

Dante, Rap, and GM Grimm

Dante's *Divine Comedy* promises divine inspiration, but its basic humanity and use of the first-person narrative engages readers almost 700 years after its publication. In the *Inferno*, Dante draws upon personal experiences of betrayal, uncertainty, and love to enrich the description of his journey through the *Inferno*, *Purgatory*, and *Paradise*. During these autobiographical moments, Dante connects with his reader and reveals that certain experiences are timeless and universal. Although originally intended for Medieval Christians, the *Divine Comedy* relates to a wide-range audience regardless of nationality, religion or time period.

Rap aspires to provide solace, guidance, instruction, context, and inspiration to urban Black Americans in a non-traditional language. As Dante spoke to his audience in Italian—instead of Latin—rappers address their listeners in straightforward raps that blend danceable beats with memorable lyrics. While rap is an invention of urban Black Americans, its relatable lyrical content transcends the confines of the hip-hop lifestyle and appeals to a broader audience. Rap's allure rests in its reliance on conventional images and tropes: stacking chips, busting gatts, the death of a relative or friend, and establishing a code of the streets. While these themes are not immediately relatable to outsiders, they can be distilled into digestible concepts such as achievement, struggle, oppression, and frustration. In this way, rap approaches Dante's universality and brings his message into the 20th and 21st centuries.

Digital Tears: Email From Purgatory draws on GM Grimm's personal experiences of the Black struggle in America. This album serves as Grimm's platform to ruminate on these experiences and celebrate his new life as a freeman (Grimm was sentenced to a life-term in prison, but after he prepared his own appeal he spent only 3 years in jail). The album begins with "All Y'All," which invites the listener to accompany Grimm on a journey through his life: "travel through time with the superstar Jet Jaguar [one Grimm's many alter-egos]." Here, Grimm introduces the listener to his early mistakes and describes his attraction to drug-dealing and debilitating appetite for money and crime. On "Stable" Grimm firmly establishes his credibility as our guide: his life is "our life". Since his experiences range from death and violence to paralysis to happiness to profound sadness and other complex emotions that relate to the urban Black experience, he convinces us that he understands our plight. "Go Back" invokes the hurt and pain that accompanies the life of urban Blacks. Between menacing chants of "Go Back to Africa," Grimm elaborates on the numerous stereotypes that beleaguer urban Blacks. Like "Stable," this track reiterates that Grimm comprehends the hardships of urban Blacks in contemporary America. The title track, "Digital Tears" is a haunting indictment of Grimm's enemies, the American penal system, popular culture, and his life. Echoing much of Dante's bitterness toward political enemies and disdain for dishonesty, the listener hears the strain in Grimm's voice as he details his encounters with snitches, connivers, pimps, and liars. He does not condemn actions or behavior to a specific circle of Hell, but he draws a clear distinction between good and evil.

After taking us into the seedy underbelly of urban America, Grimm seeks resolution and a positive close to the album. "Voices (The Final Chapter)" channels the inner turmoil that inhabits his thoughts and outlines a plan to overcome his struggles. While Grimm broods over his bouts of depression, personal insecurities and past

mistakes, the overall message remains positive. Rather than allow the voices of his alter-egos to weigh him down, he breaks out-of-character and speaks the final lines of the song:

Grimm: I want to get with the woman I love. Get married; have children; raise them to respect human life and what the Creator has given. Focus on education. Offer advice and wisdom that I've acquired from my mistakes through trial and error and see them accomplish positive things that I only dreamed of, and God willing, see their children do it as well. And lead the way into the next world.

One of the Voices: That's it?

Grimm: Yeah, that's it.

Here, Grimm plainly addresses his mission: respect God, live a moral life, find love through marriage, and raise a happy family. Trust in God and unimpeachable rectitude serve as the fundamental principles of *Digital Tears*. In this way, *Digital Tears* intersects with the *Divine Comedy* and modernizes Dante's message.

Eric Goldwyn (Bowdoin '04)