Andre Benjamin

Black Biography: Andre Benjamin

Rap musician; actor; entrepreneur

Personal Information

Born on May 27, 1975, in Atlanta, GA; children: Seven Sirius.

Career

Organized Noize production trio Rico Wade, Patrick "Sleepy" Brown, and Raymond Murray, collaborator, early 1990s; LaFace record label, recording artist, 1994-; Outkast Clothing line, founder, 2001-; actor, 2003-.

Life's Work

Andre Benjamin--Outkast's more eccentric and shyer half--oozes creativity in his fashion, his word-play, and most notably, his music. The young man known on stage, screen, and radio as Andre 3000 rose to the limelight with his high school friend, or "partner in rhyme," Antwan Patton, known to fans as Big Boi. As the duo sought to cast its out from conventional hip-hop culture, it landed its "Dirty South" music squarely in the mainstream market. Benjamin's outlandish appearance and musical and lyrical idiosyncracies have earned him a reputation as a maverick, a dramatic contrast to Patton's more conservative image.

Motivated by Music

Andre Lauren Benjamin was born in Atlanta, Georgia, on May 27, 1975, to Sharon Benjamin, a young single mother who, according to VH1's Driven, "raised him to be clean-cut and preppy." Ms. Benjamin was poor. Too frequently coming up short for the rent payment, she often had to flee with her son from one residence for another in southwest Atlanta. She told VH1 that her son understood the situation and cooperated. "I would tell him," she said, "Dre, let's go. 'I'm ready, Mama,' he'd say."

Taking advantage of Atlanta's "Minority to Majority" program, Ms. Benjamin had her son bussed to a largely white upper middle-class school, where he could pursue his artistic interests. "The grass is always greener," she told VH1, accounting for her decision. She had noted Benjamin's uncanny response to music and sounds when he was yet an infant.
She told VH1, "The things that babies play with, he wouldn't play with. You would just put him on the blanket, give him some newspaper and he'll just take the paper and he'll just crumble it ... he loved the sound."

In his early teens, Benjamin developed a fancy for upper middle-class fashions. Unable to afford the Ralph Lauren shirts and other designer apparel his classmates sported, Benjamin fastened his own self-designed logo onto plain white shirts. He also developed a fondness for what is commonly perceived as "white" music--from ZZ Top to Sting, Madonna to The Smiths. Benjamin loved all music, but has reported repeatedly in interviews that he was most strongly attracted to the work of Prince, the Funkadelic, John Coltrane, 2 Live Crew, and other R&B, Soul, Disco, and Rap artists.

Benjamin met Patton during his first year at Tri-Cities School for the Performing Arts, a magnet school in the Atlanta borough of East Point. They quickly became freestyle-rhyme rivals at the school, where teachers and administrators encouraged such artistic expression. Each discovering the other's zeal for music and savvy for rhyming, they became fast friends.

At age 16, when Benjamin began to rebel against the authority of his mother and let his grades drop, his mother sent him to live with his father, Lawrence Walker, a collections agent. Benjamin's father turned out to be more of a buddy than an authority, and Benjamin spent more time at clubs and parties than at school. He dropped out of school his junior year, but later earned his high-school equivalency.

As teens, Benjamin and Patton hung out at East Point parking lots and malls, attracting a following with their rapping dexterity, performing as 2 Shades Deep under the aliases of Black Dog and Black Wolf. A girlfriend introduced them to a member of Atlanta's Organized Noize production trio, Rico Wade, in the lot of an East Point store. Impressed with their performance, particularly the combination of Patton's confrontational with Benjamin's observational rhymes, Wade immediately drove them to his studio, The Dungeon, a red-clay, unfinished basement. Benjamin and Patton spent as much time as they could at The Dungeon, chumming with other Atlanta artists. It wasn't long before Wade arranged an audition for the duo to perform for Antonio "L.A." Reid, the co-founder with Kenneth "Babyface" Edmonds of the LaFace label, an imprint of Arista Records.

