

14/03/2001

It's his Stan

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WILL the real Eminem please stand up? Ever since the edgy, pugnacious rap artiste came into the public eye, he has been swathed in a mix of fierce hero worship and furious condemnation.

Eminem, aka Slim Shady aka Marshall Bruce Mathers III, has even managed to catch the attention of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir who have both spoken out strongly against him.

It's easy to see why.

In his music, violence, misogyny, homophobia - of which the world already has too much - pool together and form a highly destructive concoction.

Add to that a rich stream of cuss-words and the result is a picture of a dangerous, random and confusing world.

Who but someone sunk in depravity could come up with lyrics like "went to gym in eighth grade and raped the women's swim team"?

But then you get Stan, a song about a crazed fan. And against a backdrop of despair and swearing, Eminem emerges as someone who reaches out to a suffering human being, someone, in other words, who gives a damn.

Utterly obsessed with Slim Shady (one of Eminem's personae), Stan is angry and frustrated that the letters he has sent his idol have brought no reply.

Eventually, Slim's answer does come, and in place of the usual frenetic threats, we get:

"You got some issues Stan, I think you need some counselling."

Also, says Slim, "I really think you and your girlfriend need each other or maybe you just need to treat her better." As for Stan's seemingly offhand remarks about suicide:

"But what's this shit you said about you like to cut your wrists too?"

I say that shit just clownin' dogg, c'mon - how f***ed up is you?"

Sceptics say that Stan is merely a disclaimer to the rest of his work, engineered specifically to throw a more respectable light on the artiste.

But there is an undeniable note of sincerity here that makes it hard to dismiss.

Haunting and morbid, dark and rainy, Stan is the disquieting sound of someone crying out - and the crashing, hopeless silence that he gets in return. In keeping with the artiste's hardened outlook, there is no happy ending. Slim's reply arrives late - his "biggest fan", unable to face his hero's seeming indifference, drives himself off the edge of a bridge.

Eminem's latest album, The Marshall Mathers LP, sold more than seven million copies. More recently, the slight, blonde-haired 29-year-old was nominated for four Grammys - he ended up walking off with three, losing out in the Album of the Year category.

Even here in Malaysia, Eminem's popularity is phenomenal, especially among the teen to thirtysomething band.

No doubt, some of this pull can be attributed to his background, much of which took place in the rough, gangster-ridden landscape from which rap music typically springs forth.

Born in Kansas, Eminem and his mother shuttled between several relatives' homes while he was growing up, so that they were rarely in a place for more than a few months at a time. They finally settled down in Detroit, Michigan, when he was 12, where they were the only white family

in a low-income black neighbourhood.

In school, Eminem was regularly attacked, once so viciously that he lay in a coma for five days. He has never met his father, and recently, he was sued by his mother for defamation - for a whopping US\$10 million (RM38 million).

By now, these are all well-known facts, and the artiste's name is linked inextricably to the tragedy of a hard and unforgiving life, a recurring theme in his lyrics.

Certainly, there are more wholesome ways of handling the rotten hand that life may have dealt you. Oprah's childhood was hardly peaches-and-cream, but you don't see her waving chainsaws about on stage - neither, however, do you see her drawing teens like some kind of fiendish Pied Piper.

There are obvious reasons for this: Eminem is a skilled storyteller who dresses his plots - violent though they are - with catchy beats and a nimble gift of rhyme. And naturally, the younger generation loves anything which makes grown-ups gasp - that is an eternal principle.

But besides the twin thrills of beat and shocking your parents, people turn to music for one other reason: to look for affirmation or validation of their emotions. Hence, the love-struck look for sugary ballads and the melancholy dust off their Carpenters' vinyls.

Are there then deeper issues embedded in all the layers of blood, rage and strut in Eminem's world?

It is a question worth examining.

Certainly the most prominent feature of his music is contempt for the world and a willingness to vent aggression on anyone who ... well, just about anyone. He is, after all, the man who wrote a song about killing his wife.

But here and there, amidst the chaos, there are signs of the acute vulnerability we see so clearly in Stan. In Brain Damage: