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THE ARTS/CULTURAL DESK

ALBUM REVIEW; New Eminem Walks Right Out of Stores

By NEIL STRAUSS

For the last three weekends not a night has gone by without at least a few cars cruising down Los Angeles's main drag, Sunset Strip, blasting "The Eminem Show." This album, the latest from the fast-rhyming, ire-raising rapper Eminem, briefly became the equivalent of bass-enhanced car stereos and custom rims: a showboating way to call attention to a car. This is because these drivers were blasting early pirated copies of the album, which was scheduled to be released next week.

So many copies of the album have been taken off the Internet and sold as bootlegs that Eminem's label, Interscope/Universal, made the rare decision to release the album early. First, it was pushed up to today, then the album was put on sale Sunday, wreaking havoc with the marketing campaign. Despite these problems, it is expected to be one of the best-selling albums of the year.

Forget for a moment the many issues (race, sexism, violence, free speech) associated with Eminem. What his albums have become is the audio equivalent of reality television. And not just any reality show, but one like "Cheaters," so excruciatingly raw and human that it is both hard to watch and hard to stop watching.

The pilot episode was his 1996 independent rap album "Infinite." Here we see Eminem less angry and more ambitious. He is 21 and living in his mother's mobile home, on the verge of being a father. In the songs he dreams of being a star, with concert tours and albums in stores. He also imagines being "a family man happily married" with "at least half a million for my baby girl."

Well, in a twist that fairy tales and great books are often built on his wishes are granted beyond his dreams and

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the outcome is less happiness and more misery. On subsequent albums we listen as his marriage dissolves in bitterness, his mother sues him, his daughter grows up in the midst of all this, and money and fame lead to relatives crawling out of the woodwork and harassment from fans, the news media and advocacy groups.

Unlike most pop albums, this one uses real names. The cast of characters on "The Eminem Show" includes Kim (ex-wife), Hailie Jade (daughter), Mariah Carey (reportedly a former relationship), Steve Berman (a record executive), Dr. Dre (the producer largely responsible for his success) and the pop stars Jermaine Dupri and Moby (the latest targets of his vengeance). The cartoonish excess of previous albums (as well as, unfortunately, the addictively bouncing beats) have been largely bypassed and replaced with real life, love it or hate it, whether it's the rapper celebrating winning joint custody of his daughter ("Hailie's Song") or living his newly single life as a groupie-using misogynist ("Superman").

One of many aspects differentiating Eminem from other best-selling, vulgar pop stars is that there is so much pathos and honesty in his lyrics, especially on "Cleanin' Out My Closet." Here he asks his mother, "Remember when Ronnie died, and you wished it was me?" (He was an uncle who committed suicide.) Then, he continues, with words aimed to strike at any mother's heart: "Hailie's getting so big now. You should see her, she's beautiful. But you'll never see her. She won't even be at your funeral."

At times Eminem is too honest for even his lawyers to take: in a rarity for most pop albums, some words on all copies of the CD have been masked by the record label, including a comment about his ex-wife in "Hailie's Song."

In many ways "The Eminem Show" doesn't need a review, because the thin-skinned Eminem offers his own running commentary on the album, with lyrics like "my insecurities could eat me alive."

He rates his own vocal prowess when he tries to sing a ballad in "Hailie's Song": "I can't sing," he says at the end of the track. "Oh well, I tried." On the album's first song, "White America," he analyzes the phenomenon that is himself, theorizing that suburban teenagers connected with him because he looked like them, which worried parents.

What is most impressive about Eminem's self-examination is that he knows the reason for his fame: Slim Shady. It was when Eminem invented his Slim Shady persona that his rap took off. His biggest hits, "My Name Is" and "The Real Slim Shady," were from the perspective of this character, a fast-tongued sociopathic cartoon antihero who goes to madcap extremes with taking drugs, insulting celebrities and flouting political correctness. Slim Shady is silly enough for teeny-boppers to like, skilled enough for rap purists to embrace and offensive enough for parents to hate.

One of the strengths of his previous album, "The Marshall Mathers LP," was that through the characters Marshall Mathers (his original name), Eminem and Slim Shady, he explored three sides of every argument: the good, the bad and the witty.

The hidden plot of "The Eminem Show," which is darker in tone and more rushed than past albums, is the multiple-personality battle taking place. Eminem is trying to kill off the monster he created, only to find it too powerful for him. One of the reasons "The Eminem Show" isn't as engaging as its predecessors is that the rapper is trying to phase out Slim Shady. "I've created a monster," he raps, "because nobody wants to see Marshall no more/ They want Shady/I'm chopped liver."

And this appears to be correct, because the first single from "The Eminem Show" is the only true over-the-top Slim Shady song on the album: "Without Me." It begins with the taunting call that "Shady's back" and continues with glib references to drugs, alcohol, Dick and Lynne Cheney, the Federal Communications Commission, and Moby. ("You're too old, let go, its over.") In the chorus, he taunts the pop establishment: "We need a little controversy/ Because it feels so empty without me." To that effect, other songs speak of contaminating people with anthrax.

On his first independent album, "Infinite," Eminem, hungry for success, rapped, "I'm not wishing to be another fish in the sea." On "The Eminem Show" he raps that "no matter how many fish in the sea, it would be so empty without me." And he's right, but fortunately for him, Slim Shady, rather than being shocking, is becoming familiar, even cantankerously cuddly, setting the stage for the emergence of a new kingfish sometime soon.

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