Reid failed to see the duo's star quality from their first audition. With the help of Organized Noize, Benjamin and Patton fine-tuned their lyrics and delivery. After another audition, Reid offered them a contract. But both were too young to sign without their parents' approval. Benjamin reported to Rolling Stone, "Our parents wouldn't let us sign. We were 17. We had to wait a year."

But their career soon took off. The duo, now called Outkast, contributed to a Christmas album with its first single. The song, "Players' Ball," which bemoans the shortage of Christmas cheer in the ghetto, went gold and held the number-one spot on the rap charts for six weeks in 1993.

About the time they cut their first album, Southernplayalisticadillacmuzik, Benjamin decided to abstain permanently from drinking, smoking, and consuming meat and dairy products. At the same time, he began to dress more eccentrically. As his notoriety for
musical talent blossomed, so did unfounded rumors regarding his sexuality and mental health. Nonetheless, Benjamin's music and presentation endeared him to a national fan-base as early as 1995, when Source bestowed Outkast with the Best New Rap Group honor.

**Created Fresh Sounds**

Benjamin and Patton choose the name Outkast as a description of their artistic intent. The spelling is a reference to the dictionary pronunciation script for "outcast," defined as "homeless" or "not accepted in society." As self-imposed social outcasts, they have sought to showcase each artist's unique perspective of the world. Their musical style was labeled by music reviewers as a new sound called "Dirty South" hip-hop. Yet, commentators have consistently praised Outkast in creating music that defies categorization. Each track is an experiment in American sound-blend. Though varied in beat, rhythm, instrumentation, and melodic theme, Outkast's Benjamin and Patton have tagged their work as "slumadelic." They consider their lyrics as positive messages about real stories of American life.

Benjamin and Patton were disappointed to learn that "Rosa Parks," a track from their 1998 double-platinum album *Aquemini*, set off a lawsuit filed by its namesake. After the suit was filed, Benjamin and Patton issued the following statement: "Rosa Parks has inspired our music and our lives since we were children. The opportunity to use our music to help educate young people about the heroes in the African-American community is one of the responsibilities we have as music artists." The suit was dismissed but then revived in 2003 upon appeal by Parks.

When Benjamin and Patton are not collaborating, they are encouraging each other in solo pursuits. Certain tracks are the brainchildren of Patton's level-headed rapper, as others are spawned from the flamboyant poet's mind of Benjamin, whom Chris Campion of London's Observer described as "a lanky beatnik given to talking like a lovelorn dandy from a Jane Austen novel." The extravagant quality of Benjamin's lyrics, beats, and melodies seem to resonate with the inspiration he has taken from Prince. But Prince praised Benjamin, according to L.A. Reid in Rolling Stone, as an artist ahead of his time with a boldness to create music that is "so against the grain in terms of what's happening on radio."

In October of 2003 Benjamin released his award-winning opus *The Love Below*, a companion to Patton's equally prized Speakerboxxx. *The Love Below* featured a masterful composite of slumadelic influences in theme and musical blend. Benjamin described his influences for the album to Campion, saying, "Believe it or not, I was listening to a lot of punk bands like the Buzzcocks and Ramones while I was making this record. It's not like there's just one style or type of music we dig. So we end up doing whatever we feel like that day."

Benjamin began the process of creating "Hey Ya!" in 1999. With a lyric that speaks about family relationships, the working title of the song was "Thank God for Mom and Dad." When it came time to record, Benjamin put the piece together in two days. He played everything but bass, hiring bassist Aaron Mills instead. The song's most memorable lines, such as "Shake it like a Polaroid picture," were impromptu additions during the recording.
Benjamin, who has had an interest in acting since performing in the play "Charlotte's Web" as a child, reported to Campion that his musical performance is a form of acting. He puts himself in character as a music performer, whether he is Andre 3000 or one of several alter-egos, such as The Love Below protagonist "Ice Cold" and "Johnny Vulture," the guitarist in the "Hey Ya!" video. "Ice Cold" is a "straightforward and brutally honest" person, a snapshot of Benjamin's darker side. "[Ice Cold] came about because I would say certain things about girls," Benjamin explained, "and my homeboys would be like, 'Oh, man, you ice cold for saying that!'"

