

Xzibit

For hip-hop's key players, commercial sidelines often seem as essential as their music: take Puff Daddy's clothing range, Lil' John's Crunk drink and Ice Cube's film roles. For the West Coast rapper Xzibit, his parallel career as a television presenter is even more important than that. Presenting shows for MTV could well have saved his musical career.

Whatever else Xzibit was doing, his fifth album would have come out anyway. It is just unlikely we would have been sat in a hotel room on London's Park Lane if he had not made such a success of presenting reality television show Pimp My Ride, similar to Changing Rooms but with cars instead of houses, and earth-shaking bass speakers instead of MDF.

From there, the artist known to his parents as Alvin Joyner has gone on to co-host - with Sarah "Buffy" Michelle Gellar - this year's MTV Europe Awards. Indeed, the previous evening Xzibit was all wide grins and bonhomie as he introduced Franz Ferdinand and the Beastie Boys to the continent's music fans. Now, less than 24-hours later, a more withdrawn Xzibit has slumped into an armchair.

For an artist that emerged from the boastful world of gangsta rap, Xzibit is surprisingly self-effacing. Talking about being chosen to host the awards, he says: "I don't think they could afford Jay-Z, and Snoop [Dogg] couldn't get through customs, so I guess I was the next best thing."

The rapper can promote his latest record to a wider potential audience than ever before - with barely a full day in the UK before he heads back to the States. You can almost feel the effort, as he begins to crack jokes and talk earnestly about the meaning behind his lines.

Weapons of Mass Destruction reveals a very different side to the fun guy you see on telly. On

Xzibit's 'Weapons

Written by Robert ID632

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screen he is all boyish enthusiasm for plush seats and in-car fridges, here the rapper broods and seethes in a way that reflects a turbulent period in his life. The label that had signed him, Loud Records, went bust and the artist was in limbo before being picked up by Sony. The rapper's ambition to set up his own label, as a platform for West Coast rappers, was scuppered.

Xzibit was originally under the wing of hip-hop's most influential producer and talent-spotter, Dr Dre, so the rapper was expected to reach the same heights as Snoop Dogg and Eminem. Indeed, he achieved platinum sales in 2000 with his breakthrough album *Restless*, though two year's later its follow-up, *Man Vs Machine*, failed to match such success.

At the same time, he broke off an engagement with his long-term partner. Her presence is still felt on the record, especially in "Scent of a Woman", which chronicles the change of heart of a man who starts off cruising the streets while he boasts of his independence, then finally praises a partner who stands by him through thick or thin. "I love what I became from that," he says. "It's one thing to be bitter about something, but it's another thing to recognise the growth and the change that you made. 'scent of a Woman' was how I felt at that time."

His last album featured the dubious "Choke Me, Spank Me (Pull My Hair)", a precursor to ribald hits such as Khia's "Lick It". "It's not time for that [subject matter]" he says. "Weapons of Mass Destruction has a certain feel and recurring theme that doesn't need to be diluted by trying to appease the masses with a booty song. There's enough of that out there. If you want something different, then come see me."

What is different, certainly in California, is tying themes of hardcore rap with the world at large. When Xzibit talks about weapons, he does mean WMDs as well as the AK-47s and glocks beloved of the genre. In "Judgement Day", the rapper spits: "First there was a war on blacks, then a war on crack, now there's a war on Iraq." Could he have worked out that his government relies on an enemy to mobilise public opinion behind it, something it had missed since the end of the Cold War? "These are negative movements, you know," he says. "America thrives on it; the government, that is. They have to be fighting something and when the rest of the world isn't tripping, they attack us at home. When the heat is off us, you can go to the ghettos and people are living. People start asking: 'What's going on?'" Well, their attention is somewhere else."

