

MUSIC ARCHIVES

Me and the Devil Blues

by ROBIN ROTHMAN

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More pain in his house than ever, and is that tattoo scary, or what?

PHOTO: CHRISTIAN LANTRY

Life's been a bumpy ride for Everlast. By the time his Celtic working-class rap outfit House of Pain's million-selling 1992 debut spawned the major radio hit "Jump Around," Erik Schrody had already bounced from Ice-T's Rhyme Syndicate to solo flop to full-fledged star. But after the next four years, during which House of Pain's popularity waned under the weight of two less successful follow-ups, Everlast was ready to risk reinvention. So he grabbed an acoustic guitar and struck out on his own. On the day he finished recording the now triple-platinum *Whitey Ford Sings the Blues*, Schrody suffered a massive heart attack that almost took his life. He was 29 years old.

It's understandable, therefore, that his latest, *Eat at Whitey's*, would portray Everlast as a man with death on his mind. Sonically, it follows in *Whitey Ford's* footsteps. But the singles "Black Jesus" and "I Can't Move" just aren't owning the airwaves the way "Ends" and "What It's Like" did. And though it's as good as, if not better than, its predecessor, the album's not bowling people over, either. Maybe its rap-folk hybrid is just too much of the same. Or maybe we just can't identify with the first-person "Black Jesus" like we can the third person of yore. Because maybe this album's greatest strength is exactly what's holding it back: the narrative.

Here we have the honest story of a guy who almost didn't make it and is now trying to sort his proverbial shit out. The tale begins with a cocky, seemingly indestructible "white devil"—a total rock star living a life of excess, testing his limits, and toying with death. In the eerie "I Can't Move," he challenges an inner demon: "Want to get near it, close enough to fear it/close enough to hear it, close enough to say that I looked it in the eye/then it turned away." But it doesn't; it stares him down, tears him down, and leaves him defenseless. Only five tracks in, he's already spinning out of control. Carlos Santana adds hypnotically repetitive, weeping-guitar melodies on "Babylon Feeling" as Everlast rasps: "My heart is broke, my will is gone/Fell in love with a woman named Babylon." Hokey? No more than when he got shot in "Painkillers" last time out; the shit's *real*. More real than that which claims to be, at least. Humbled, beaten down. And he accepts the responsibility.

The guy's low, so naturally he dwells on his poor decisions. When the Brand New Heavies' N'Dea Davenport joins for a soulful duet, Everlast is lamenting the girlfriend he cheated on. Soon the introspection pays off and he concludes that (epiphany!) the things he thought made him happy are the very things that are hurting him ("Heaven and hell are one and the same, boy"). Just when he concedes that "We're All Gonna Die" and begs, "Lord, have mercy on my soul," BAM! God up and gives him another shot. Everlast ends "Graves to Dig" paying tribute to those who stared down their demons but didn't walk away: "It's one for Scott LaRock, two for 'Pac and Big/And three for all the mothers who got graves to dig."

Not to add fuel to the Eminem-versus-Everlast single-begets-single-begets-single dis train, but plagued by image issues, chick problems, and racial hang-ups destined to destroy him, Eminem should step back and actually listen to Whitey before picking up his next gun or (allegedly) set of studio headphones. Everlast, as a white man who has appropriated his fair share of black culture, nonetheless plays it much cooler than Em. Oh, he can be controversial, too—the tough-guy verbal warfare's still there, and referring to himself as a "Black Jesus" won't win him any popularity points, no matter how catchy his picking and how singalongable his "na na na na" chorus is. The big difference is, Everlast crosses racial lines unostentatiously.

See, Eminem just can't figure out whether he wants to be considered the whitest black man in pop or the blackest white man in rap, or both. But Everlast doesn't care either way. He doesn't give a second thought to the paradox inherent in name-checking Run-DMC while Warren Haynes, a Southern jam man, plays slide guitar and Merry "Gimme Shelter" Clayton wails in "Mercy on My Soul." The juxtaposition doesn't come off like a planned social statement because it's not a contradiction; it's simply who Everlast is.

By covering Slick Rick's "Children's Story," with Rahzel from the Roots adding some Doug E. Fresh human beatbox, Everlast isn't just providing a turning point in his white devil's story; he's paying respect to the East Coast old school he grew up on. And when he enlists Clayton, Santana, and Haynes, he's not selling hip-hop out, he's just paying respect to the rock and roll that, well, he grew up on.

Maybe the plot reads like an episode of *Behind the Music*, but there's nothing annoyingly arty or superficially metaphorical here. *Eat at Whitey's* is neither a morbid testament of impending doom nor a sappy spiritual reaffirmation of the Preciousness of Every Moment With Which We're Blessed. It's just the latest dispatch from a man who now knows that the last thing he said could really be the last thing he ever says.

Everlast plays Irving Plaza February 14.

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