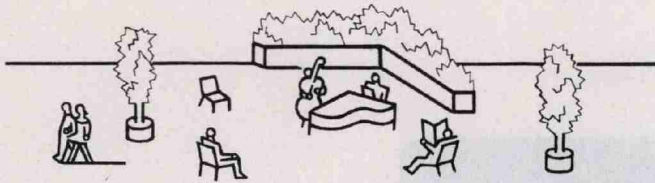


## THE CRITICS



POP MUSIC

## ORGANIZED CONFUSION

*Shabazz Palaces' sounds and symbols.*

BY SASHA FRERE-JONES

This summer, the Seattle indie-rock label Sub Pop (home to Nirvana, most famously) put out one of the very few hip-hop albums it has released in its twenty-three years of operation. "Black Up" is by Shabazz Palaces, a mysterious unit led by Palaceer Lazaro, whose real name is Ishmael Butler. The album is alternately dense and light, and its mixture of noise and knottiness can sound like contemporary acts whose members are half Butler's age—Odd Future, Lil B, and Ex Military, among others. The slippery nature of Shabazz Palaces does have one notable predecessor, though. Twenty years ago, Butler was a member of Diggable Planets, a group that was similarly at odds with its milieu.

In 1989, when Butler, a Seattle native, was eighteen, he dropped out of college in Massachusetts and moved to Brooklyn, where his father's girlfriend's mother owned an apartment, and had a free room that Butler could use. He recorded a demo of hip-hop songs, begun with a friend from Seattle named Squibb, which was eventually delivered to Ruben Rodriguez, of Pendulum Records. In 1992, Butler called his friends Craig Irving, from Philadelphia, and Mary Ann Vieira, from Washington, D.C., for an audition in Rodriguez's office. "I told them, 'I'm in this group, so I need to come through with some people.' So they came through," Butler told me recently.

The group was signed as Diggable Planets, and it released "Reachin' (A New Refutation of Time and Space)" in 1993. The word "Reachin'" was a reference to the

Miles Davis albums of the fifties, with titles like "Cookin'" and "Workin'"; the subtitle is taken from a Borges essay. The music, which was sampled largely from jazz albums, felt relaxed, and the lyrics ranged from entirely abstract to pro-choice manifestos.

A single called "Rebirth of Slick (Cool Like Dat)," based on a large chunk of "Stretching," a song by Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers, from 1978, reached No. 15 on the *Billboard* Hot 100. The album went platinum and won a Grammy for Best Rap Performance by a Duo or Group. Fans and critics lumped the band together with a loose collection of artists, such as Guru's Jazzmatazz project and Us3, that performed in a toothless genre known as "jazz rap."

Diggable Planets' second album, "Blowout Comb," didn't yield a chart hit; with fewer jazz influences, it probably seemed murky and oblique to people familiar only with the gentle bump of the band's hit single. For other listeners, however, "Blowout Comb" was a welcome signal that the group had little interest in recasting classic jazz as background hip-hop for hotel bars. The album was a satisfying mixture of bass, obfuscation, and directness, and it still sounds that way today.

The album's more political feel was informed by the influence of Butler's father, a history professor at the University of Virginia, who was well versed in both Communism and revolutionary black jazz artists such as Sun Ra and Pharoah Sanders. Butler has said that his favorite rapper is Jalal Mansur Nuriddin, from the Last

Poets, probably the fiercest spoken-word group to come out of the seventies, and if there were initially surface similarities between Diggable Planets and amiable groups like De La Soul and A Tribe Called Quest, "Blowout Comb" made it clear that Butler wasn't much concerned with being a chart proposition.

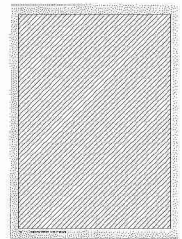
Diggable Planets split up in 1996, and Butler, who missed home, headed back to Seattle to spend time with his mother; he still lives there. Although he has been deliberately opaque about identifying the personnel in the credits of the Shabazz Palaces releases, he told me that the band started several years ago when he started working with a neighbor, Tendai Maraire, a musician with a home studio, like Butler. In 2009, they released two fantastic EPs simultaneously; one was self-titled, and the other was called "Of Light."