You might expect Xzibit to have been more circumspect at the awards show, but he could not resist a dig at his president. A billion people were watching the show in 100-odd countries, he announced, "and 16 of them George Bush has no plans to invade". Hardly groundbreaking

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satire, but a relative hammer blow when the only other recognition of events beyond the music arena was a tank in Eminem's stage set. During the presidential elections, Xzibit was one of the few figures in his genre to come out against Bush. While Eminem's political broadcast "Mosh" called for people power, its animated nature put him a step away from an actual pronouncement against the incumbent regime. With one foot still in the underground hip-hop scene, Xzibit has little to fear from alienating mainstream opinion. "A lot of people don't really care," he says. "They don't want to be identified as people that want to use their voice. Me, I got nothing to lose."

It is an attitude born of the adversity he faced in 2003, when his career seemed to be in free fall. "When people think the money's stopped coming, they stop coming," he says. "A lot of people that called themselves my friends were long gone. Only the people there from the beginning are still around." Xzibit had spent a number of years living the gangsta life of self-centredness and conspicuous consumption. He could emerge as a more thoughtful character; one better able to empathise with others. "You don't know how to do it right until you do it wrong," he says. "When you glorify yourself to the point where you can't relate to a regular person, then you distort your expectations and your values. There was a time when I was making a lot of money and moving very fast. I didn't like who I was. I could tell by the company I was keeping."

His new attitude is best expressed on the album's most remarkable track. In the dour "Cold World", Xzibit compares the life of a young woman battling addiction in some US city to that of a child growing up in Baghdad. The key line is: "You got two choices; you can give it up or just die with it." Banal out of context, the line is surprising coming from a hardcore rapper. "In LA, when someone's jacking your car, they give you two choices - you can get out of the car yourself or they kill you," he says. "It's about being stuck in a vicious circle. You never think about it until you're put in those shoes." It is a point of view that Xzibit is keen to express beyond his music. In interviews before the awards show, the rapper called for hip-hop to regain its place as a meaningful art form.

"What I miss is a time when hip-hop music had integrity; there was some kind of message," he says. "Not in all the music, because it's not for that, but there was at least something that got through that had some content that was sensible and positive, not just hooky junk-food rap." You can't help but be reminded that Xzibit has a nine-year-old son, who must cause him to be more thoughtful about his pronouncements. "We have kids that listen to hip-hop by the millions and they listen to us more than they listen to their parents, their teachers and politicians. So if the only thing we're doing is selling them clothes and making them have sex, what are we preparing them for?"

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Xzibit names the artists that had attracted him to hip-hop: Public Enemy, Poor Righteous Teachers and A Tribe Called Quest. Not that he necessarily wants a return to some mythical golden age of politicised, didactic rhymers. He believes artists should express their own points of view rather than rely on clichés. "If your reality is get up, drink, smoke, fuck ho's all day, then say that, but not everyone does that," he says. "I want to hear other points of view."

Yet despite his outspoken desire to hear something different in rap music, Xzibit still relishes the weapon fixations of gangsta cliché: AKs, automatics, even hand grenades crop up on the album. Though he maintains this is the experience that he is coming from. "I'm still rugged and street," he says.

Xzibit is off to the States to shoot his scenes in *Derailed*, a film set to star Clive Owen and Jennifer Aniston, and a respite from his struggle to make sense of hip-hop. At least now, with Sony's support, he can develop his own label, Open Bar Entertainment, to give a leg-up to the next generation of West Coast talent. Its first act, Strong Arm Steady, is a group of MCs that includes Xzibit. Maybe it is his answer to Eminem's D12. In this respect, the industry centred around Los Angeles has lagged behind that of the smaller, perhaps more tightly knit, Detroit East Coast scene. In a similar fashion, while the New Yorker Nas is taking Tupac Shakur's place as a poet who looks beyond the bloody tales of his own neighbourhood, the Californian contingent has overdosed on dope and porn flicks.

Xzibit may think he is alone in his struggle, but Nas faces similar challenges on his latest album, *Street's Disciple*, where he deals with the brutality of the projects that were his home and his impending marriage to the R&B star Kelis. Growing up is, indeed, hard to do.

"Weapons of Mass Destruction" is out now on Columbia.

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