

# Common

Interview by Terence Teh and Alex Stevenson. Words by Terence Teh.

*Hip hop's most conscious ambassador is back with a swagger. Following up the four times Grammy nominated album 'Be' in style, Lonnie Rashid Lynn Jr returns in 2007 with a new album and a Hollywood acting debut under his fine, Italian, handmade applejack styled hat.*

"It's a love for what I do. I really appreciate the fact I've been blessed to be able to express myself and have a voice that can be heard. Also to get out there and be up on the screen, to be able to express yourself in that way... they are all a gift, so I be hungry. I love it," says Common in his deep, soulful drawl, contemplating how his celebrated 14-year career in the hip hop industry has crossed over to the silver screen.

Spanning six gloriously diverse albums, with a seventh, 'Finding Forever', out later this year, rap's most conscious cat (who has undoubtedly got his swagger back) has gone from the Unsigned Hype column in The Source, to earning himself multiple Grammy nominations. Even winning one of those coveted gold gramophones in 2003 with 'Love Of My Life (An Ode To Hip-Hop)', a track he wrote alongside then-beau Erykah Badu. In a career move probably marked by a doff of his Soji hat (Common's own line of sharp, handmade Italian hats) the artist born Lonnie Rashid Lynn Jr in 1972, has taken his heart from the streets of blue collar Chicago to the glossy hills of Hollywood with his major movie debut, in the Joe Carnahan directed 'Smokin' Aces'. Starring alongside an A-list ensemble cast including 'Entourage' scene-stealer Jeremy Piven, Andy Garcia, Ray Liotta, Ben Affleck and piano tinkling soulstress Alicia Keys, Common genuinely shines in the hyper-violent, black comedy (think 'True Romance' meets 'Sin City'). As Sir Ivy, right hand man and bodyguard to the movie's lead, Buddy "Aces" Israel (played by Jeremy Piven) Common's role portrays a man who is the calm at the centre of the storm. The noble, loyal yet conscious character is a contrast to Piven's villainous, sleaze personified, wannabe mobster protagonist.

Via a scratchy phone line — Common in Los Angeles, One Week To Live in London — he talks animatedly about his burgeoning acting career. However, I must point out the poetic, thoughtful tone he delivers on record is exactly how he speaks. So when I say animated... Common's neither overexcited nor rambunctious like your typical MTV spotlight photosynthesizing hip-popper. His voice evokes a vibe similar to the original street poets, like fellow Chi-town native Gil Scott Heron ("definitely an influence. He reminds me of what writing can be about. It can be powerful"), and The Last Poets, the late 60s/early 70s collective who appeared alongside Kanye West on Common's single 'The Corner'. In the midst of the 'Smokin' Aces' press junket our initial interview was predominately filled with conversations surrounding the film, however a couple of days later Common was again available to talk hip hop, freedom and corporations.

**Did acting come quite naturally to you? After being in the hip hop industry for so long, did the transition to being on-screen feel like a natural step?**

Actually, nah. To be honest I never really thought that way. I remember in one video I had to do an acting scene. I was really nervous and the acting was real bad. Lauryn Hill was directing it and she was trying to coach me, but it just wasn't good. I'm a person that definitely believes you are born with natural gifts, but you do have certain things to develop. I had to learn what the processes were about and then I could approach it for real.

**So how did you properly start?**

I took classes when I could, and with the movie 'Smokin' Aces' I got the chance to audition. I had a meeting with the director, who said he had a good instinct about me, so I flew in from Paris, went to the audition and gave my heart.

**How was your first experience of Hollywood?**

It was actually a lot of fun because everything is new. New challenges, new experiences, new people. Seeing different aspects, different actors and just being around them. It's been cool because the schedules are a little different from the music world.

**Is it more hectic than promoting an album?**

Nah, the promotion of an album is heavy. Not only do you do press promotion or TV shows, but you go to the radio, the club, the record stores, barber shops! Haha! There's a lot of groundwork, you know. But with the movie, you get to go out and do different things. Hollywood isn't as raw as the hip hop world, but that's why it's Hollywood, haha.

**You must be pretty pleased with the film. It's a bloodbath but you somehow avoid getting shot and you get the girl!**

Haha, exactly! I came out on top, right? I was one of the only people in the movie that didn't get shot. It was a blessing to be a part of that movie. I love the writing, how creative it is. It's the way I want my hip hop to be. Doing something new and fresh and coming from an unexpected place. It's pure and not try-hard, and that's what that movie is to me, it's really creative.

**I've heard you're starring in another big budget Hollywood film?**

I did a film called 'American Gangster' that will be coming out in November. It's directed by Ridley Scott, starring Denzel Washington and Russell Crowe. [Wu-Tang Clan's] RZA and [Southern rap star] T.I. The lead character [drug kingpin turned police informant] Frank Lucas is played by Denzel and I'm his brother.

**What was it like working with Denzel?**

Ahh man, that was incredible. That was being alongside the master, the king, point blank. One of the greatest ever. Just being in his presence was a lesson in itself. And it was fun too, a lot of fun...

**Did you get star struck then?**

At first, yeah. I was like, man, that's Denzel right there! I had to grasp on to the fact this dude's my brother. You know, it's Denzel! From 'Malcolm X' to 'Hurricane'...

**He might have been, "Oh shit! That's Common right there!"**

Haha, yeah right...

