



Lupe Fiasco's The Cool

Hip-hop music, once a platform for creative expression and friendly competition, has, sadly, become a popularity contest. With record sales down and ringtone dollars up, rookies searching for that “one big hit” seem solely concerned with being deemed “cool.” Lyrics have side-stepped, giving way to dance-instructing “rappers” more concerned with sparking the new “Macarena” than being hailed as an MC.

On the outside looking in at such followers is Lupe Fiasco. Rather than conform to music industry standards, Fiasco (born Wasalu Muhammad Jaco) has trail-blazed his own path to critical acclaim. Possessing head-spinning wordplay and a topical range more akin to the underground than the mainstream, the 25-year-old lyricist has proven that talent can still make waves in the rap game.

Born and raised in the seedy, confrontational West side of Chicago, Illinois, Fiasco grew up like the regular urban survivor. What wasn't common, however, was the means by which he carried himself. Comic books and literature of all genres cluttered his bedroom floor, and a skateboard replaced your typical drop-top Cadillac. Influenced by the Californian gangsta rap of artists such as Spice 1 and Ice Cube, Fiasco gradually grew leery of such negative messages, gravitating toward the dazzling lyricism of the likes of Nas and Jay-Z.

In 2004, Fiasco signed with Atlantic Records – even launching his own company, 1st & 15th Entertainment – and began recording his debut, *Lupe Fiasco's Food & Liquor*. Fiasco's first major look came on fellow Chi-town native Kanye West's hit single, “Touch The Sky,” where Fiasco delivered a show-stopping verse. The buzz gained from that song transitioned the gumshoe rapper into his first official solo single, the skateboard-meets-rap gem “Kick Push.” Inspired by his own quirky hobby, Fiasco delivered a metaphorical tale of uplift through the eyes of a thrashing, four-small-wheel riding skater boy.

Released to extensive critical lauding and media embrace in September of 2006, *Lupe Fiasco's Food & Liquor* (executive produced by good friend, and one-time mentor, Jay-Z) set the stage for a career that promises longevity. As a result, Lupe landed a remarkable three Grammy nominations – including Best Rap Album, and Best Rap Solo Performance and Best Rap Song for “Kick Push.”

Now, ready to capitalize on such promise, Fiasco has returned with his second offering, *Lupe Fiasco's The Cool*. A largely conceptual tour-de-force, the album's title is inspired by a standout track from Fiasco's debut, a hustler-turned-zombie epic also called "The Cool." This time around, Fiasco introduces three new characters – Michael Young History (The Cool before his death), The Game (a male personification of a hustler's damaging influences), and The Streets (a female embodiment of an urban area's corrupt allure).

The potent sense of thematic execution comes across perfectly on "The Coolest," a highlight of *Lupe Fiasco's The Cool* that serves as a prelude to the earlier track, "The Cool." Detailing Michael Young History's fall from glory to tragedy at the hands of his lover, The Streets, Fiasco employs his unique brand of imagery: "If the rain stops and everything's dry / She would cry so I could drink the tears from her eye."

Elsewhere, Fiasco strays away from his characters to comment on his own rise to fame, an issue that clearly causes discomfort. Look no further than the first single, "Superstar," produced by Fiasco's closest collaborator, Soundtrakk, and beaming with poignant unease: "A fresh, cool young Lu / Trying to cash his microphone check, 2, 1, 2 / Wanna believe my own hype, but it's too untrue / The world brought me to my knees, what have you brung you?"

Primarily produced by Soundtrakk, and also featuring contributions from a diverse array of atypical instrumentalists (including Fall Out Boy's Patrick Stump), *Lupe Fiasco's The Cool* is evidence that Fiasco is anything but average. Rather than follow up a monumental '06 year – capped by his three Grammy nods, four BET Hip Hop Award nominations, and recognition as *GQ*'s "Breakout Man of the Year," amongst other accolades – with an obvious attempt to further crossover, the young wordsmith has crafted a dense, dark, and atmospheric examination of life's pleasures. Whether negative or positive, what people consider to be "cool" ultimately dominates their every move, and Fiasco is completely aware of this.

In hip-hop's popularity contest, Lupe Fiasco is the observer, a thinking man brave enough to dictate the acute thoughts that his peers ignore. Now, *that* is cool.

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