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What's Taking Dr. Dre So Long With His New Album?

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The psychology of perfectionism may explain why he and other musicians struggle for years to release new material



AP Images

In April 2010, Dr. Dre traded in his [White Sox](#) cap for a Red Sox jersey during a public appearance at Fenway Park before the MLB season opening game. The reclusive hip-hop icon's normally stoic grimace turned to a childlike grin as he took [batting practice](#), participating in the spectacle in the name of promoting the "Red Sox Edition" of his Beats By Dr. Dre headphones, and not—as many fans had hoped—

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his decade-or-so-in-the-making third record, *Detox*.

At a press conference during the event, Dre finally did mete out a couple of [details](#) about the project—that its lead single, "Under Pressure" featuring Jay-Z, could be released in two weeks, and that the entire album would "definitely" drop in 2010. Both assertions turned out to be false. After weeks turned to months, the Internet decided to put out "Under Pressure" for Dre in June by leaking it, prompting him to issue this statement: "The song that's on the Internet is an incomplete song that I'm still working on. When it's ready, you'll be hearing it from me."

Rapper Soopafly called Dre a "perfectionist" this week, echoing what 50 Cent said about him in 2007.

This summer, Dre released the first two singles from *Detox*, "Kush" featuring Snoop Dogg and Akon, and the Eminem collaboration "I Need a Doctor." But a year and a half after his Fenway stunt, a release date for the record has yet to materialize. Posting under the "Kush" video, a YouTube commenter said it best: "i used to say 'when pigs fly' now i say 'when detox comes out [sic].'"

Dr. Dre is part of a lineage of great artists who've had trouble producing the follow-up to a notable album. Notoriously, Guns N Roses' 2008 record, *Chinese Democracy*, was a critical and commercial failure that

took 15 years and more than \$13 million to produce (*Detox* has become known as the "Chinese Democracy of hip-hop"). An article in *Psychology Today* called "Axl Rose: Obsessive Monomaniac Perfectionist," speaks of the album in terms of "the latest act of a tortured genius in the great tradition of other tortured geniuses."

Uncomfortable with the superstardom wrought by the runaway success of her only studio album, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, Lauryn Hill retreated sanctimoniously into obscurity. Despite her husband Rohan Marley's claims about the singer's prolific songwriting around the house—she writes "in the bathroom, on toilet paper, on the wall," he told *People* in 2008—by now, those who once held their breath for a Hill comeback have either exhaled or expired.

The list continues: After putting out great records, My Bloody Valentine, The Avalanches, Neutral Milk Hotel, and D'Angelo have all seemingly ground to a creative halt. Amy Winehouse passed away as the fifth anniversary of *Back to Black*, her breakthrough last album, approached.

A few factors are at play, usually. Artists who become known as musical geniuses are often rewarded with an autonomy that does away with the usual record label strictures—deadlines and checks and balances—that ensured that their previous records actually saw the light of day. Issues like addiction, alcoholism and legal troubles can also play a part in delaying an artist's work, as was the case with Winehouse, and D'Angelo, who started making his third album, *James River*, in 2002.

Dre, himself, has already faced this challenge. His previous, critically acclaimed, multi-platinum album, *2001*, came seven years after his equally successful solo debut, *The Chronic*. Compare this low productivity rate with that of his fellow hip-hop artist/producer/studio-mad-scientist Kanye West, who has managed to release six popular, critically lauded albums during Dre's time away from the spotlight.

It's likely that the most frequent cause for creative paralysis in the wake of landmark albums is the pressure put upon musicians by their own work—that they look back at their last effort and think, *how did I do that?*

It's a reasonable thing to wonder, says Dr. Simon Sherry, an assistant psychology professor at Dalhousie University. Mathematically, most talented people *don't* live up to their own past achievements.

"In the statistical sense, it's far more likely that following an exceptional, well-above-average performance, the performance drops," he says. "You see that all the time in the world of sports, where an athlete has an exceptional year... hitting 50 home runs in baseball. That's their peak performance, and it's much more likely that they're going to then regress towards a more average one."

But for Dre, "average" is not an option—possibly to his detriment.

Speaking about *Detox* to HipHoxDX.com this week, rapper Soopafly called Dre a "perfectionist" who "takes his time." It sounded a lot like what 50 Cent, in 2007, said of his label boss in [an interview with the same website](#): "He's such a perfectionist. But sometimes that can be a bad thing. You create new pressure when you wait that long."

Sherry, a registered clinical psychologist who assesses and treats perfectionists, says that there are two main forms of perfectionism. One, known as "perfectionistic striving," whereby a creative person can't

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relax until they've lived up their own standard of excellence, can be motivational. The other is a more destructive form of perfectionism, referred to as "perfectionistic concerns."

