



# Conde Fast

A gay rapper’s search for serenity

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PHOTOS BY JULIAN P. LEDEZMA

The late morning breeze is whistling through the leaves above the patio of Press Coffee on San Pedro as I take my seat across from Chris Conde. “It’s gonna get warmer as the sun hits the zenith,” Conde says, glancing up through large, round sunglasses, the kind fashionistas refer to as Jackies. On March 27 at Mana House Conde will release a six-track EP that will not only mark a career milestone but also commemorate a triumph in the personal life of San Antonio’s very own gay rapper.

Conde skateboarded to our interview. He’s been skateboarding for about 20 years and still enjoys “bombing the hills” of Alta Vista. He says he usually doesn’t like drinking coffee on an empty stomach but that he will this morning because he’s a “caffeine addict.” And a Libra. I can’t help but stare at the large Harry Potter-esque medallion on his chest. It’s comprised of parts from antique watches set in multiple layers of resin. I ask him for his definition of a Libra. “It means I can’t make up my mind,” he says. “When I’m at a Mexican restaurant, I get enchiladas then make a taco out of it, so that I can have both.” Conde plays guitar, drums, bass, and viola but considers writing to be his forte and, at age 28, his “most consistent art form.” Being born under Themis’s Scales of Justice implies that indecision also plagues his songwriting. “Learning how to walk away” from a verse has been a hard lesson, he says, echoing the pragmatic view of local filmmaker Brett Mauser: “Films are never finished, they’re only abandoned.”

Conde lived in nearly a dozen cities with his military parents before returning to his native San Antonio to answer “a calling.” Upon his return five years ago, San Antonio struck him as “a really gay town.” “In San Antonio you can throw a rock and hit two lesbians walking into a Catholic Church.” His septum piercing remains still when he laughs, though the heavy gauges in his ears bobble behind his long, dark hair. “I love that this city is authentic. I love it that people do keep it real here.” As authentic as SA may be, Conde is still an artist of his times, layered with the resin of its politics. Simply because of who he is, in 2015 his work is still political. “I think homosexuality is a part of my identity and that needs to be acknowledged,” he says with a graceful wave of his tattooed hands. Conde was drawn to “black music” as a child after his parents bought him a cassette tape of Michael Jackson’s *HIStory*. Later, between episodes of *Will & Grace*, he developed a middle-school avidity for future classic hip-hop luminaries Missy “Misdemeanor” Elliot (and her 1997 *Supa Dupa Fly*), Busta Rhymes, and Timbaland (whom he considers a genius). Conde began writing original poetry

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in the syllabic verse known among the rap cognoscenti as “flow.” “I’m definitely borrowing someone’s culture, [but] I’m drawn to the rhythm and energy of it,” he says. Ideally, Conde would like to go back to the roots of hip-hop in his shows, which would include a DJ on turntables. He feels the commercialization of hip-hop has undercut the essence of its pioneering underground sound. “The people who are doing hip-hop [today] didn’t come out of 1979,” he says with a grimace. “They grew up on, what? Will Smith?” He compares contemporary hip-hop with the (perhaps unintentional) popularity of Hot Topic. “They used to want to market themselves as a grassroots company.” But Conde believes rap’s rebel yell could be recaptured. “True underground is writing without a censor, without writing necessarily for a specific audience,” he says. “The true artist is writing [his] true experience even though [he] might think, ‘Ah, nobody’s going to get this.’” Enough listeners get Conde to be demographically identifiable. The fans awaiting his new work consist mostly of “artists, poets, and hippies.” Although he’d love to be on the radio one day, he doesn’t feel his music has a “pop sensibility.” His music, however, has already served a higher purpose. He credits songwriting with helping him conquer addiction to drugs and alcohol. The six rap-filtered songs featured on his EP are a means of self-reclamation. “If you’re not [telling your story], you’re this manufactured thing that’s serving someone else’s purpose.” A letter is tattooed above the knuckle on each of his fingers. Held together they spell

