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MGK Doesn't Want to Be Cool Anymore

The onetime rapper on making Bob Dylan a fan, the harrowing abuse that shaped him and his new, genre-agnostic pop album, “Lost Americana.”

By Joe Coscarelli and Jon Caramanica Visuals by Thea Traff

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Before Bob Dylan delivered him an out-of-the-blue stamp of approval earlier this year, the rapper and singer MGK was on unsteady ground.

He had just returned from an extended stay at a rehab facility amid a high-profile breakup with the actress Megan Fox, who was expecting the couple’s first child. The Los Angeles fires had destroyed his favorite studio. And he had scrapped some two years of work on a new album, opting to pursue a new genre-agnostic, pure(-ish) pop direction. Everything felt far from certain.

Then, in February, a decade-old clip of MGK rapping in a Central Florida record store appeared on Dylan’s cryptic Instagram.

“Everything on his grid is black-and-white and old — either it’s Malcolm X or like dead jazz players,” MGK, born Colson Baker and best known as Machine Gun Kelly, said this week on Popcast, The New York Times music show. “I’m like, OK, how do I fit in here? What’s going on? It’s like a D-side MGK video from, like, the 17th page of my YouTube channel.” (In the clip Dylan highlighted, MGK had been “hopped up on cocaine,” he added, noting his flailing arms and inability to “shut up.”)

Following a period of disbelief, MGK began inching toward meeting the reclusive rock legend. They finally came face to face in May, following a Dylan performance at the Hollywood Bowl. Not long after, MGK announced his new album, “Lost Americana,” with a video narrated by that familiar — but rarely heard — voice, intoning about “a sonic map of forgotten places, a tribute to the spirit of reinvention and a quest to reclaim the essence of American freedom.”

“He’s the most elusive snow leopard,” MGK, 35, said of Dylan, explaining his decision to take his idol’s approval — along with that of Mick Jagger — as a sign that he was now on the correct path.



“There’s no beguiling on this album,” MGK told Popcast. “This album is not a character.”

“Lost Americana,” out Friday, is the result of that newfound confidence, yet another reinvention for a polarizing artist. Having come to prominence as an aggressive white rapper claiming Cleveland, MGK made a mainstream name as a worthy opponent of Eminem, a fellow chip-on-his-shoulder outsider who’d grown from a Midwestern battle rap scene. The pandemic saw MGK’s pivot to pop-punk, which resulted in a pair of No. 1 albums, as well as his turn as a tabloid-trailed celebrity boyfriend.

Now, he’s doing dance choreography in the brightly colored music video for “Cliché,” and attempting to meet his fans, detractors and lifelong demons with a clear head and a lack of pretense. “There’s no beguiling on this album,” he told Popcast. “This album is not a character.”

In a winding conversation, MGK was at turns edgy and gregarious, discussing how an adolescence filled with abuse and bullying led to his pursuit of being the “anti-bro”; the common turn that white rappers make to rock, country and pop; and why he needs to self-destruct before he can create. These are edited excerpts from the interview, which can be watched or listened to in full below.

JOE COSCARELLI The Bob Dylan Instagram — what happened?

MGK I was having a rant in my sunken living room pit about, “Is this the right album we’re making?” Because in my heart, my DNA is hip-hop and half of my fan base is like, “Make this rap album that we have been promised.” I’m having that conversation and tripping out. I’m about to erase everything again. And someone goes, “Dude, Bob Dylan just posted you.” We watched it and were like, damn, that was hard.

COSCARELLI I see why Bob liked it.



“It’s become a pop culture thing where MGK is a scapegoat and I just laugh because you are now the conformists,” MGK said.

MGK Bob liking me as a rapper blew my mind. Bob’s the original — [“Subterranean Homesick Blues”] is the original rap song. “In the basement,” [mixing] “up the medicine,” it doesn’t get more gangster than that. That’s like a Clipse line.