Benjamin acknowledged his treatment of singer and ex-flame Erykah Badu, with whom he had his son, Seven, in 1997, akin to how "Ice Cold" treats women. Outkast's first pop single, "Ms. Jackson," from its 2000 triple-platinum album Stankonia, was largely inspired by Benjamin's estrangement from Badu. The song is narrated by a single father who seeks a stable relationship with the mother of his child's mother.

Speakerboxxx/The Love Below sold well over four million copies by the time the Grammys were handed out. Benjamin's "Hey Ya!" and Patton's "The Way You Move" were, respectively, at Billboard's number one and two positions for over two months, beating the Bee Gees' 1978 record of a single group retaining both spots for four weeks (for "Night Fever" and "Stayin' Alive").

Pursued a Variety of Artistic Endeavors

Though Outkast has a contract to make two more albums for Arista Records, music-industry commentators have speculated since Speakerboxxx/The Love Below's release that the duo will split. Rolling Stone read into the two-for-one packaging as a clear indication that Outkast is "a dual that everyone knows is headed for divorce court." Benjamin and Patton have consistently denied the rumors.

Nonetheless, Benjamin's move from Atlanta to Los Angeles to pursue acting only inflated music commentators' cynicism of the duo staying together. In 2003 he landed a small role in Hollywood Homicide, starring Harrison Ford. Soon after, he played Valentine, a music prodigy, in Love Hater, a film directed by Morgan Freeman. In 2004 Benjamin began shooting Be Cool, the sequel to Get Shorty, playing a member of a fictional rap group, the Dub MDs. The Hughes brothers also cast Benjamin as Jimi Hendrix in a biopic film about the guitarist. And he was recruited, with Patton, to co-star in an HBO movie set in the 1930s. Other pursuits include Benjamin's study of clarinet and saxophone. He also hopes to study classical music composition and theory at the Juillard School of Music.

In addition, Benjamin is serious about painting and fashion design. His paintings can be purchased through his Sevenaire Paintings venture. Outkast has had a men's clothing line since 2001, and in 2004, Benjamin offered his Andre Benjamin line of clothing, accessories, samples of which are seen in the "Hey Ya!" video. He told Rolling Stone that his style role models are "Ralph Lauren, Sly Stone, and Jacqueline Kennedy."

Objecting to charges that Outkast is breaking up, Benjamin said that the duo was "growing up," not "splitting up." "We each want to do certain things," he said, "and we're supporting each other's thing." Perhaps Benjamin and Patton are so different from one
another that they are perfect together and will be as enduring a combination as the American blending of peanut butter and jelly.

Awards

Grammy "Best Rap Duo or Group" and "Best Rap Album" 2001, for Stankonia; Grammy "Album of the Year" and "Best Rap Album," 2004, for Speakerboxxx/The Love Below; NAACP Image Award for "Outstanding Duo or Group", 2004; Soul Train Awards for "R&B/Soul or Rap Album of the Year," 2004; Soul Train Awards for "R&B/Soul or Rap Music Video," 2004.

Works

Selected works

Albums

- (With Outkast) Southernplayalisticadillacmuzik, LaFace, 1994.
- (With Outkast) ATLiens, LaFace, 1996.
- (With Outkast) Aquemini, LaFace, 1998.
- (With Outkast) Stankonia, LaFace, 2000.
- (With Outkast) Big Boi and Dre Present...; LaFace, 2001.

Films

- Be Cool, 2005.

Singles

- (With Outkast) "Player's Ball," 1994.
- (With Outkast) "Hey Ya," 2003.

Further Reading

Periodicals

- Launch, April 1, 1999; January 12, 2001; March 27, 2001; January 14, 2003; May 13, 2003; October 2, 2003; February 17, 2004; March 2, 2004.
- Rolling Stone, October 22, 2003; March 18, 2004, p. 58.

On-line

http://www.answers.com/topic/andre-benjamin?print=true

**Other**

• *Driven*, VH1, April 29, 2004.

— Melissa Walsh