Unorthodox rapper and beatmaker MF Doom dead at age 49

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On December 31, news reports revealed that 49-year-old Daniel Dumile had died on October 31. Dumile was most widely known as the popular underground rapper, beat producer and turntablist MF Doom. There was no further information available about the cause of death or any indication as to why news of his passing was not made public for two months.

Upon news of the rapper's death, numerous artists, fans and media outlets expressed grief and mourning. According to *Pitchfork*, Dumile was a "writer's writer" within hip hop music. The publication explained that Dumile, "with zero platinum or gold albums" to his name, left "an indelible mark on hip-hop."

Dumile, during his nearly three-decade musical career starting in the late 1980s, adopted an extensive list of musical stage names, the one most memorable being, as noted, the MF Doom alias. The rapper and producer put an eccentric and creative twist on the late 1990s "mafioso rap" trend in hip hop music. Instead of acquiring a stereotypical mob-related alias and its attendant banalities, Dumile donned a "metal face" mask reminiscent of Marvel Comic books' Dr. Doom character, performing as a musical super-villain.

While eccentric, Dumile was able to combine genuine ability with a comic personality. While his music regularly referenced gunplay, drugs and other menacing items, one was just as likely to hear how the masked rapper's adversaries would slip on a carefully laid banana peel or some other classic gag.

Dumile was born in 1971 in London, England to Trinidadian and Zimbabwean parents. However, his early years were spent on Long Island, New York in the late 1970s and 1980s. Living in close proximity to New York City, the future rapper was near the epicenter of the cultural ferment marking the birth of hip hop music, when graffiti art, turntable DJing, rapping and break dancing first emerged.

"Rhyming wasn't that popular back then, but it was fun," Dumile said of the period in a lengthy 2009 profile in the *New Yorker*. "Everybody had a cousin who came out for the summer and could rhyme. And you'd be like, 'Oh, he rhymes? Oh, he rhymes? I gotta meet him.'"

Dumile's first foray into the music industry was as Zev Love X, a member of the black nationalist-inspired group KMD. Dumile's sound at that time was more upbeat and clean-cut than that for which he would later come to be recognized. "Peachfuzz" is his best known song from that period. This single from KMD's 1991 debut full-length, *Mr. Hood* (Elektra), "Peachfuzz" amusingly focuses on the rapper's difficulty getting the time of day from members of the opposite sex.

Other elements of Dumile's earlier work stand out. He innovated on the typical "album interlude" formula by interspersing amusing movie and VHS tape dialogue throughout songs. These elements were a prelude to later MF Doom sequences that would feature snippets culled from Marvel's *The Avengers* and other hiss-riddled audiotape tidbits.

KMD ended in tragedy before the completion of the group's 1993 sophomore album *Bl_ck B_st_rds*. Dumile's brother and group mate DJ Subroc (Dingilizwe Dumile) was killed by a car on a Long Island freeway. The album was shelved shortly afterward, and Dumile was dropped from Elektra.

With the death of brother Dingilizwe and the dissolution of KMD, Dumile temporarily abandoned his music career. According to a 2005 interview in *Wire*, Dumile spent the years from 1994-1997 "damn near homeless, walking the streets of Manhattan, sleeping on benches." In 1997, Dumile again returned to the stage, performing at New York City night clubs

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as the Doom character, sporting masks of different types.

Dumile describes his motivation for this transformation in the *New Yorker*: "I wanted to get onstage and orate, without people thinking about the normal things people think about. Like girls being like, 'Oh, he's sexy,' or 'I don't want him, he's ugly,' and then other dudes sizing you up. A visual always brings a first impression. But if there's going to be a first impression I might as well use it to control the story. So why not do something like throw a mask on?"

MF Doom, while not a particularly gifted vocalist, his words slurred and at times off-beat, combined with references to 1980s children's cartoons, Dukes of Hazzard, Jeopardy! and other cultural ephemera of the period. He was capable of smuggling unique and entertaining metaphors into his rhymes. Dumile's backing beats, without simply re-treading previous terrain, maintained a fidelity to the music of the early 1990s such as A Tribe Called Quest, Leaders of the New School, Brand Nubian and especially De La Soul.

On 1998's *Operation: Doomsday* (Fondle 'Em Records), Doom raps that his rhymes are impressive enough to "make an Arab thief clap" while openly bragging about lifting the song's drums from a fellow rap artist ("Go with the Flow"). Dumile memorably bases the single "Hey!" on the sampled theme song from Scooby Doo. In it, he tells convicts doing "unsettling bids/You could have got away if it was not for those meddling kids."

Dumile's high point is considered to be his collaborative album *Madvillainy* (2004, Stones Throw Records) with hip hop producer Madlib (Otis Jackson, Jr.). The two artists possess a definite chemistry. Madlib's minimalist, yet meticulously arranged instrumentals were built largely on the sampling of rare jazz records and other such sources, combined with entertaining lyricism.

There is an unforced feeling to many of *Madvaillainy*'s songs; almost a hip hop–jazz improvisation album, with sets, guest appearances and instruments playing off one another.

Dumile's numerous alternative projects and aliases, such as 2003's *Vaudeville Villain* (under the name Viktor Vaughn) and 2005's *The Mask and the Mouse* (a collaboration album with producer Danger Mouse under the name "Danger Doom") have entertaining aspects to them as well. His last solo album *Born Like This* was released in 2009.

Despite his genuine talent, Dumile often had little to say about social reality that was particularly insightful. In fact, he purposely avoided more serious subjects.

"When I do it [make a song], I feel like I'm thirteen again," he tells his interviewer in the aforementioned *New Yorker* article. "To me it feels like that time was richer, every second was really five minutes. Being older now, grown, I'm like, what do we really do that's fun? I'm kind of corny when you think about it. What could I rhyme about? Let me see, um, I gotta pay the rent today."

There was more than enough social drama in Dumile's own life—and world—to amusingly explore any number of interesting topics. The most insightful artists are able to do this. However, for such topics to be tackled effectively, a degree of social perspective is necessary. This was beyond Doom's capabilities.

Of course, there were political, cultural and historical obstacles at play here that worked against such an approach that Dumile never seemed very interested in overcoming. But it is worth noting that Dumile's rather eccentric "turn inward" away from reality coincided with a decade of unrelenting social, economic and political turmoil (1998 until 2009!) that drove millions of people into political life. Some artists did make this connection, Dumile did not.

While always amusing, Dumile's music became increasingly formulaic. His musical output slowed down considerably in the final decade of his life although the rapper would occasionally collaborate on songs or even albums until near his time of death. At his best, Dumile was an endearing presence within music, able to innovate significantly upon hip hop music's standard forms. His music deserves a hearing.

A sampling of Dumile/MF Doom's music:

3rd Bass – The Gas Face (featuring Zev Love X)

Madvillain – All Caps

MF Doom – Kon Karne

MF Doom – Doomsday

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