

THE DEEP END

OVER THE PAST FEW YEARS, JUSTIN BIEBER STRUGGLED TO KEEP HIS HEAD ABOVE WATER AS HE DEALT WITH THE TRANSITION FROM TEEN POP STAR TO INDEPENDENT ADULT. NOW, WITH REALIGNED PRIORITIES AND A RENEWED FOCUS, THE MOST FAMOUS MUSICIAN IN THE WORLD IS FINALLY COMING UP FOR

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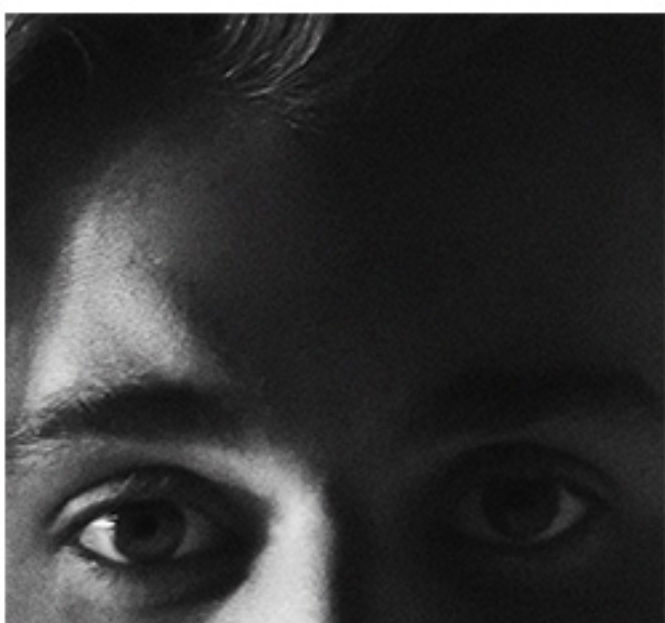
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It's just past noon on a cloudy Thursday at the swanky Montage Beverly Hills hotel when a brawny man wearing a tight black T-shirt, black jeans, and shiny boots storms into a private poolside cabana and thrusts his card into my hand. "I'm Justin's security, who are you?" he barks. After I explain to "Sarge" that I'm here from COMPLEX to interview Justin (last name: Bieber), he mellows. Justin, it turns out, is running late—he's still recovering from the removal of all four wisdom teeth, one of which he'd later tell me was infected.

Three years ago, Justin Bieber appeared on the cover of COMPLEX as a fresh-faced 18-year-old. At the time, he was a relatively unblemished teen pop idol—so of course we photographed him in a boxing ring, bloodied and bruised (the blood was fake; the steak he held against his face was not). In the ensuing years, Bieber took his share of lumps: a bad breakup, multiple run-ins with the law, a night in jail for DUI and drag racing, and some head-scratching antics caught on camera, including an infamously belligerent deposition and peeing into a mop bucket. Depending on who you ask, Bieber had either gone full "bad boy" or was simply dealing with the growing pains associated with being a handsome, fabulously wealthy post-adolescent.

Yet Bieber's legion of fans (72 million Facebook friends and counting) stuck with him. And now he's gaining a new audience: This year he has a pair of top 10 hits (the Diplo-Skrillex collab "Where Are Ü Now" and "What Do You Mean," his first-ever Billboard No. 1); he's also been working with Kanye West and Rick Rubin on his first proper album in three years. Besides being in recording mode, he has made sporadic image-softening plays that included a Comedy Central roast, a couple of self-aware Ellen appearances, and a feel-good Carpool Karaoke video with James Corden, and a VMA performance that ended in tears. But after a couple false starts, has Justin really turned the corner?

When Bieber finally shows up to the interview, draped in throwback Chicago Bulls shorts and speckled Yeezy Boost 350s, the difference between now and three years ago is immediately evident. He's not the same kid who was playing Temple Run and doodling backstage when we first met in 2012. Bieber now makes a point of looking you in the eye when he's speaking, and one thing is clear: He's in the mood to talk. While he picks apart his salmon across the table, he doesn't mince words as he talks about moving past a rough patch and his new support system of one.



"LOVE IS NOT A FEELING.
LOVE IS A CHOICE."

A lot of people who work with you, including Skrillex, say that you're hypercompetitive. Have you always been like that? Has it gotten even crazier as you've gotten older?

