

On creating your own worlds



Rapper and producer Kool Keith on persona, avoiding stagnation, focusing on the writing itself, and using sci-fi as a way to escape the everyday.

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As told to J Bennett, 2932 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Production](#), [Focus](#), [Process](#), [Collaboration](#).

Your new collaboration with Thetan, *Space Goretex*, is the first time you've included your three main personas—Dr. Doom, Dr. Octagon and Black Elvis—on one album. Why did you create those characters to begin with?

I was working on a lot of albums at the same time, so I had to break up my creativity in other ways. I had so much backed-up content that I had to create another person to put out some of these albums. I write a lot and I record a lot, so when somebody calls me for a project, I've got a lot of stuff written in the lane of what they have. A lot of people don't understand that not everyone is structured around making songs just for an album. I do that, too, but I got a lot of content so I try to get stuff out anyway I can. You only live one time, but a lot of people want you to save records and songs. For what? I don't have time to save songs. I just had to create other people so I can do these projects. People might think that's weird, but I'm not weird. I had to make other artists within myself.

When you're doing a song in character, how does that affect the process? Do you have a different mindset for each one?

Not really. It's like a movie. Stephen King wrote *Children of the Corn*, he wrote *Christine*; he wrote that one about a truck chasing somebody on the highway. When I did Octagon, people got hooked on the stuff so much, but I do other movies. I didn't want people to get stuck on all the projects—I just like people to know that I write different things.

You're known for your sci-fi themes. Where does that come from?

I grew up watching different shows—*Batman*, *Lost in Space*, *Buck Rogers*. I looked at *Fantastic Four* comics and all that kind of stuff—Dr. Octopus and Spider-Man. So you could live urban and still go buy comic books and have a fantasy but you're still in the Bronx. It's more than just urban lifestyle, people drinking Hennessy and throwing cookouts and everybody you walk by is smoking a blunt with junkies nodding on the floor. It's just escape for me. But in people's minds, it's the opposite: They think I'm in outer space or something. I'm the George Jetson of rap. But I'm in the streets, the hoods, when I write. I write sci-fi things that drive me away from normal daily life. My life is real, but my mind is surreal.

That's a great way to put it.

I'm dis-attached from reality on my own terms. If I wrote about half of the stuff I see, people would just be scared. I don't write it down; I don't have to put it down. I can write the songs about the urine in the elevators, the drug selling, and the gunshots and yellow tape and everybody with coronavirus masks on, the check cashing place and the welfare people and junkies in the street taking a shot of heroin. But I don't have to do that. I see it so much. It's in my body.

Your own reality—the stuff you rap about—is more enjoyable for you than your surroundings.

Yeah, you could say that. It's another world. It's an escape. My mind is somewhere else, other than my body. My body is in the inner city, walking by White Castle or a gangbanger or the elevators. My mind is out in space. My real life is the opposite of what my mind is. So that's why when I see everybody trying to do hardcore records like everybody all up in the streets, it's funny to me. I'm like, "You're not from the streets. You're living in a nicer area." But I could be from Kingston, Jamaica, and still write some Marvel Comics shit.

You're incredibly prolific—you've put out something like 40 albums in the last 25 years. Where does that drive come from?

I remember I said one day, "I'm going to write myself with a lot of money"—which I did. I wrote myself to California; I wrote myself to Hollywood. I wrote myself to everything I bought—clothes; I wrote myself to my Rolex, my apartments, to anything materialistic. Anything I own and possess I wrote to it, whereas other people maybe had other alternatives. They might have had to do another field or occupation. They might have had to be a movie person mixed with it; they had to do sitcoms and all that. They got known from some controversial thing or they was in a shootout that they wasn't in, or whatever. They had to be in an incident that caused the record to sell. Their career took off because they had sex with somebody. Some people had to do some things that probably they didn't want to do. Me, I didn't have none of that. I did it with pure, 100 percent writing. The writing job was pure, whereas a lot of these artists, they were never 100 percent. They were like orange juice with 30 percent water in it.

One of the things I've always loved about your style is that you're not afraid to be funny. Most rappers aren't funny—at least not on purpose. Why is it important for you to include humor in your work?

