

gressive, substantive hard-edged drum-n-bass acts. And, as its title suggests, this record fits both Mos Def's reputation for social and musical clairvoyance and the Rawkus Records "raw cuts" bill.

As the third track on the album, "Love," tells us, Mos was born December 11, 1973 and spent the first ten years of his life in New York City's Roosevelt Housing Projects in Queens before moving to Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn. "Love" offers a poignant picture of the young Mos, whose family name is Dante Beze, as a little boy discovering his passion on New York's first-ever rap program on Kiss FM: "I listened to the Rap Attack and held the radio close." It also gives us a glimpse into this artist's ethereal reverence for both family and music. "My folks said they was in love when they made me/ I took the love they made me with to make rhymes and beats."

The anthem and album that follow are historic, poetic and devout vigils on life and blackness that bypass the crass materialism, violence, misogyny and excessive vanity of much of today's mainstream hip hop. Mos's sensibility builds on the racial and social justice themes championed on the earlier Kweli—"Black Star," collaboration, one which was noted by critics for its Marcus Garveyesque quality. But "Black on Both Sides" adds to its critique of America's persistent neglect and/or persecution of inner city blacks meditations on how life might improve for this segment of society.

"If hip hop is about the people, and hip hop won't get better until the people get better," Mos says on the introductory track, "then how

do people get better? People get better when they start to understand that they are valuable. And they not valuable because they got a whole lotta money or because somebody think they sexy, but they valuable because been created by God." This shot of 'positivity' is not only a manifestation of Mos's dedication to Islam, but is also a direct challenge to the prevailing themes of today's mainstream hip hop.

But this is not to say that Mos is about rainbows and happy times. Far from it. "Black on Both Sides" is infinitely aware of the struggle of black people in America. In the song "Rock N Roll," the artist traces his musical inheritance to the songs sung by his ancestors: "My grandmomma was raised on a reservation/ My great-grandmomma was from a plantation/ They sang songs for inspiration/ The sang songs for relaxation/ They sang songs to take their minds off that f—ed up situation."

Apart from putting hip hop in line with old the folk spirituals sung by Native Americans and African-American slaves, "Rock and Roll" makes the controversial case that all rock and roll - Elvis Presley and the Rolling Stones included — is derived from the music of "those folks whose backs

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-Mos Def

got broke/ Who fell down inside the gun smoke/ (Black people!) Chains on they ankles and feet." It also implies that absolutely NO music by whites "has soul."

**James Brown go plenty of soul
James Brown like to rock and roll
He can do all that sh-fo' sho'
That Elvis Presley could never know
Kenny G ain't got no souulll
John Coltrane is rock and roll
You may dig on the Rolling Stones
But they could never rock
like Nina Simone**

That Kenny G "ain't got no soul" is indubitable. But some might contest Mos's divisive commentary about race and rock and roll music. Even if he's right, it's