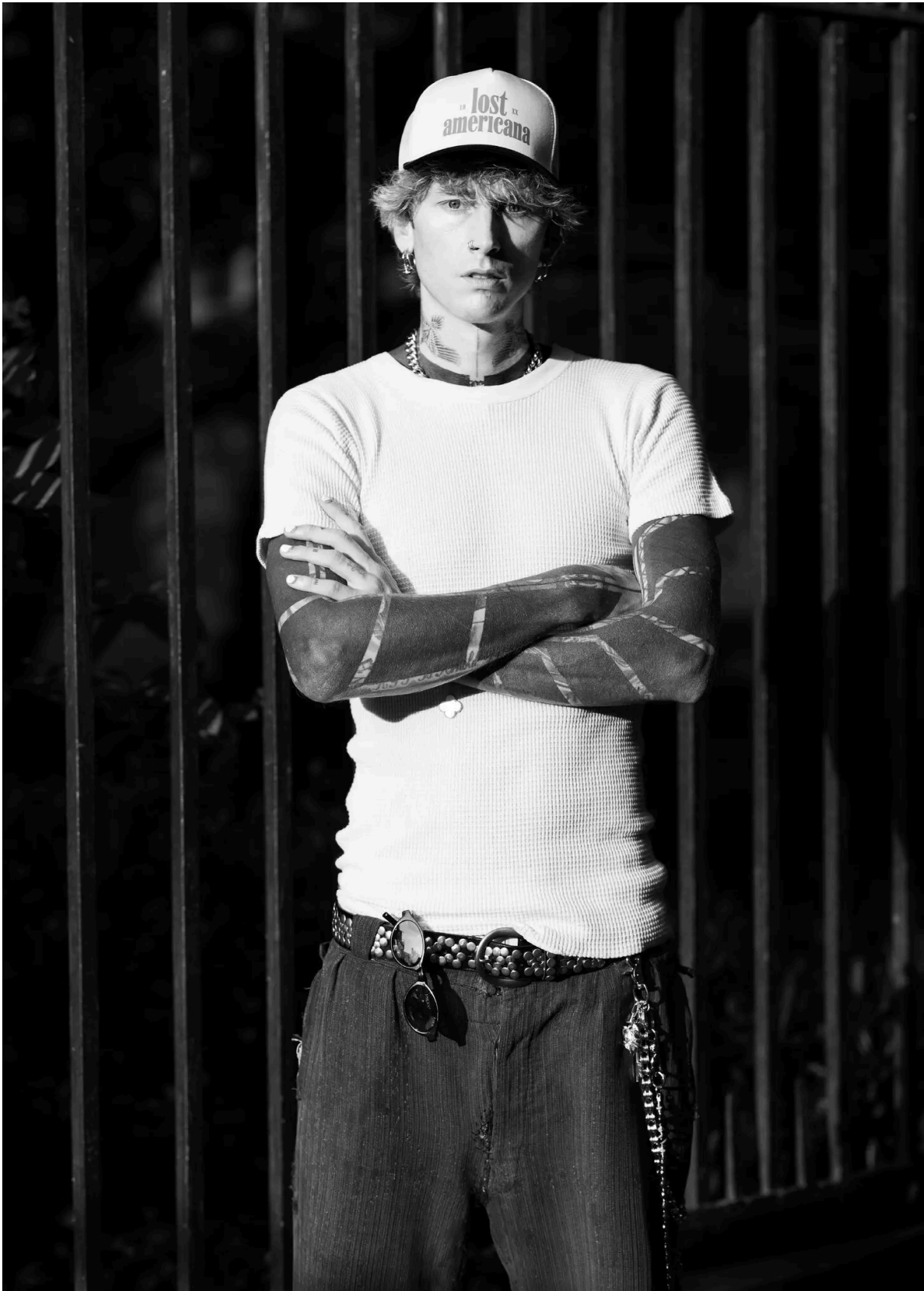
Then, dude, I just came here a couple days ago after having dinner with Mick Jagger in London. It’s just these Thanos stones. That’s the beauty of manifestation and how the universe has aligned with this album so brilliantly. Mick Jagger had that quote, something along the lines of “MGK is making rock ‘n’ roll fun again.” When they sit down with me, I’m so curious and I’m also awkward, so I just want to immediately ask questions: Hey, any Michael Jackson stories, any Prince stories?

JON CARAMANICA It's an overused word in pop but you have all these eras: the "Wild Boy" era, your mid-period rap stuff, your pop-punk emergence in 2020. Do you feel like people afford you more respect now than they did in the early days?

MGK Honestly, the desire to look for it has just left me. I have a fan base that has not left me for 15 years and that is constantly growing. So I don't know why I would be looking for the vocal minority. It's become a pop culture thing where MGK is a scapegoat and I just laugh because you are now the conformists. "Lost Americana" is the enemy of the conformist thinker. It's the enemy of the ones who pick on the weak. It's the enemy of the bro, you know?

COSCARELLI You talk about yourself as this polarizing artist, which you are — a punching bag on the internet for people who say you make bad music, along the lines of what Nickelback was. At the same time, you've had a huge amount of success in your life, dating all the way back to before you were famous: winning Amateur Night at the Apollo, your beef with Eminem, all of these moments where hate could have buried you, but it only made you more famous. Do you not allow yourself to feel your wins because then you won't have any motivation left?