Common's musical career has taken some twists and turns over the years. On the whole, each record since his 1992 debut 'Can I Borrow A Dollar?' has been a critical success. Lyrically, he has always worn his socially conscious heart on his sleeve, the innate poetic nature of his music being what most fans hold in highest regard. His sophomore album 'Resurrection' is regarded as the "classic" of his discography, with the stunning single 'I Used To Love H.E.R.' cemented in hip hop's Hall Of Fame. There was the anti-gang bang message of his third album, 1997's 'One Day It'll All Make Sense', off the back of which he secured his first major label release, 2000's 'Like Water For Chocolate'. This was produced by the late, great J Dilla, who was responsible for all but one track (DJ Premier brought back the Golden Era boom bap with 'The

6th Sense') and secured a Grammy nomination for the sublime Bobby Caldwell-sampling single, 'The Light'. Common's wildly eclectic music tastes were showcased on the psych rock/electronic/neo-soul opus 'Electric Circus'. However, this wildly ambitious album wasn't well received, with many fans feeling Common had gone a bit doolally, blaming his relationship with cosmic soul diva Erykah Badu. According to Common, even close friends like The Roots' ?uestlove were asking questions about the deep, experimental nature of 'Electric Circus'. However, in 2005, as if to bitch slap his critics, Common came back with the four times Grammy nominated, platinum selling 'Be'. Not only a return to splendour, but a return to a purer hip hop sound. With J Dilla and Kanye West producing the record, 'Be' seemed to capture the essence, diversity and soul of his home city. "Chicago is an authentic, blue collared type city and people are really keen to be true to who they are." Common explains, "It's a very soulful city. A lot of things went down in black politics and the city's culture. From jazz to blues to the struggle that shapes who we are as individuals."

**What's the story with your new album?**

It's called 'Finding Forever' and it looks like it's coming out in April. I worked with Kanye and have a song produced by a brother named Kareem Riggins. He's from Detroit, he drums in my band... and he's also a producer. He produced some Slum Village at one point. A very talented musician. In fact, he produced the title song for 'Smokin' Aces'. We did the song 'Play Your Cards Right' featuring Bilal. J Dilla also did a track, before he passed, which features D'Angelo.

**You and Dilla were really close right?**

He was one of my favourite people in the world. That's my brother right there. We had a serious bond. I felt really close, and still feel close to him, you know? He had a big passion and love for music. That's what he was about. He was a cool dude. A good person.

**How has this album evolved from 'Be'?**

I want to give a fresh new sound that still has the spirit of hip hop in it, but has new elements and new expressions from me. You know, when it's fresh but it still has those elements we love. Whether it be Tribe, Rakim or Nas, I just want to continue along that lifeline of hip hop, which is progressive.

**It's not going to be conventional then?**

Nah... I got the name Common, but it's definitely not everyday stuff. Everyday people can relate to it, but it's not your run of the mill sound. It definitely got that boom bap baby...

**What qualities link the producers you work with? J Dilla, Kanye West, ?uestlove... in the public eye they all seem to have different vibes...**

Qualities... well, they are all very passionate about their music, they all got soul. They all want to be in control! Haha.

**Are there any new hip hop artists that have got your attention?**

I really don't listen to a lot of new hip hop to be honest. From what I have heard, Lupe Fiasco has a lot to say, he has something important to express. So, I'd say he's a significant voice from the next generation.

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**Do you feel that conscious aspect is missing from the current state of the scene, seeing that 2006 was such a party year for hip hop?**

I think it would be great to have a balance. The South stuff is an aspect and expression of the culture, but along with that you need people rapping about something else, coming from another perspective. The diversity of hip hop deserves that.

**I wanted to ask about the freedom and creative control that you have with your music...**

Even early on I had creative control. Whoever dealt with me knew who I was as an artist and [knew] if I was free, they were gonna get the best product. One thing that has helped me create songs is great producers. Some producers really hone you. People like Pharrell, J Dilla, ?uestlove and especially Kanye. He's one of the greatest at that, really taking an artist and giving them some direction.

Alongside rappers Talib Kweli and Mos Def, Common makes up a "conscious trinity" of modern hip hoppers. Musicians with socially aware messages who observe, document and, at times, preach about the rights and wrongs within hip hop culture. Like any cultural movement that goes mainstream hip hop has changed, and some feel it has lost its original, idealistic essence. However, Common highlights the bigger picture, "I definitely feel it's part of the evolution. The changes may not be something I'm into, or accustomed too, or even like. It may not be good, or seem good at the time. But, you have to go through changes to know who you are and discover yourself. That's what hip hop is going through." Now, with his music career on a high and Hollywood calling, how does he feel about the commodification of hip hop? "Major labels [are there to] make money. They're a business. It's not like they're only gonna exploit this. If you are bringing a product to market, they gonna work with you. Being an artist you have to have certain boundaries. They can't force you to shuffle and smile. If you do it, it's up to you. Where's your integrity and your values? That's how I look at it. You can't place all the blame on the corporations. Everyone's got a responsibility to be true to who you are."

*"Being an artist you have to have certain boundaries... You can't place all the blame on the corporations. Everyone's got a responsibility to be true to who you are."*

## COMMON CLASSIC 7

**1. COMMON SENSE: 'I Used To Love H.E.R.'** *[Relativity]*

**2. COMMON: 'The Light'** *[MCA]*

**3. COMMON: 'The 6th Sense'** *[MCA]*

**4. COMMON: 'The Corner'** *[G.O.O.D.]*

**5. COMMON: 'Go'** *[G.O.O.D.]*

**6. COMMON FT. ERYKAH BADU: 'Love Of My Life (An Ode To Hip-Hop)'** *[MCA]*

**7. COMMON SENSE: 'Resurrection'**  
{Large Professor Remix} *[Relativity]*

'Smokin' Aces' is out now on general release. The 'Smokin' Aces OST' is out on 22nd January on Polydor and 'Finding Forever' is slated for an April release on G.O.O.D. Music.  
[www.common-music.com](http://www.common-music.com)  
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Photo by Christian Lantry