

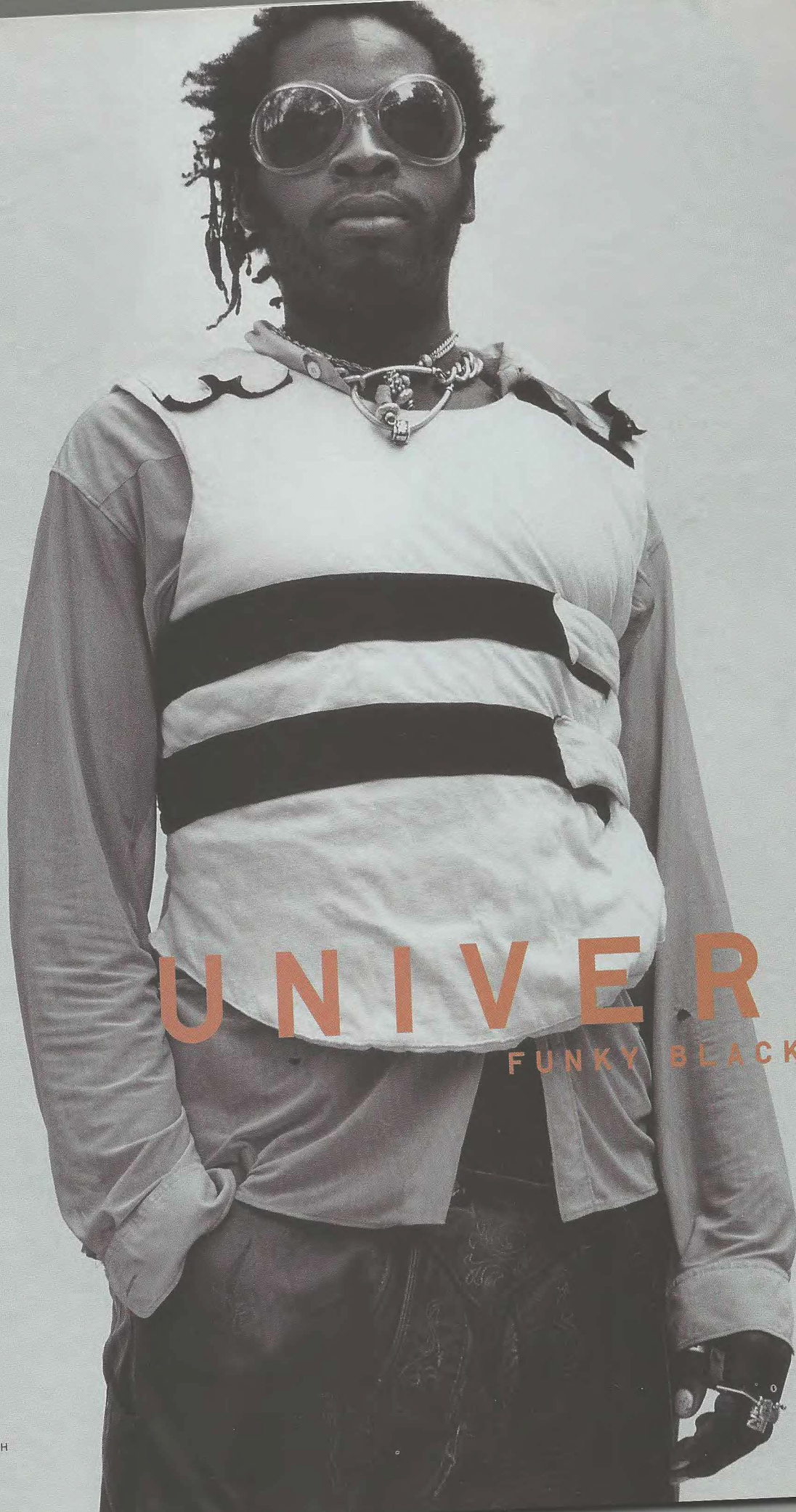
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ANOTHER