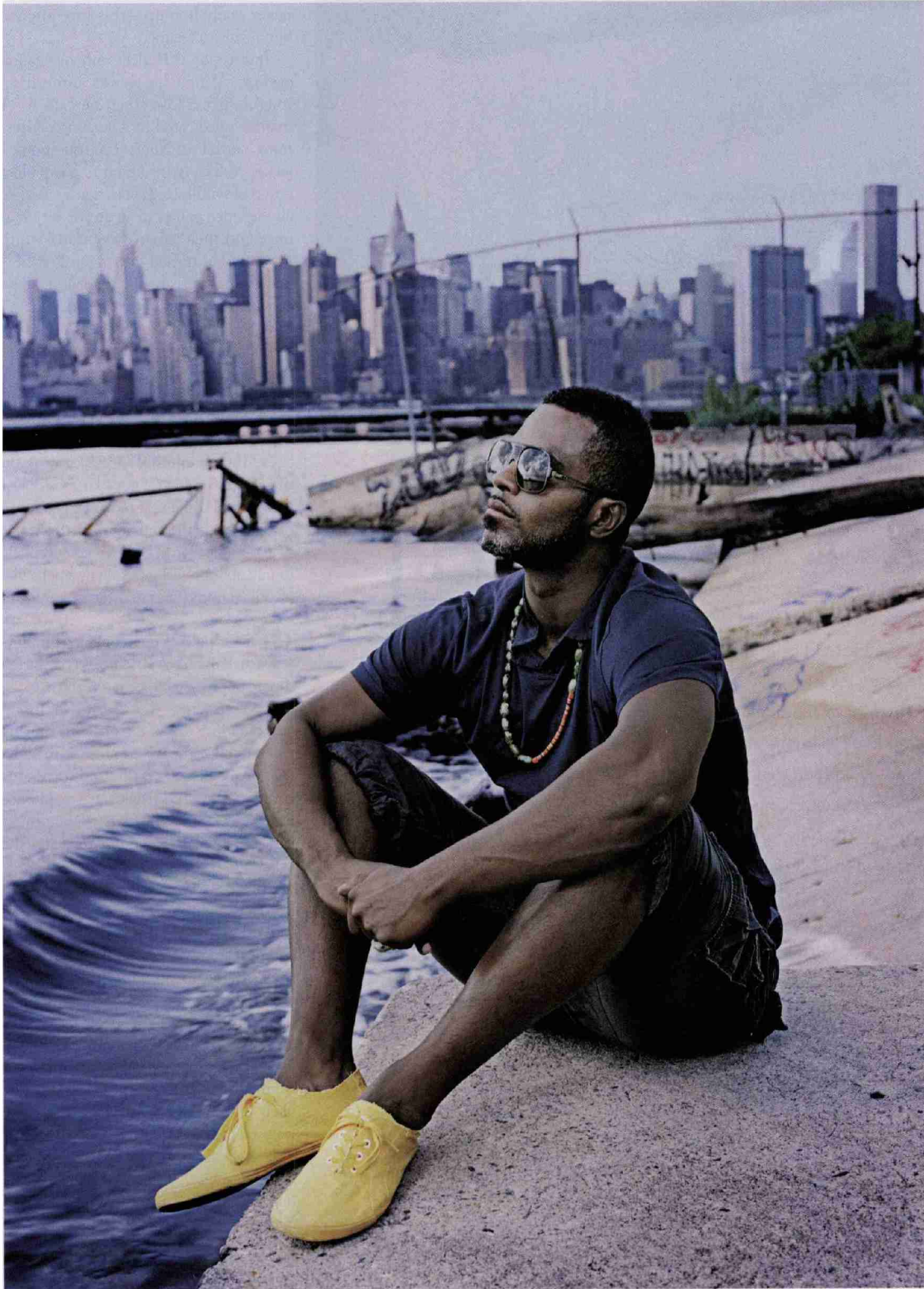
Butler described the goals of the group simply: "To get a chance to do the work and play it for people." That urge to perform makes Shabazz Palaces a good match for an independent label with a small promotional budget and a trust in the power of touring.

Shabazz Palaces doesn't make music you can dance to, though it facilitates nodding. The rhythm rarely builds to peaks or gets much faster than a lope. "Black Up" is a lesson in forceful insolence, stocked with music that rests in the low end, only to be unpredictably split apart by noise. On "Are you . . . Can you . . . Were you? (Felt)," Butler opens the song by repeating "It's a feeling," and that simple sentiment can help you navigate the somewhat disorganized set of symbols and sounds. Later in the song, he raps, "My mind waits behind the music," which works as a key to the album, too.

One of the best songs on the band's self-titled EP, the improbably named "kill white t, parable of the nigga who barrels stay hot, made by hardkings@freecasinoblk," might lead you to believe that Butler held to some kind of dogmatic view of black empowerment. But if there's a "white t" that Butler wants to kill, it might just be the cop who busts up the poker game described in the first verse. The story is a sideways nod to the pool hustler in "Sport," a song that Jalal released in 1973 under the pseudonym Lightnin' Rod, on an album called "Hustler's Convention." But the title and the lyrics of "kill white t"

ABOVE: PHILIPPE WEISBECKER; OPPOSITE: INSTITUTE





*Shabazz Palaces is Ishmael Butler's second act, long after the breakup of Digable Planets. Photograph by Wayne Lawrence.*

never really line up—this low-pitched lurch is also a feeling.

Indirection is Butler's only navigation system. When he writes something roughly like a love song, he calls it "A treatise dedicated to The Avian Airess from North East Nubis (1000 questions, 1 answer)." The lyrics are set to a wobbling group of synthesized tones that sound like all the video games in an arcade set off at once and then slowed way down, until mayhem has turned into a gentle confusion. Butler raps about a woman he likes, and his lyrics veer between concrete and allusive. What might be the chorus (though most of these songs don't break into obviously demarcated sections) is rapped just once, the lyrics chopped into short bursts: "You're / the shit / like ear- / ly summer / the breeze / the birds / the bees / they humming / if / I know / you there / I'm coming / if not / I'm stuck / just wondering." Butler is fond of tangents and of distorting the music until the static swallows the words, but he is equally likely to talk about a girl whose hair smells like "April showers," and to mean exactly that.

Shabazz Palaces uses sonic fog and unusual mixing to obscure its charms—a sly and unpredictable lead m.c. and a clutch of sonorous tones—not because the group is dissuading anyone from entering its world but because it is committed to high-resolution disorientation. All of this is keyed to pleasure. "Black Up" would once have been called a "headphones album": it is rich and striated, and was made for the closeup of the in-ear speaker.

Butler is forty this year, and he comes from a generation of hip-hop artists used to working in professional studios with engineers, and to a level of audio quality that is alien to the laptop generation. ("Blowout Comb" is one of the best-engineered hip-hop albums of its time.) But Shabazz Palaces also has a commitment to live performance that puts the group in step with its juniors. So though it is unlikely that the group will chart high or be licensed for an episode of a hit TV show, Shabazz Palaces might end up with the kind of career that many of Butler's platinum peers from 1993 would be thrilled to have now. ♦

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Sasha Frere-Jones listens to Shabazz Palaces.