

Divine says he had to change his rhyming approach the same way some athletes use maturity to smarten their game. So while he may not have the same quickness to the hoop, he can nail the jumper from 15 feet out like never before. "My root is still the hip-hop that existed even before there was hip-hop," he says. "When it was just communicating and people having fun, that pre-dawn sort of thing. That's still my foundation, where I get all of my energy from."

Divine Styler knows a thing or two about hip-hop since he lived it as a child reared in Brooklyn. As a teen, he split his years between both New York and Los Angeles, and still divides his time between both coasts. He first got into the public eye in the late '80s when he was down with Ice-T and the Rhyme Syndicate. Shortly after releasing his debut with his crew, The Scheme Team (featuring Cokni O' Dire), Divine became less and less enamored with his Syndicate management and the direction they were nudging him in. *Spiral Walls*, he says, was a reaction to that situation, and except for a brief D-I-V-I head-peek on the *De La Soul Is Dead* record, Divine had been incognito until he popped up on

some joints from House of Pain's last album (friends from his Syndicate days).

"It was just bad feelings all the way around," he expresses regarding *Spiral Walls*. "I was locked in a contract, and I wasn't happy. I turned in something completely different, something more alternative. I was able to get out of my contract, and do some things that I wanted to do at the time, so it served two purposes. I really didn't expect hip-hop to feel it at all, but then again, I don't make music for them. I make music as expression — for everyone."

Spiral Walls proved to be a defining moment in his career as well as a potential stumbling block. By the time the Jungle Brothers' Laswellized *JBeez With The Remed* came out two years later, hip-hop had evolved even further. "I remember when Afrika [Baby Bam] was talking about doing that record. He appeared frustrated musically and just needed to go farther. When he did, of course, the traditional hip-hop people weren't having it. I think it was dope. Hip-hop needs to evolve and it's people like that who have the balls to do it."

Evolution is a theme for Divine. Once a self-proclaimed hot-head, he has made a recent commitment to the Islamic faith — one of the pieces that he described earlier as falling into place. Though a member of the Five Percent Nation when he was a youth, he discovered Orthodox Islam about four years ago and began to get really serious. This last year, he completed his "fifth pillar," the final stage of conversion, which included marriage and his first haj, the pilgrimage to Mecca made during Dhu'l-Hijjah.

"I think I'm a lot more at peace with myself," he says after a pause. But how will this affect his music? "The theme of my album is self-mastery — having control over yourself. You can't guide anybody or help anybody until you first have ultimate control over yourself. Creatively it's a little harder because you're more aware of things. The more knowledge you have, the more you're accountable for, you know? So I have to try and stay really focused and just keep a balance. That's what *Directrix* is. It means the median line in the trajectory of fire, which is balance. Balance plays a big part in my life now." **JAZZBO • photo: B+**