MGK I say it on the first track of "Lost Americana": "All the pages are blank until my life goes to [expletive] / I know I do that on purpose just to write again." Great bar. It truly sums up the totality of what I do almost before every album cycle. We watched it with this one, you can see it in the news. I've got to ruin everything so that I can talk about something, because that's the only truth. I've put so much weight on my art that I'll bleed out and die for this.



“I’ve got to ruin everything so that I can talk about something, because that’s the only truth,” MGK said about his album cycle.

But I've never even thought about kids on the internet associating me with bad music because when I walk the streets, when I sell out arenas — it's not easy to make some of the vulnerable or bold choices I've made.

CARAMANICA Why do you think white rappers often end up making rock or country music? It happens a lot: Jelly Roll, Post Malone, back to the Everlasts and Kid Rocks of the world.

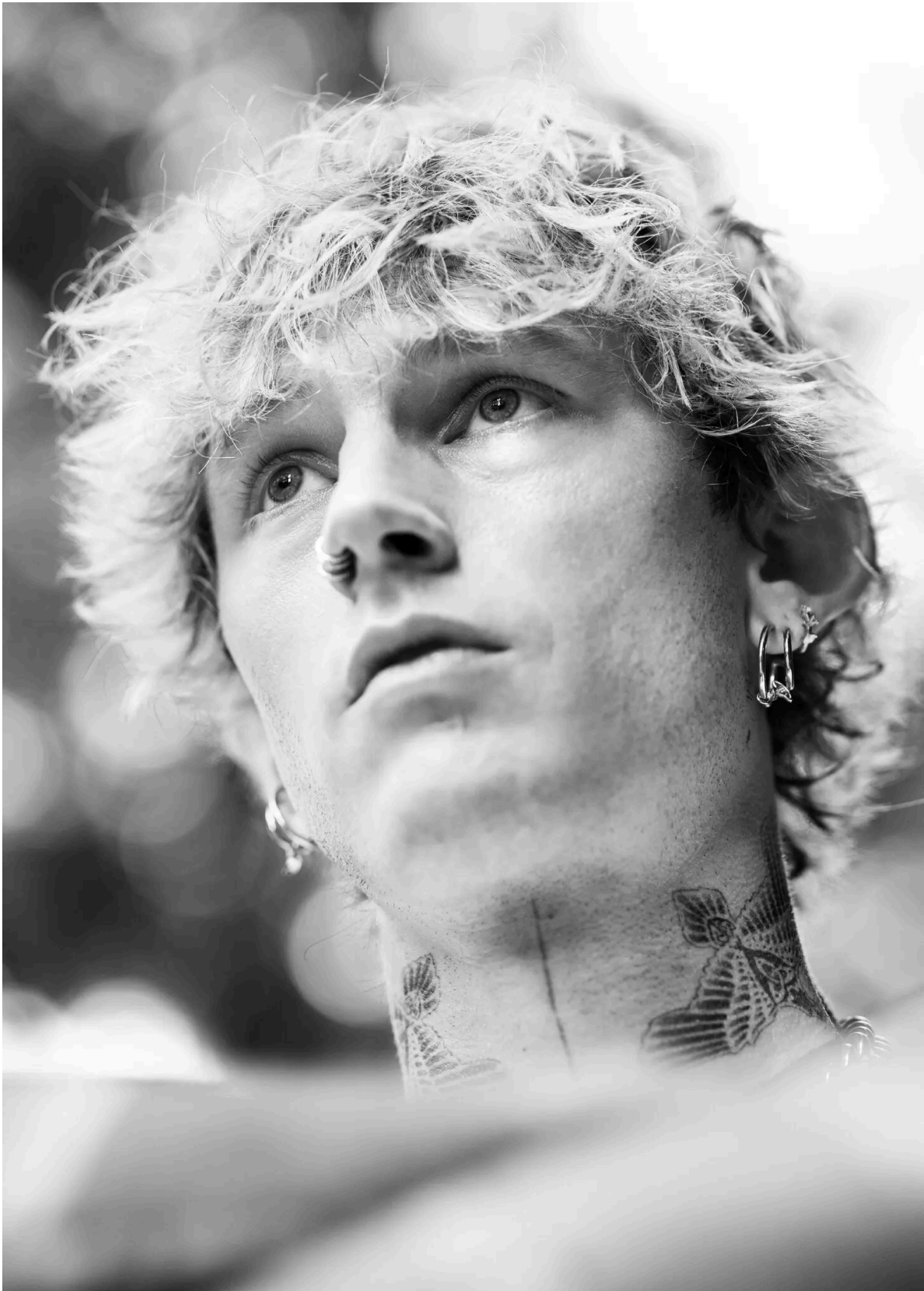
MGK I'm not the spokesman for the whites. I'm an off-white, OK? I don't know why that lore exists.

