Dem Atlas: Local Rapper on the Rise

Brayden Mann

yb6938yy@metrostate.edu

The first time I had an opportunity to meet local label Rhymesayers’ Entertainment newly signed emcee Dem Atlas was back in early 2014. I was at Rhymesayers’ record store, Fifth Element, talking with a friend who works there when I noticed a skinny black dude with dreads and thick rimmed glasses that would do Woody Allen justice.

“Is that Dem Atlas?” I asked my friend behind the counter. He said yes, and that he was in preparing for an in-store show the following day. It was one of the first official shows he would play as the label’s newly assigned musician. After about 20 minutes, he left for the bus stop. Meaning to make my acquaintance, I left to meet him at the bus stop to introduce myself.

The reason for my excitement was very simple: not a whole lot was known about him before being signed. He’s from St. Paul, had an EP, and a song called “Charlie Brown” on Youtube; basically it. So, when famous local rap label Rhymesayers’ Entertainment, the biggest record label in Minnesota, signed him, he suddenly became the local hip-hop scene’s newest fixation.

I introduced myself as a music journalist who wanted an interview and offered him a ride home, as he was short for bus fare. He accepted, and we began talking. Mostly small talk about music we liked, but when I dropped him off, I departed by saying “I’m going to get that interview soon, just keep an ear out!” He smiled, and replied “I look forward to it.”

About a year later, I give him a call to cash in the favor. After a few extra spins of his “Charlie Brown EP,” characterizing his sound as if Nas, “Lucy” era Atmosphere, and Miles Davis decided kick it at a party. At this point, he had just released his second EP “DWNR,” as well as a constant string of shows beginning with the “Soundset” festival the year prior.

“[Performing at Soundest] was crazy. I was on this legendary stage and I smashed a guitar. I know no one has done has done that at Soundset. But, I knew I wanted to because I had never performed in front of that many people before.” His work definitely cut out for him, Soundset, the local hip-hop festival that has only grown exponentially since its 2008 inception, had record attendance last year.

An eccentric performance at the festival tends to mirror his musical attitudes as well: with the aforementioned “Charlie Brown EP” utilizing jazzier instrumentals and song structure, transitioning into “DWNR,” which has an emphasis in a more melancholy pop into his rhyme structures similar to the Gorillaz or fellow label mate Atmosphere. “I think for the next release I want to do something fusing the two concepts of my last two EP’s,” he said, answering my questions and quips with a level of clarity and grace.

That was the point in the interview when it occurred to me why Atlas had been such a lightning rod of attention in the underground since his label-unveiling: sure, he may be technically proficiently in his rhyming despite only rapping for about four years, the thought he puts into what he says on record, but the curiosity ultimately stems from one thing, his innate focus on incorporating the genres of music he loves into his own style and a precise focus to detail. Even his name is meant to symbolize two aspects of his humanity, “Dem” and Atlas.”

This sudden interest in his music, two relatively successful EP’s, and a string of incredibly successful shows builds anticipation for his first proper album release. “When the LP is ready, it’s going to let people know what’s up. It’s going to dive into what the two words “Dem” and “Atlas” really means,” he said. “Expect at least a new EP this year, but the album is in the works. I want to really take my time with it, I gotta take my time with it.”