

Born to Use Mics: Reading Nas's Illmatic

By Michael Eric Dyson, Sohail Daulatzai

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At the age of nineteen, Nasir “Nas” Jones began recording tracks for his debut album—and changed the music world forever. Released in 1994, *Illmatic* was hailed as an instant masterpiece and has proven one of the most influential albums in hip-hop history. With its close attention to beats and lyricism, and riveting first-person explorations of the isolation and desolation of urban poverty, *Illmatic* was pivotal in the evolution of the genre.

In *Born to Use Mics*, Michael Eric Dyson and Sohail Daulatzai have brought together renowned writers and critics including Mark Anthony Neal, Marc Lamont Hill, Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., and many others to confront *Illmatic* song by song, with each scholar assessing an individual track from the album. The result is a brilliant engagement with and commentary upon one of the most incisive sets of songs ever laid down on wax.

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Editorial Review

From Booklist
Though not an overwhelming chart success when released in 1994, Nas' album Illmatic has long been hailed as a hip-hop masterpiece, whose sales steadily climbed until in 2001 it attained platinum status (i.e., one million-copy U.S. sales). Editors Dyson and Daulatzai corral a team of all-star commentators, including themselves, to assess the album's merits and its place in the larger cultural context. Arriving at the very end of hip-hop's "Golden Age," Illmatic pointed the way for hip-hop's post-gangsta crossover into and alteration of the pop-music mainstream. The essays aren't easy reading, but they constitute a vital book for readers eager to understand the history of the genre. As Daulatzai observes, "There is something about Illmatic that transcends the categories of hip-hop," though at the bottom line, "Illmatic is just a dope album, embodying everything that is hip-hop while mastering what matters most: beats and rhymes." An absolute must for serious pop-music collections. --Mike Tribby

Review

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"A vital book for readers eager to understand the history of the genre."

About the Author

Michael Eric Dyson is the author of seventeen books, including *Is Bill Cosby Right?*, *April 4, 1968*, and *Holler If You Hear Me*. Currently University Professor of Sociology at Georgetown University, he lives in Washington, D.C.

Sohail Daulatzai is an assistant professor in African American Studies and Film and Media Studies at the University of California, Irvine. He lives in Los Angeles, California.

Users Review

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