' up signs." And in "Joy," a duet with Mos Def, Kweli looks to his two children, Amani Fela and Diani Eshe, as a source of divine lyrical inspiration: "I do it for the seeds, y'all/ In their formative years when they need, y'all/ We gotta believe in what we conceive, y'all/ It's deep y'all."

Musically, Kweli enlisted many of today's leading hip-hop producers to lay *Quality*'s sonic foundation, including Ayatollah, Dave West, Megahertz, Kanye West, Jay Dee, DJ Quik, the Soulquarians, Da' Houd and DJ Scratch. Kweli also collaborated with a host of notable guest stars, including his Rawkus label mates Mos Def, Pharoahe Monch and newly-signed hip-hop-soul singer Novel, along with with Common, Black Thought, Res and Bilal, whose mighty voice enhances the album's first single, "Waitin' For The DJ," an upbeat dance groove that recalls Paliament-Funkadelic.

"*Quality* is about me growing as a man and as an artist and continuing what I've been known to always do, which is place quality over quantity," Kweli explains. "I will never

do a record without some sense of responsibility. Even if you don't agree with what I have to say, even if I'm speaking something that's not relevant to your life, you'll still be able to appreciate it."