

KJ-52

“It’s Pronounced Five-Two”

“I don’t want to just be a great MC. I want to create songs that can touch lives. I’ve made an effort to be studied and careful in order to hear my audience’s heartbeat and respond to it. I’m not just motivated by my own instincts anymore; rather, I want to write to my audience.” – KJ-52



KJ-52 is a rare find in today’s Christian hip hop world. A white MC who has risen to prominence in a largely black arena, he is at once a respectful student of the art form and a genuine hip hop innovator, stretching the boundaries of both its sound and shape. And regardless of where he’s working—from churches and huge Christian festivals like Festival Con Dios 2003 to the heart of the hip hop club scene, KJ can hold his own, with ease, against the best rappers in the business. Indeed, there’s nothing that smacks of the poseur in KJ; rather, everything about his work screams “the real deal.”

This credibility has served to open doors for KJ-52—to media, to his peers and to his fans—and KJ has met this opportunity with purpose. This sense of mission, more than anything else, is what sets KJ apart from the pack, driving his commitment to both grow as an artist and to use that art to communicate something of the good news of Christ’s gospel to his audience.

This passion for great art and true ministry is aptly displayed in KJ-52’s new release *It’s Pronounced Five-Two*, a cutting-edge 16-song set that perfectly captures the range that this extraordinary MC brings to his music. From wildly self-effacing humor and celebrations of forgiveness to deadly serious reflections on subjects like divorce and suicide, KJ has found both a way to make his music at once unquestionably accessible while allowing it to offer profound insights into life and, most importantly, faith. This combination positions *It’s Pronounced Five-Two* to become among the most important—and biggest selling—hip hop releases of the year.

Perhaps KJ’s strongest asset, apart from the obvious compassion for his audience that drives his music, is the absolute respect (and delight) he brings to the hip hop form. KJ is clearly a student of the genre who has found a way to integrate the best of its various roots, while crafting something that is genuinely groundbreaking. There’s a near reverence in KJ when he talks about his place as a white rapper in the hip hop pantheon.

“Hip hop is a black house,” he explains, “and I’m a guest in it. It’s more than just an art form, it’s a culture, and I’m humbled to get to be a part of it.”

It’s Pronounced Five-Two is reflective not only of KJ’s respect for the form, but also his significant maturation as a practitioner of it. The song structures on this new disc suggest a growing respect for the melodic and musical, wrapping KJ’s sharp rhymes around eminently memorable (and frequently hummable) hooks and over an infectious collection of beats. Co-produced with former Gotee Brother Todd Collins, some of the disc’s tracks, like the smoothly memorable and affably nostalgic “Back In The Day,” slide into a slow simmering groove that smack of late summer afternoons by the grill, while others—like the effervescent and playful “Check Yourself” and riotous “Rock On” (with Rob Beckley, Pillar frontman)—approach a more manic flow, drawing on the sharp, staccato rhythms of both the cutting edges of hip hop and rock culture and the playful good humor of some of rap’s early radio breakthroughs (which calls to mind both early Beastie Boys and Will Smith’s work, as well as more recent work by bands like Linkin Park and, yes, Eminem). “Pick Yourself Up,” (with Donnie Lewis) meanwhile, is a real world song of encouragement to listeners who in one way or another have fallen off the straight and narrow, reminding KJ’s audience of the ancient biblical truth that “his mercies endureth forever”—but in a far more modern cadence akin to the sonic smoothness of the

Nelly/Kelly Rowlands duet. But however radio-friendly these tracks might be, there is also enough “street cred” on It’s Pronounced Five-Two to keep the hard core purists convinced of the disc’s authenticity.

This growing thoughtfulness—and selflessness—has led KJ to a lyrical approach that is always sophisticated, at times whimsical, and decidedly kind-hearted, reflecting an approach to writing that is clearly motivated by his interactions with his growing fan base. While reluctant to impose a specific “agenda” on his artistic expressions, it is clear that KJ’s intent is always to encourage, edify and challenge. In short, KJ has come to understand that an artist’s first goal is to serve—both his music and his audience.

This commitment manifests itself throughout this new release, disarming at first with its whimsy, and then, just as effectively, in its penetrating insight.

“I use humor as a means to open the audience up to the more intense things in some of my songs. After all, 70 minutes of hard core heavy hitting on big-time issues is tough to take, at a show or on disc. By interjecting levity into the mix—literally and figuratively—I give us all a chance to take a deep breath. It makes the hip hop experience much more authentic, ultimately, in the same way that not blinking at the rougher edges of our culture does. Mind you, you don’t have to scratch very deeply, even in the whimsical songs, to find deeply serious subject matter.”

It’s inevitable, too, that a young, supremely talented rapper in 2003 who happens to be white—like KJ-52—will be compared to that other white rapper. The towering commercial and artistic achievements of Eminem are not to be sneezed at, after all. And for an artist like KJ, who is aspiring to the same level of artist excellence that Em has achieved—but from a markedly different point of view—the comparisons certainly could grow tiresome. And they did bother KJ for a time, but he’s come to understand that they represent a kind of high praise for the Florida-based MC.

The comparisons have served as fertile ground for KJ’s art as well, forcing him to think about the ways he wants to emulate Eminem and the ways he wants to be very different. The first fruits of that reflection came with “Dear Slim” from last year’s Collaborations—a track that produced a veritable frenzy of media interest, including a well-publicized, if one-sided, bit of exposure on MTV’s Total Request Live. The song is followed on It’s Pronounced Five-Two by “Dear Slim Part Two, which continues KJ’s one-sided dialogue with Slim (Em has yet to respond to KJ’s songs).

*but a lot of people they just seem to get the song confused
see what I say to you I know it might even sound funny
but I never came at you just to paint you as the enemy
it wasn't about hating you or starting some controversy
it wasn't about blaming you or trying to make some money
I don't claim to know everything that you've experienced
Man I don't even know if you'll even ever be hearing this
but I said it once and I still hold to this
is that a life without Christ is still a life that is never fixed*

“The problem was,” says KJ, “that people understood ‘Dear Slim’ as a big diss on him, when that wasn’t my intent at all. It was really a reflection on the responsibility of the artist, and my heart for Em, my desire that the pain and confusion in his life—which he expresses in his music—might find their answer in a relationship with Christ, and that he express that to his audience instead of just giving them back that same anguish and confusion.”

In a world that is largely ego-driven, KJ-52 is a rapper consumed by compassion for his audience. It is this commitment to being an agent of grace in the midst of a decidedly decadent and unyielding culture—that marks It’s Pronounced Five-Two as a work of extraordinary import.