

ALBUMS

Quaranta

Danny Brown

2023



6.5

By Mehan Jayasuriya

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LABEL: Warp

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With an uncharacteristically somber tone, the Detroit rapper's sixth album is his most introspective and confessional work to date.

As an artist in a genre where emerging stars are rarely old enough to drive, let alone drink, Danny Brown has always seemed self-conscious about his age. His breakout mixtape, XXX, was titled in part to reference his age at the time. His next album title was even less subtle. *Quaranta*—“40” in Italian but also, a near-homonym for “quarantine”—arrives as

Brown enters his fourth decade, and he's called it a "spiritual sequel to XXX." That's a bit misleading though, because *Quaranta* is a very different record. Across a number of solemn, lyric-heavy tracks, Brown catalogs his regrets and owns up to his personal failings. If XXX felt like a never-ending carousel of sex and drugs, *Quaranta* feels more like sitting in a therapist's office processing the fallout from a decade of rockstar living.

The last few years have given Brown a lot to unpack. A lifelong Detroit native, he relocated to Austin, Texas following a divorce; earlier this year he got sober after a stint in rehab. He wrote *Quaranta* during the initial wave of COVID lockdown and it sounds like it. Brown's stance is isolated and reflective; he raps deliberately over sparse beats, his delivery more confessional than flamboyant. Where his previous albums approached similar topics (*Old*, in particular, attempted to reconcile Brown's hedonistic lifestyle and traumatic childhood), the music and rapping were far more dynamic. On *Quaranta*, Brown's acrobatic flows, ear for oddball beats, and dark sense of humor are in short supply.

Brown has always been equal parts traditionalist and insurgent. While he led a wave of internet-fluent rappers who crossed over into indie and EDM, his mastery of storytelling and technique betrayed his love of '90s hip-hop. He leaned into those sounds on 2019's *unknowhatimsayin*¿, which was executive-produced by Q-Tip, and goes further on *Quaranta*, often dropping the nasal honk and frantic delivery in favor of a lower register and slower tempos. He's never sounded more distant from the current wave of psychedelic rap he influenced, a fact that's equally evident in his lyrics. The subject matter here is heavy and personal, even by Danny Brown standards—few rappers have aired out this sort of dirty laundry on record. "Down Wit It" delves into heartbreak and addiction ("Now it's all over, can't stay sober/Deep in my depression, hoping I can get over") while "Quaranta" undercuts Brown's image with a grim dose of reality: "Lost everything in pursuit of my dream/Pushed everyone away, now no one here but me."

It's commendable that Brown would rather make an album about what he's going through than cater to what his audience expects—as he told us a decade ago, he has no intention of rapping about youthful exploits for the rest of his life. That said, *Quaranta* often fails to

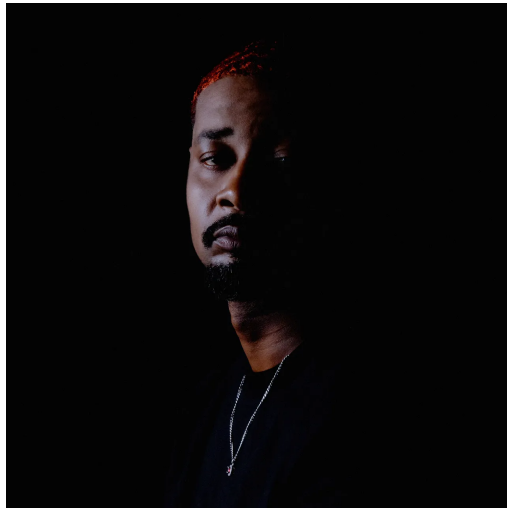
present these topics in compelling ways. On the more diaristic songs, the narratives aren't as vivid, the rapping isn't as nimble, and the songs lack momentum. It's telling that on "Celibate," the otherwise sedate MIKE easily scores the album's best verse by injecting some verve into a song that's otherwise inert. Brown attempts to widen his focus on "Jenn's Terrific Vacation," which enlists Kassa Overall for a drum-fill-heavy, Goodie Mob-referencing song about gentrification in Detroit. But the observations feel surface-level and pat (someone, *please* write a song about gentrification without mentioning Whole Foods). The subject matter lands just outside of Brown's wheelhouse, and despite rapping in the first-person, he struggles to bring his usual color to the storytelling.

Not everything on *Quaranta* feels like a break from the past—there are a few glimpses of Brown's old charisma. The proggy, Alchemist-produced lead single "Tantor" falls into a familiar trap: In picking something challenging to rap over, Brown ends up with a beat that feels clunky. Still, he manages to straddle the line, as he often has, between woke and gleefully ignorant ("It's that Black Lives Matter, still sniff cocaine"). The beat for "Y.B.P" is a bit goofy and brings to mind early Insane Clown Posse but, as Brown knows well, ICP is a Detroit institution. The song is glowing with the personality and local color that's missing from many of these songs (Bruiser Wolf hilariously sums up the state of Michigan thusly: "It's hard to fit in the murder mitten like O.J.'s glove"). "Dark Sword Angel" is *Quaranta*'s best song and the only track that could easily slot into a noisy, industrial album like Atrocity Exhibition. Over a squelchy instrumental buttressed by live drums, Brown drops the sort of filthy punchlines he's long been known for ("Tried to put my finger in her like a rotary phone/If I take her for a spin, she will never call home"). The song provides a much-needed jolt of energy and humor to an album that's lacking in both.

On *Quaranta*, Danny Brown seems to be questioning his choices while plotting a path forward. And though it's more compelling in theory than in practice, its meditative tone is a bold move coming from an artist known for giddy hedonism. Whether spending \$70,000 on samples, dropping a heater with Purity Ring, or touring with Kitty, Brown has never been one to make safe choices and few rappers with his stellar track record would

throw a curveball like this a decade into their career. There are a few hints that this experimentation might yet bear fruit, like the serene closing track, “Bass Jam,” where he sounds open-hearted and nostalgic. But those bright spots aren’t enough to lift the album out of its dour funk. Growth can be awkward, and for better or worse, *Quaranta* feels like an apt reflection of this process. Given how few rappers are given the opportunity to age gracefully, it still feels like a privilege to hear him work through it.

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