To me, rap don't have to be so serious. It's like everybody raps serious. People took it too far—they'd come into places to judge rap, to fold their arms, to look how serious the bars are, and everybody had to stand around in different poses and hold their head down to make sure word-for-word was so serious. It just took out the fun. As I got older I started learning that making fun records was more relaxing.

Right now the girls are more entertaining than the guys because the guys have been stuck on a concept for the longest time. Guys have to be pushing weight, taking Xans, pills—it's the same thing. Some of these guys have never matured. Yo, do something different. You've been doing the same thing for seven albums. Surprise me with a slow jam or something. A lot of these guys are scared to step out the box. The girls are talking more high-definition—it's serious but it's still funny. The guys are just trying to make 'antioxidant' and 'apocalypse' rhyme for bars and bars. All that stuff is tired to me because I've been through those times of the lyrical proving and stuff.

That's what made me probably a different artist too, because sometimes I step out my genre again. People get locked into Octagon and I'll go change. They don't understand that. But I'm not here to stay in one thing too long. Some people, they'll do a gangster album for the rest of their life. Some people will rap fast, like 100 miles an hour for the rest of their life. I can't do it all the time. I can't take 'antioxidant' and just rhyme with that shit every hour. There's other words to use, you know?

You've collaborated with many different types of artists over the years. What do you like about the process of working with others versus working solo?

Well, it's definitely not the money in collabs. Sometimes it's me just wanting to do something different. But it's a catch-22. Some people will pay you a lot to do something easy, and some people will pay less to do something harder, but it's been the way of my life. There's people that will let you be free and do what you like to do. You can do a track with a person and they just say, "Yo, do what you do, I don't care. I don't give a fuck. I'm rapping about Pizza Hut on my version and you can rap about the fucking garbage truck. I like that." Then you got some people that want to be more precision. They got to be like, "Okay, this album is about a pit bull—we're going to talk about his ass, tail, legs, and his head, the wrinkles on his body, or whatever. The dog, we got to talk about him for the whole record." It's all cool. It's the point of view that you want to do it and you love

it—the dedication.

You started making your own beats years ago. Was that just a matter of becoming self-sufficient?

I got tired of begging people for beats, and I learned a lot about beats when I got my deals. The music industry is very phony because when you don't have a deal, a lot of producers be looking at you like, "Well, I don't know. I ain't giving you beats. Are you signed with somebody? You got a deal, you got a situation?" It's like you can see people are like, "Okay, this is weird." I had to beg them for beats and then everybody is home with their girl or like, "I got this girl coming over so you got to wait." You got your paper and pad; you're ready to write but you're begging people for beats.

So one day I just went in the studio and I was like, "Fuck it, I'ma just touch the keyboards and Pro Tools and see how it works." And I started programming beats on the keyboard, just the kicks and snares and just looping it, and then after that I said, "Oh shit, this is easy." I started putting my bass lines on top and that was it. Plus sometimes the producer don't have the intensity to match what I'm writing. I'll be like, "I want this to sound hard" or "I want this to sound like a love record, like a pimp record" or "I want this one to sound like a porn star record." But people never usually had a lot of beats that would match my lyric content. My content sounded more wilder.

A lot of rappers, they have dope rhymes and stuff, but they didn't have the beats to really make it sound good. It should be like a soundtrack, like when James Brown did *Black Caesar* or when Curtis Mayfield did *Super Fly*. The soundtrack matched the movie so well. Now you got movies, the soundtrack don't match. These guys now, they do a scene—a shark is coming, but that shit be playing some elevator music or something. It don't even match the movie screen. So I wanted my beats to match the lyrics.

What else do you look for in a beat?

I'm a funk person. I grew up listening to Slave and Con Funk Shun and Black Ivory and Heatwave and the Ohio Players. That was the real deal, the undisputed truth. Slave was my inspiration to really make music. I never was a jazz collecting guy at all, but I think a lot of people tend to put me in that circle because I guess they feel like, "Oh, he's an outcast guy." But I never was. I grew up listening to the funk bands—anything that had weird bass lines, like Midnight Star. So the music rubbed off and I made *Spankmaster* and all that stuff. I guess people got mad at me because I wasn't doing breaks and grooves or something. But Keith didn't come from blowing dust off a record.

You started out as a dancer. How do you think dancing prepared you for your career as a rapper and performing in front of an audience?

