

On Figuring Myself Out, and Mac Miller

Prem Sylvester

Depression is a fragmenter. Those of us struck by it do not remain whole, but shatter into grains of our former selves, too numerous to pick up.

In 2013, my final year of school, I'd begun to finally find my way out of this bramble of being-but-not-living, after several bruised years of stumbling around. I hadn't been a regular at school in months, and I was hoping to find my way back into life's jog. This was supposed to be the time I picked up my fragments and set the course for what would be, at the very least, my near future. But high school is a confusing time, even for those whose ideas of the self were firmer than mine were.

For a truth is often lost in the vagaries of depression. Piecing together an identity, an image of the self, in the aftermath of your worst days is just as maddening as the depression itself. It's a puzzle. There's many paths to take, with only a few torches to help find your way. But the one that shone the brightest for me—the one that comforted me with its warm glow—was music.

I had a dependable list of names to pick from when I needed rescuing from my waves of sorrow, names that I still turn to today. But there were fewer artists who could help me clear the consequent fog in my mind.

Mac Miller was one such artist—he who helped me hold on to my identity in this unmoored time, through his existential ponderings.

Watching Movies with the Sound Off, Mac's second studio album, remains one of my favourite pieces of his compelling discography. And "I Am Who Am (Killin' Time)," coming in almost exactly halfway through the album, ties together an array of ideas revolving around identity in under 5 minutes. It remains one of my favourite Mac songs, one that soundtracked many of my walks to and from school.

The straightforward appeal of the song is evident—the elegance of the production begins subdued by static, before bursting into a hauntingly beautiful instrumental. Crystalline vocals swirl in the background around light keys and clean drums, culminating in the gorgeous hook ("No earthly vehicle can contain this drive"). Mac Miller's measured flow and enunciation makes for easy listening. "I Am Who Am" is, on all counts, a good song. But its listenability is what drew me into really picking up on what the song was *about*—and that's when it became great.

The core of "I Am Who Am" becomes clear in its opening lines:

*Look, I'm posing a question
How many been empty and holding aggression?
Close to depression
Open your eyes and just focus a second*

Just like that, I was welcome into this journey of quiet resilience.



Mac Miller

"I Am Who Am
(Killin' Time)"

*Watching Movies with
the Sound Off*

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Rostrum Records

I was still a mess at school. I would burst into tears over seemingly small jibes, which only led to more ridicule of my (lack of) manliness, physical appearance, and such. I was finding it hard to reconnect with my friends. I was growing increasingly disillusioned with the idea of a recovery. But here was a man, just a few years older than me, reaching out. And it meant the world.

I learnt to steady myself. In the months to come, "I Am Who Am" turned into a sort of meditative tool for me. A line or two would float into my conscious memory from the recesses of my mind, sometimes the whole song would play in my head. It was magnetic, deliberate in its pace—and I was glad for the contemplative trance it could put me in. Music may not be a cure for life's ills, but it is a soothing balm.

I was still teetering on the edge of the fall, but was realizing that the only way to stay steady was to shape my being as a counterweight to the worst of my depression. The question that stayed at the forefront of my mind in that tumultuous year, then, was the question of who I was to be. Would I ever be free of the constraints of my mental health? Would I have the career I wanted? Would I find love? Did I believe in a god? Was there going to be something more to my life than...this? Was life worth living?

Mac Miller was asking these questions too. Why am I famous? Why am I obsessed with women? Who am I living this life for? Why is the world so cold?

God loves me, what if he does, what does it mean?

What does any of this mean?

I didn't know. I didn't have the exact same questions Mac had—mine were grounded in my own reality—but in the midst of these crises of faith, in a higher power and myself, a singular lyric rang clear in my head:

The mind is like religion, can't agree on who's its savior

The truth was that there were no easy answers to the questions either Mac or I were asking. We could ask these questions for the rest of our lives, and keep finding new answers. And that was okay.

It's a gift, our time to be alive

I spent the remainder of my final year of high school questioning everything. At the end of the year, I was still changing. The fragments of my identity hadn't quite been put together yet, but I'd found the recipe for the glue in Mac's music. His restless quest of exploring the human condition through his music showed me that all we needed to do was keep asking—that our constant evolution of self depended on our curiosity, terrifying as it might be. He showed me that I could find a quiet confidence in my insecurities, my anxieties, my rudderless struggle to be someone. The confidence to just...be.

Mac Miller may just have saved my life. On some of my loneliest days, he showed me that the secret to living—really living—was to confront what I thought was my fate and wrest my essence from it.

I've come a long way since the downs of high school. My mornings, more often than not, begin with me looking forward to living the life I'd shaped for myself.

I was in bed on a hazy Saturday morning in September this year, scrolling down the notifications on my phone, when I saw the headline saying Mac Miller was dead. I spent the rest of the morning weeping.

I did not expect Mac's passing on to hit me as hard as it did. But much like the emotions of his music, the reality of his legacy revealed itself to me with a slightly sad smile, piercing the part of my heart that his music had calmed so often. I was once again that lost teenager from half a decade ago, taking slow walks to the mantra of "Fight to the death, 'til there's nobody left." But my tears now weren't because I was that same depressed kid looking for a way out through his music—they were because I'd learned to dodge my demons, and Mac...maybe he hadn't.

So many questions.

I'm still stitching together the shreds of a life I might easily have lost. I'm often still floundering. I'm still wondering about life. But I know, when I put on "I Am Who Am," that I'll never stop wondering.

That's a promise. To myself, and to Mac.