“Hold Fast.” “When you’re on stormy seas,” he explains, “you hold fast in whatever direction you’re going in. It’s an old sailing term. Being in the midst of drug addiction is terrifying, especially when you want to stop [but] you don’t know how.” The tattoo is a tribute to his tattoo artist, who recently passed away. He had the same tattoo. Your tattoo artist? Is it common to claim a tattoo artist as one’s own? “Do you claim your hairstylist?” he replies. “I don’t just let anyone throw a needle into me.” While he was addicted to meth, Conde was constantly monitoring how much he had and when and how he was going to get more. “[Meth is] what you’re living for, whether you want to acknowledge it or not,” he says. Conde has been drug-free since June with the support



of a 12-step program. He used meth for six months. Before that it was cocaine. “I had this cocaine dealer who had the best cocaine in the city. I couldn’t get ahold of him for, like, forever. His cocaine was always good. If it wasn’t good he would charge you less for it,” he says. “He was like a responsible practicing cocaine dealer.” About a year later, the dealer turned up at one of Conde’s shows. He was clean and sober, which explained his sudden disappearance. “People who are involved in the drug game or have an insane addiction either end up dead or in recovery,” Conde says. “I was on the road to death. A terrifying darkness overwhelmed me the last couple of months that I was using.” He means that literally, too. His electricity had been out for six months. “I was on candles and I was picking up the WiFi signal from my next-door neighbor and smoking crack. It wasn’t cute at all.” Getting evicted was the tipping point. He disregards the surrounding patrons as he raps a song a cappella. The line, “I’m writing Dear John letters to a mirror,” leaves a haunting impression. Some of the songs were songs written while he was using, some when

he was sober. He feels he can draw from a “bigger vocabulary” sober. “I used to think that I had to be stoned in order to write so that I could have this different perspective. [That’s] not necessarily true. It’s just that you’re stoned, man.” The title of his EP is *Twisted Kite Strings*. It’s the story of his journey, feeling like he’s never been able to be “like, off the ground. C’mon kite. C’mon music career. C’mon sobriety. Whatever it is, it’s never been able to stay up there,” he says. Focused on his recovery, Conde says he isn’t ready for a relationship yet. His spiritual guide suggested he wait a year before he jumped back into the dating pool, but gave him permission to do whatever he wanted to do. “But my whole life I’ve been doing what I want and it’s kind of led me into some dark places,” Conde admits. Two years ago, he was in a six-month relationship with a well-known local boylesquer. “So that’s, like, six years in gay?” he quips. “I don’t think I was honest with him about how much partying I really had done.” He feels freer than ever now: being authentic in his life and on stage has brought him peace and serenity. Serenity, however, does come with a price tag. “Serenity costs sacrificing the personal ideologies that you’re married to,” he says. “It takes some discomfort to be able to see it.” “I think a lot of us are in denial of the things that we are doing that are harmful to ourselves,” he says. “I was a Christian for a long time and I believed that I couldn’t be gay. It stifled everything! I was trying to follow the Lord and live this spiritual life, not necessarily a religious life, but a spiritual life. But I couldn’t be gay. ‘But this is me!’ I thought.” He says he’s more spiritual now than he aspired to be when he was younger because his “theology is broader. It’s led me not to put God in a box.” Historically, hip-hop and LGBT culture are two tribes that aren’t often given an opportunity to coexist. Conde has no qualms about bending those rules. He isn’t familiar with the gay rappers of a decade ago, but he knows more recent artists like Big Momma, whose work he finds “very sexual. I think [his songs] are awesome but I’m like, ‘OK, I get it. We’re gay. I feel there’s so much more to us than just sex. The sexual generation? That’s done. We’ve done it. We’ve been out of it,’” he says. Who do we owe thanks to now that the LGBT community is being mainstreamed and quinceañeras are hiring drag queens for entertainment? I ask. “ACI? Just kidding. Thank you to Generation X. The people who are 10 to 15 years older than me,” he says. “I just remember watching videos from the AIDS blanket. I’m like, ‘How did this happen?!’” Did you just call it the AIDS blanket? I ask. “You know what I mean.” **0**