The destructive form "involves things like a tendency to be harshly critical of yourself," Sherry says. "To doubt your actions and your performance abilities. To have an extreme, exaggerated concern over mistakes. And to often perceive or misperceive that other people around you require you to be perfect."

"That aspect of perfectionism is more clearly related to a range of work-related difficulties, including procrastination."

It wouldn't be hard to make the case that Dre's been procrastinating. Over the years, he has set aside *Detox* multiple times to focus on other projects. There is his hugely profitable line of [headphones](#). His brand of [Cognac](#). Endorsement deals with [Hewlett-Packard](#), [Dr. Pepper](#), [Coors Light](#), and [Chrysler](#). The eight studio albums he has executive-produced through his label, [Aftermath Entertainment](#), since 2003, including Eminem's *Recovery*, the highest-selling record of 2010. His newest protege, 21-year-old Compton rapper [Kendrick Lamar](#). [Time at the gym](#). [Fun in the studio](#) with Justin Bieber.

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But between these departures, and a period in 2004 when he [gave up on *Detox* altogether](#), the doctor has been squeezing in sessions for the album. By all accounts, the results have been extraordinary.

"The man is getting piano lessons from Burt Bacharach and he's reinterpreting Chopin symphony stuff," longtime Dre cohort and reported *Detox* collaborator DJ Quik effused in a 2008 [interview](#) with Loud.com. "It's crazy, he's lost his mind. He's got like 400 records."

In December, another Dre affiliate, rapper Kurupt, [told SOHH.com](#) about the seismic effect the album would have on hip-hop at large.

"I think it's going to do the same thing [*2001*] did—it's going to change the game," he said. "The one thing you don't play with when it comes to this [rap] game is the doctor. Point blank. Never play with the doctor... Because he plays no games. He's a stickler. He's a stickler for perfection."

Dre's exacting sensibility can be heard in his production aesthetic, which has grown increasingly meticulous over the years. On *The Chronic*, he favored loose riffs lifted from funk and soul artists. For *2001*, he developed a clean, quantized balance of rhythms and melodies.

But in the past few years, his obsession with precision has rendered many of his beats cold and mechanical to the point of lifelessness - the antithesis of funk. As Ian Cohen wrote in his [Pitchfork review](#) of Eminem's 2008 album, *Relapse*: "Dre has treated production like a test run for his very expensive headphones, concerning himself with only the most inert, stainless steel sounds."

Beyond Bacharach, the list of artists who have allegedly logged time on *Detox* is a cavalcade of *Billboard* heavyweights that includes Eminem, Jay-Z, Beyonce, R. Kelly, and Lady Gaga, to name a few.

If the hype is to be believed, *Detox* will be Dre's magnum opus, a true, modern rap classic, something more akin to the Sistine Chapel (which, incidentally, only took Michelangelo four years to complete) than *Chinese Democracy*. Should that happen, his protracted creative process will be vindicated, and the doctor will always be remembered.

The anxiety that people aren't acknowledging his legendary status could be the prime motivation for Dre's perfectionism. The notion that the public has neglected him has been a theme reiterated often throughout the post-millennial part of his career.

On *2001*, we "[Forgot About Dre](#)," forcing him to respond that he's the same O.G.—but he's been low-key

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—before breaking down his vast inventory of accomplishments (the studio full of tracks; the wall full of plaques hanging up in his office like trophies; the careers of Snoop Dogg, Easy E, and NWA). On his previous single, he reminded you that he's "Still D.R.E." And on "The Watcher," from the same album, with the tone of a mother, upset that no one complemented her casserole, he admonished, "I started this gangsta shit, and this the motherfucking thanks I get?"

Asked if Dr. Dre's contentious attitude toward his audience could be related to his perfectionism, Dr. Sherry says it's probably more a product of ego.

"Often times, people who are narcissistic are disappointed with how other people treat them," he says. "Because others don't acknowledge their so-called brilliance or uniqueness or special talents. And that lends itself to a sort of defensive orientation towards the world where everyone's attacking you, and everyone's disappointing you."

His most recent single, "I Need a Doctor," advances that narrative to its apotheosis—we need Dre—while inflating his return to almost messianic proportions.

The song opens with two melodramatic verses by Eminem, who raps, "you're either getting lazy or you don't believe in you no more... I demand you remember who you are!" In 2011, even Dre has forgotten about Dre. Finally, vehemently, he emerges for the song's climactic third verse, concluding, "...I'm back, bastards. One more CD and then I'm packing up my bags, and as I'm leaving I guarantee they'll scream 'Dre, don't leave us like that, man.'"

Ultimately, the fact that Detox will be the 46-year-old rap legend's last project could best explain what's taking it so long. It's his swan song, one he hopes will be the perfect last installment in a classic trilogy of hip-hop albums.

So like a pitcher on the mound, winding up for his third strike, a nation of listeners waits to see if Dr. Dre can do it again.

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