In different ways. I care about different things now. I think I was competitive in a different way, where I just kind of focused on probably some wrong things, and now I'm just focused on winning and doing the best I can.

Skrillex also says you're good at everything. I heard you showed up to a charity ping-pong event and waxed Action Bronson.

Growing up, I literally got my identity through being good at stuff. I always wanted to be the best because I felt like that's how I got my self-worth. It actually did me good in the long run because now I can go skateboard and have fun. I was the only person in my school who was skateboarding and on the basketball team.

I think that also got me in trouble when I was young, because people don't like when people are good at stuff. They just hate on it, and that has a lot to do with my hate in general. You see a dude who's successful and he's doing what he loves and people don't take too well to that sometimes. I'd probably be the same way if I was in Canada, seeing this kid driving around in all these fancy cars and shit.

With that competitiveness, is it tough for you to stay quiet when you're recording?

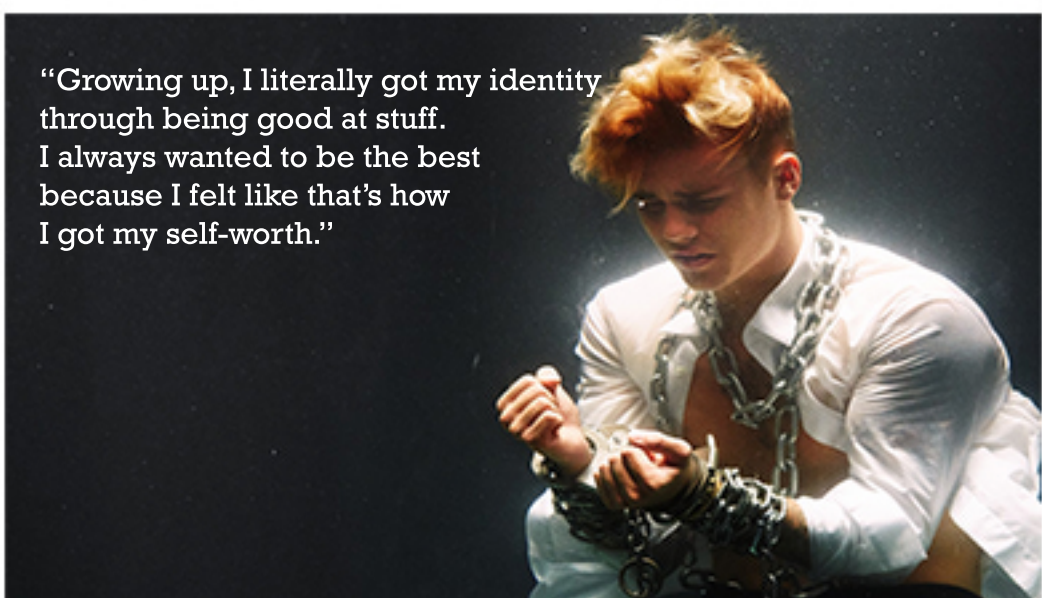
For sure. I'll hear songs on the radio, and I'm not really a fan of what's going on right now in music. I'll hear it and go, "Ugh, why is this being played so much right now?" I have such great music that I want to share with the world.

You've worked with a lot of artists; now you're working with Kanye. How is he different?

It's his creative input. I'll play a song, and he'll be like, "Man this reminds me of like...a blacklight sunset," or something. He'll try to paint these pictures for you. It's not the average way. He doesn't just come in and say, "This sounds good; this sounds bad." He'll be like, "This is this because the world needs this." He comes from a whole different point of view.

You said you scrapped this album previously because it didn't match up with your mindset. What was lacking?

I've done probably three or four albums that I haven't released yet. I've gotten all of these different modes, and try to dive into different ideas, and I finally came up with something that was pretty genius. I have these collaborations with Skrillex and Diplo, like "Where Are U Now" that just took off. This is their first top 10 record. It just shows that we're breaking barriers in the EDM world. I think people have been trying to do it for a while, making dance music, like Usher and all of those people, but I don't think it's been done in the right way.



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What does the 21-year-old Justin Bieber do for fun compared to the 18-year-old Justin Bieber I interviewed three years ago?

Well, I uh...I golf a lot. I wanted to golf today. It's pretty good—I'm not great or anything. I enjoy it. Also, I can drink now. So I have a few drinks every now and then.

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