COSCARELLI I think people feel like white rappers have more flexibility to change their genre and land in a safer place. It would be much harder for a Black rapper.

MGK André 3000? "Hey Ya"? Oh my God, are you serious? "Roses"?

COSCARELLI I'm not saying it's never happened.

MGK He's an anomaly. MGK is an anomaly. I can't speak for everybody. Dude, you wanna talk about culture? I'm a part of the culture, I'm a street kid. Black, white, I am very aware of the optics and I'm very aware how it was when myself, Mac Miller and Yelawolf were coming up. Because it was very much like, earn this. I was physically scrapping to rap in the areas I was from. But hip-hop, to me, is synonymous with punk rock as far as it's a fight. It's fight for your right to blank — whatever that is, fighting the power, fighting the system, fighting your parents, fighting police.



“Hip-hop, to me, is synonymous with punk rock as far as it’s a fight.”

COSCARELLI So you don’t think you’ve been afforded more freedom to play around in genre?

MGK Hell no. Did you see the response when I picked up a guitar? You think any color was excited to see me do that? Everyone was like, “Bro, rap.”

COSCARELLI People know you as MGK, as a tabloid figure, but they don’t know that you lived all around the world as a kid. How did that influence who you are today and the enemies you’re still fighting back against?

MGK I grew up in Africa until I was 6. So with that, your entire subconscious, those really formative years, you’re growing up amongst so many different cultures, prayers, skin colors, ethnicities. I grew up with a very open heart and open mind.

When I moved to America, I became a product of bullying. I was very tall, my mom and dad split, poverty ate up my clothes. I was the guy who went and got the wrong ear pierced, didn’t know which one was the cool one. I acted goofy — I was obsessed with Jim Carrey, so I would do all these impressions and everyone was just like, “What’s up with Ace Ventura over here?”

At the same time, my house was very, very dark. I was living in my aunt’s basement with my dad and it was really, really abusive. Listerine to this day triggers me so hard because I shared a bed with my dad and he would always go and throw up in the morning and come back in the bed and have Listerine on his breath.

I grew up in a very, very masculine house. It was the type where I would come downstairs and my dad would be like, “You’re dressed like a [expletive], go change.” I had many years of being like, “Where’s my mom?” And then, 15 years later, after he passed, my mom and I find this reconnection and I ended up learning all of these false narratives I was fed as a kid. It was so unfair to that little boy because when you look around and the two people who are supposed to unconditionally love you, one isn’t there and then the other person is just beating all of their own issues with life, all of their dissatisfaction into you, and then you go to school and you’re getting jumped or you’re getting laughed at.

I didn't feel safe anywhere. I moved to the attic, because at least I could hear the feet coming, so I could be prepared by the time my dad got upstairs for whatever was going to happen to me.



CARAMANICA You said you feel like you've stripped away all the cool. I think a lot of people from the outside looking in will look at you and say, well, this guy's been cool for more than a decade, but you're saying, hey, it's actually time to shed all that.

MGK Dude, any interview of me in my 20s, it makes me cringe to the max. But you need the arc of dumbass to enlightened. I think there was a characterization that I was playing into that really loved being a polarizing figure. When I'm at home at night, though, if you look at my astrological chart, it's one of the most sensitive charts that exist. Among other gnarly diagnoses that I have, hypersensitivity is one. So I have a hard shell. I grew up a battle rapper. I am prepped for war pretty much at all times. But the truth is, it felt much more satiating to the broken boy in me to be simpatico versus being the polarizing figure.

I also have been showing a lot goofier side of myself — the anti-bro. I don't care that my nails are painted. I don't care that I have an androgynous look. I don't care to fit into whatever the mold is of what they think a rapper should be.

That will inevitably influence how others are perceiving me. Because my face will be the same, but something will be different to them. They'll see someone who's more grounded and more calm. What I've been missing is just a love for myself, and so that's why I take that broken version of me and I put my arm around him and I say, "Dude, I know we've went through the trenches together, but it rains before the rainbow."

Watch the full episode here and follow Popcast on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Amazon Music or YouTube.

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