

A performer with many personal demons: Rapper and entertainer DMX dead at age 50

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11 April 2021

On Friday, Earl Simmons, better known by his stage name DMX, was pronounced dead several days after suffering a heart attack that left him in a “vegetative state,” according to press statements from his former manager. Simmons had lost functionality in his major organs, including his lungs, and was taken off life support shortly afterward. The rap entertainer was only 50 years old.

Certain news accounts attributed Simmons’ death to a drug overdose, while others denied this was the case. Simmons was an internationally famous recording artist signed to the hip hop record label Def Jam Recordings. His career spanned nearly 30 years.

DMX’s renown—the moniker originally derived from the popular 1980s beat machine and later came to mean “Dark Man X”—is largely due to a string of best-selling Def Jam albums dating from the late 1990s and early 2000s. The *Washington Post* notes that during this time the rapper “became something of a hip-hop rock star,” producing platinum-selling albums seemingly at will (DMX is the only musician in history to have five albums debut at number one on the Billboard chart), receiving Grammy nominations on several occasions and performing before crowds of hundreds of thousands. His music could be understatedly described as “aggressive.”

Simmons often spoke about the difficulties he faced in early childhood. In addition to being afflicted with severe bronchial asthma, which lent his voice its signature gruffness, the rapper battled a lifelong addiction to hard narcotics. “[I]t’s a constant fight every day” said the rapper in a 2013 interview. “Every trigger that was a trigger [before sobriety] is still a trigger. Whether you act on it or not is something different.”

Born 1970 in the New York City suburb of Mount

Vernon, Simmons grew up in nearby Yonkers with a single mother. Simmons never met his father. His mother often physically assaulted him as child and he was sent to a number of reform schools, group homes and other state-run facilities before his 18th birthday.

As with many vulnerable individuals who achieve meteoric success, Simmons’ musical triumphs would later be overshadowed by constant difficulties in his personal life. He was reportedly jailed over 30 times, with his first encounter with such institutions occurring when he was only seven years old.

These personal crises were undoubtedly magnified by the pressures and socially destructive processes generated by fame. However, even before his initial career success, Simmons’ music was punctuated by anti-social and even sadistic tendencies. His 1998 debut album *It’s Dark and Hell is Hot* and even more so his 1999 sophomore album *Flesh of My Flesh, Blood of my Blood* (Def Jam Recordings) are at times cringe-inducing compendiums of social backwardness.

Despite these unattractive qualities, which played to the entertainment industries’ efforts to manufacture thuggish and gangster-like personalities for rap audiences, Simmons also possessed a level of sincerity and personal charm that proved he was capable of more meaningful music. His album single “Slippin’” from *It’s Dark and Hell is Hot* is at once moving and disturbing in its content. In it, Simmons unflinchingly narrates his early life story backed by a beat constructed around a mournful saxophone sample lifted from a Grover Washington, Jr. jazz fusion record. What the song may lack in insight, it makes up for in honesty.

Unfortunately, such moments on albums were mostly crowded out by DMX’s braggadocio and posturing, which become even more grating in light of the very real emotional and personal crises that the rapper

experienced.

News of Simmons' death was immediately met with an outpouring of condolences from supporters and musical collaborators. "You were one of the most special people I have ever met... Full of Humour, talent, wisdom honesty and love and most of all loyalty," wrote rap artist Eve, one of Simmons' frequent collaborators, on social media. "Very Very Very few will EVER do it like you homie," tweeted gangsta rap veteran and media personality Ice-T, alongside footage of Simmons performing live.

In his music, DMX frequently made mention of his hometown of Yonkers. Often referred to locally as New York City's "sixth borough," located directly north of the Bronx and only four miles from Manhattan's northernmost point, the city is also representative of many processes that found distorted expression in the rapper's music.

In the 1980s, Yonkers gained national attention when a federal judge ruled that city authorities were engaging in institutionalized segregation of low-income housing programs and the education system. Only in 1988 were its public schools desegregated. Manufacturing and other industries providing decent jobs were largely nonexistent by the 1980s, when Simmons was entering early adulthood. The rapper's difficult life unfolded within these conditions.

After his initial musical success, Simmons began to succumb to personal difficulties at a rapid rate. The *New York Times*' Jon Caramanica writes: "DMX's time at the top of the [rap] genre was relatively brief... [but] he was never erased from its collective memory. That's partly because the tumult of his personal life constantly landed him in the spotlight." Undoubtedly, the scrutiny of the celebrity media, notoriously intrusive, did not make things easier for the rapper, who was clearly in a vulnerable state.

Following *Grand Champ*, DMX's fifth album and his last released on Def Jam, his life and career increasingly descended into chaos—punctuated by jail sentences, medical crises and media spectacle. Several "comeback" attempts were enthusiastically promoted by hip hop media outlets, but little came of them.

While Simmons gave off occasional flashes of depth in his music, and possessed noticeable musical gifts, the vast bulk of his output was dominated by anti-social posturing and wealth acquisition. Such traits are bound

up with a decaying capitalism. Unhappily, damaged figures like DMX respond to the severe decay by accommodating themselves to and attempting to build careers out of it.



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