

The hip-hop world has many legends, heroes and outlaws. But the man known as Divine Styler stands alone in rap lore. Once a protégé of Ice-T, he honed his lyrical skills alongside Everlast and DJ Muggs as part of LA's seminal Rhyme Syndicate posse. Ten years ago, he dropped his intriguing debut, *Word Power*, and established a small following. He helped pioneer the interaction of rappers with live instrumentalists. *Spiral Walls Containing Autumns of Light*, an indescribably envelope-pushing album, followed, and Divine became a celebrated eccentric in some circles while he was dismissed in others. Then, abruptly, he all but disappeared from the music scene. Over the years, his enigmatic persona grew, so much so that he inspired a Canadian hip-hop fanzine titled *In Search of... Divine Styler*.

"I dropped out of the music scene to get my head together," the 31-year-old MC explains. "I watched the history of entertainment repeat itself constantly with drugs, death, disaster and people going from stardom to going completely broke. I was like, 'There's gotta be more to this. There's no way I can see myself gaining success, becoming a drug addict, dropping out and becoming a legend because I die young.'"

Having grown up in Brooklyn, Divine recalls with fondness a youth that was largely spent throwing rocks at traffic, chasing girls, robbing people, writing graffiti and dancing. As he got older, his reckless streak began to have serious consequences. By the time he joined the Rhyme Syndicate, he was expected to deliver hard Brooklyn rap in the vein of Big Daddy Kane. "I was running the streets, in trouble, kind of a stick-up kid," he remembers. "I came out to LA and I went to jail. When I went to jail, something happened to me. I had these dreams and I changed. I had been studying Islam and

something took hold of me. When I got out of jail, I rewrote *Word Power* in two weeks. I promised never to do anything negative musically again."

His commitment to positivity has continued to this day, and his new, independently released disc, *Word Power II: Directrix*, is a celebration of spirituality, enlightenment and transformation. The concepts may be lofty, but the way Styler spits lyrics speaks directly to the gut. For much of the record, relentless beats march tirelessly beside often-distorted vocals, pushing emphatic, chant-like hooks to the center. Listen closely, though, and the complexity of the lyrics comes through clearly enough. The chorus of "Before Mecca," for example, runs, "Precipitation is the platinum hook/Reflection with the all-seeing retina/Gamma-tek/Gamma-ray," which is not exactly the accessibility equivalent of, say, "We Be Clubbin'."

"We're doing a book of translations of all the important songs from my last three albums," Styler informs quite seriously. Divine concedes that some are put off by his dense writing style. "People hear my rhymes and they be like, 'I don't want to think,'" he says. "But there are people who like intellect and who want an alternative to, 'Wu-Tang Clan ain't nuthin' to fuck with.' I get fan mail from people who [write], 'You changed my life with this line.'" Still, in an era where endless talk of firepower, street credibility and diamond jewelry sells big, it can be hard to convince the public to switch gears. Divine seems discouraged by the current state of the music he once loved.

"[Hip-hop] is dying right now," he says. "When you go to a siream to drink water, you don't drink in a dead pool; you drink where the water is going over the rocks, 'cause that's the cleanest part of the water. Music is the same way. These people 'keeping it real' and talking about black pain, they're giving people the

wrong water to drink. People have gotten the black struggle confused with it all being painful. It's not just all pain and suffering. Everybody in the whole world knows that black people were enslaved and we were an oppressed people. There's more to us than that. There's a spiritual side of black people, there's an intellectual side of black people, there's an inventive side. If I put out the record that I put out and I went and got high with all of those people who bought my record and had sex with women, I'd sell more records than anybody out there, because they'd rather see me as a hypocrite than see me as a person of truth."

Styler is far from resigned, though. Just as his rowdy formative years bring a smile to his face, his upcoming plans evoke a look of determination. He's tentatively returned to performing again with a live band, and a recent appearance at an LA art event proved the group deserving of large venues. He's also begun work on a new album called *Divine Balance*, which he says will aim more for the spirit than the intellect. Don't expect the mystery to dissipate altogether, though: As both old-school icon and futuristic hip-hop revolutionary, Divine is likely to continue to flourish outside of the mainstream sector. But his faith in the power of the medium will keep him in the game for years to come.

"Music is the most powerful force on the planet. Music is the only thing that can change a people overnight," he asserts. "The preachers can't do it. The ministers can't do it. A minister can preach to a congregation of a thousand people on Sunday and those people will go out and do the same thing they did that whole week. You take that same message and put it in a rap song, add a couple of curses to it and if whoever's rhyming has the [skills] that people can feel, every one of those people will change."