THE SECRET LIFE OF

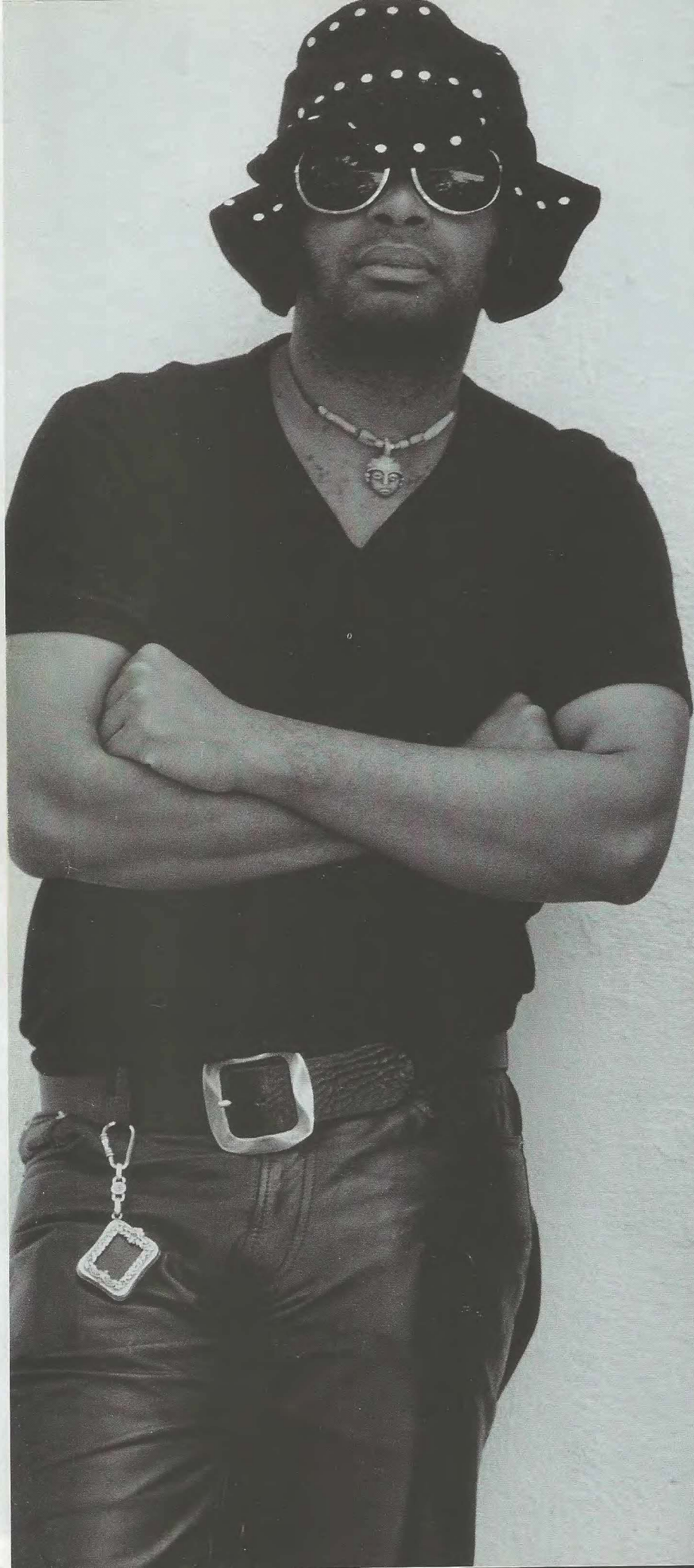
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UNIVERSE

FUNKY BLACK ANGEL



THE FIRST TIME I SAW ONE, HE WAS FLYING.

Jerome had taken me to see a bunch of brothers play downtown, saying they were into Miles Davis *Live Evil* covers—an obvious ruse, but I knew what he was saying, sort of. The gig was at one of those dank underground venues off the Bowery, a rank beer-soaked shitbox hidden in a basement below the kind of café where you might arrange to meet friends from out-of-town for overpriced grilled chicken sandwiches and Hawaiian kettle potato chips, hoping they might pay on an expense account.