Yeah, yeah—I was dancing to funk records. That's what made me. Dancing made me feel the rhythm first. I rap to the beats like I dance. The dance is me—like even off beat. I appreciate the style that I had back in the days, but people would laugh. Look at Blueface—he has the style like he's just saying what he want and it's just sliding across the track. *Sliding*. What I like about him, he did it in his own way. It's not all strategic and serious. Let the words just slide. These guys trying to hit every word, you didn't have to do all that. You can just slip and slide on the beat. Not everybody can do that, and that's the point: Not everybody can do it.

So yeah, I was dancing to "Joystick" [by the Dazz Band] and Midnight Star, The Deele and all that. I wasn't into Ron Carter. Respect to Miles Davis and them, but I was never into that stuff. That wasn't me. They had their own lane—I'm not going to follow it. And that's another thing, too—you look up to people, but I don't want to base myself on somebody. I wanted my own lane. I didn't go try to be the Ohio Players. I was inspired by Slave and Kool & The Gang, but I never wanted to be them. Some of these guys want to loop a whole Parliament-Funkadelic album, but they want to be credited like an individual great producer and person. I'm not going to do that. That's why I did Black Elvis and stuff. I wanted to be my own guy. I didn't want to sample all they stuff.

Not following the crowd freed you up to do your own thing, I'd imagine.

Yeah, it's freedom. You don't have to be all strategically thinking. There was never no law books in rap. The people that took over rap or tried to so-called "run it," they tried to make these laws that don't exist. There's no rules that say what beats you can rap on. There's no rules to say how you should rhyme, how your flow should be. We ended up getting a lot of critics that paid attention to stuff that didn't make no sense. And that made people start getting with the regular, the normal, "Who's the best rapper?" But the same normal rappers is always considered the best rappers. The same top five is the same top five. It got continuous and repetitious. You got those people now that judge rap and put laws on it, but it never was a book written. Ain't no law in rap.

What kinds of things have you done to consciously break from the norm?

I get on all kinds of beats. There's so much new music out there that it's just too much for the average antique person. It's like when the new Dodge Magnum with the magnifying sunroof come out, they can't look at it. They still riding in the old shit. So they're mad—it's the same with music, with beats. The beats are too new and they can't adjust and get on them. It's like you sitting in the new Bugatti but you don't know shit about it. You don't know how to turn it on; you don't know how to roll the windows down. You so used to driving that 1991 Buick. You on some '91 Corolla beats. These motherfuckers don't wanna adjust to the new shit, so they get mad and say, "That's not the real shit." That is the real shit. You pull your '91 car up to the 2021 shit and it's parked right next to you. But the old cats is mad because they can't decipher it.

So it's about staying open-minded.

Me, I was already advanced anyway so it was easy for me to transfer over to learn the new shit. I listen to every artist from old to new. I don't go, "I'm going to only listen to these guys because they was in my bracket only." I listen to the new motherfuckers, too, because you can learn from a new person just like you could learn from an old person. You could learn something from Nelly and you can also learn something from Young Thug or something—a flow, you could learn a cadence. You can learn anything. It's both ways.

Do you think that's why you've been able to create for so long at such a high level? Or is it something else?

I just stay recording. It keeps me youthful. Some people get stuck in the normal shit, you know? Somebody in they family is like, "Yo, it's time for you to quit. You gotta cut the grass, feed the dogs and get fat. Throw barbecue ribs on the grill and get out of shape and let your hair grow all crazy and gray." That's the thing I try to avoid. They want you to let yourself go and be like, "Yeah, I used to rap," and you got a big greasy hamburger in your hand and a white t-shirt with mustard all on it and talking about, "I'm a legend." That's why I've avoided that shit for so many years. Most of these guys wanna have a family reunion and talk about what they used to do and how they *used* to do it and how things *used* to be ... but it's about what you're doing now. That's what I'm about.

Essential Kool Keith:

1. *Black Elvis / Lost In Space* (as Kool Keith)
2. *First Come, First Served* (as Dr. Dooom)
3. *Critical Beatdown* (with Ultramagnetic MCs)
4. *Sex Style* (as Kool Keith)
5. *Dr. Octagonecologyst* (as Dr. Octagon)

Name

Kool Keith

Vocation

Rapper and producer

□

courtesy Kool Keith