Jerome and I were literally the only people in the 250 max capacity venue, and the band sounded nothing like electric Miles. Still, the groove was copasetic and cacophonous, and I was digging it tastefully when it happened. The frontman launched into a mean solo on the soprano sax, and with a pair of goggles on and his windpants flapping as his left leg swung to an invisible beat, he sought out the notes of his ascent until it looked as if... well, no. Well, yes: the last thing I remember thinking was, *Oh shit, this nigga's actually flying.* I started to see them other places after that: posted up at the bar in Ludlow on Monday nights, taking the stage in the back room at Baby Jupiter well past 2am, a gig at CBGB's, all the spots where I started to stretch out and grow as an anonymous newcomer to the sable city. The scene was thankfully difficult to label or categorize. It was much more than a simple race thing, mainly because of the music. Nobody called it jazz or funk or avant anything. I suppose the obvious cultural configuration is a sobriquet frequently applied to Lenny Kravitz and now popularized in the sparkly puff paint of baby tees accentuating the breasts of well-intentioned hip chicks from Billburg to the Bay: Rock Stars... and *Black Rock Stars* at that.

The label works, to a point. They were black, they rocked, they were stars insofar as we want to imagine stars are born, not made. Stars are stars at age nine with the Goody hairbrush-cum-mic in front of the bathroom mirror, and so are they stars 20 years later getting twisted on cough syrup and cheap tequila, walking down Avenue A with three groupies in tow and no record deal to speak of. A record deal does not confirm or convey actual-factual stardom, nor does a lack of one deny it.

On a good night a band rocked out with a vicious intent to devastate aural preconceptions. (On a bad night a set was marked by fiddling with knobs and pedals and furtive glances.) These brothers wilded the fuck out onstage, and when they made it with a tight riff or a stunning solo or devastating vocals they were blacker than your cult-nat touchstones and far more rocked out than an R&B singer wearing a Stones T-shirt in a video on BET.

They played not as if their lives depended on it, but as if yours did.

Moreover, the best and the worst of it came from the same cats. That's why I listened to it and respected it: like Black Rock, I always got to extremes. The middle was a morass of *soi-disant* types and even though Miz

Musician once told me if I didn't like s music I didn't *understand* it, well yee-haw, down as one of the ignorant. Because wh one is good, no one is good. Everyone is b And that gets us no closer to understand human condition, which is one of the rea find ourselves compelled to bring art into in the first place.

The middle: just as in hip-hop, most of the steadily tried to get over with smoldering barely closeted sexual ambivalence or the pursuit of white/Japanese pussy. I suppose part of the life, but to mistake that for mus serves to feed the marathon of mediocrity th marks most our music today.

But the puff paint on the T-shirts is trou would seem *Black Rock Stars* as a trope do explain what happened later, when the city to exact from me a certain tax on its pleasure mysteries, and I began to lose things: my fr my lovers, my job, my money, my natural mind (*nigga please*). The music of the funky angels hovered about me in my lowest mom lifting me up by reminding me of a certain w being, and of the sheer possibility of our colle black existence.

From here it would seem the greatest art come a certain human cost, and in the music I heard a allel narrative to the life and loves I was experienc Playing in front of small crowds, for little to money, at a time when "hip-hop" is used describe everything—our generation, culture a lifestyle; our selves—Black Rock Stars were in something else, and that something opened a do of escape from the deafening reductive steamroll that is North American cultural hegemony.

Amiri Baraka once described himself as "a black nigger in the universe"—"a long breath singer would be dancer, strong from years of fantasy an study." Black Rock Stars are all that, and theirs e

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the music of the inside and the outside, the strains of the heart and the sound of exile from the universe you created.

The music and the brothers—and I should say here, the sisters—who made it helped me understand how far human expression could be taken, made me stop worrying about hip-hop, saved me from walking around in a dashiki in December talking about how to Save The Race. In short, my black funky angels helped make me the asshole I am today. And for that, I am eternally grateful.

