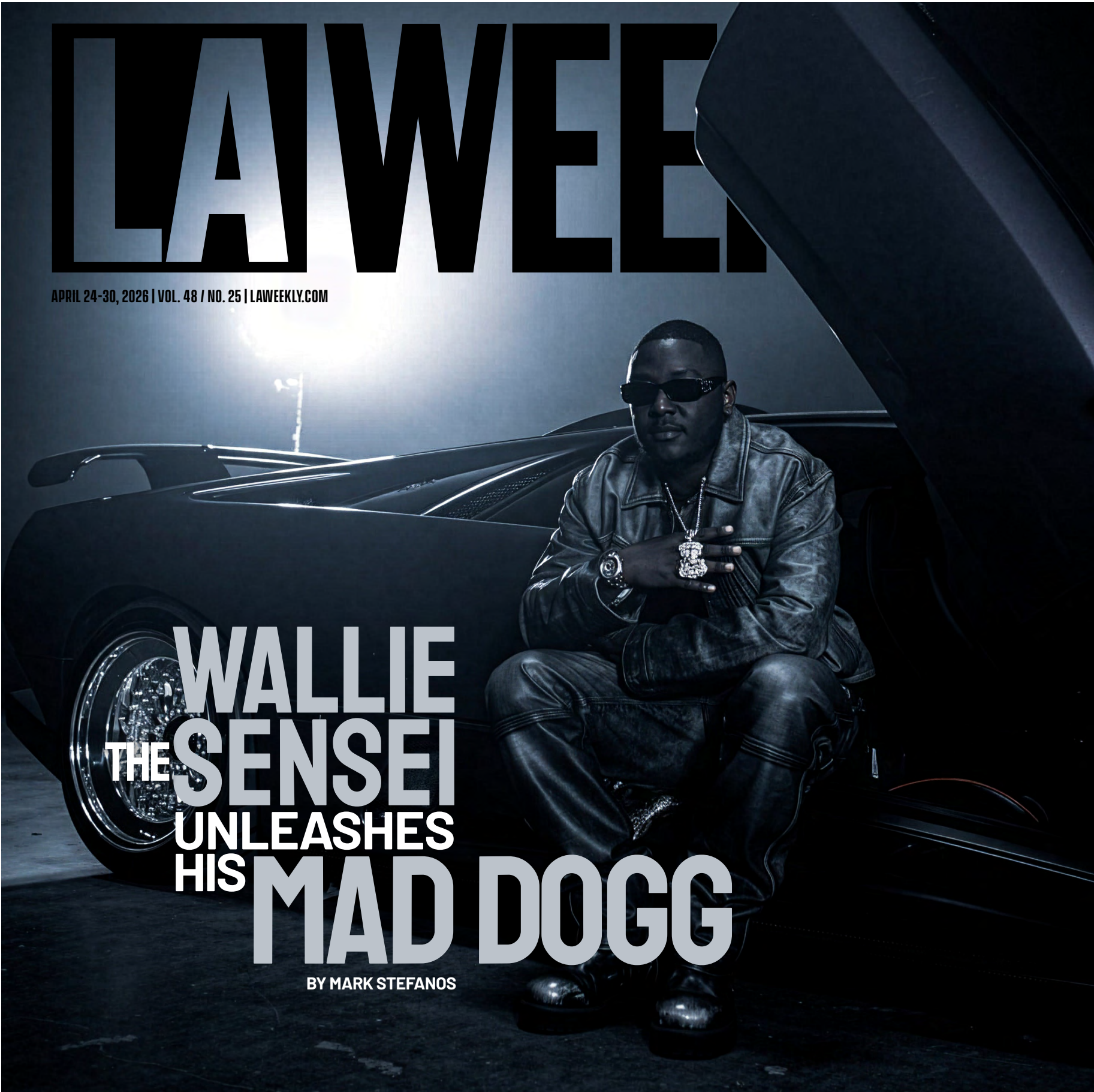


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THE WALLIE
SENSEI
UNLEASHES
HIS MAD DOGG

BY MARK STEFANOS

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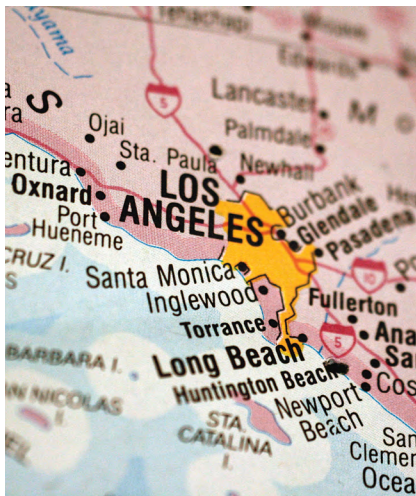
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ENTERTAINMENT

‘RUPAUL’S DRAG RACE’ WINNER MYKI MEEKS ON HER \$200,000 PLANS, BROADWAY DREAMS, AND ‘SNL’ AMBITIONS

BY GIL MACIAS

It’s been only days since Myki Meeks was officially crowned America’s Next Drag Superstar, and she hasn’t really slept since. Before she could even fully process that she achieved her dream of joining the coveted winners circle, the *RuPaul’s Drag Race* Season 18 reigning queen was whisked away to a blur of after-parties, early morning talk shows, and cross-country flights to her first post-win gigs.

In a season that kept fans on edge with shocking eliminations and unforeseen “flat tires” from some of its most polished performers, Meeks managed to outlast the gaggle of girls, rising from a chronically safe underdog to one of the most formidable front-runners during the second half of the season. But, as she tells *LA Weekly*, her survival tactic was simple: she trusted her instincts, always leaning into her self-described “ingénue” persona.

Now that the crown is securely on her head, the real work begins. Beyond the glamour and the \$200,000 check, Meeks is facing the reality of *Drag Race* fame: a mix of sudden financial freedom and a fandom she says can turn from supportive to skeptical the second you start winning. Whether she’s figuring out which extravagant purchases to make with her prize money or eyeing a future on the Broadway stage, the Orlando-based theater kid is keeping her feet on the ground even as her star rises.

During our exclusive interview with the newly crowned queen, we discuss what’s next on her career bucket list, her thoughts on Jane Don’t’s jaw-dropping elimination, and why trusting her gut was the most important tool in her makeup kit.

LA WEEKLY: It’s only been four days since you won *RuPaul’s Drag Race*. Can you give us a brief rundown on



Myki Meeks

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the whirlwind that followed right after you were crowned?

Myki Meeks: Oh, it's exactly what you said: it was a whirlwind. On the day of, it was nonstop events. We watched the episode, then we had to go straight to the coronation and to the after-party. I got maybe an hour of sleep because I had to go straight to *Good Morning America*. So if I looked a little wired, that's why. **Laughs**

But then I was able to have the rest of that day off and my best friends were in New York with me, so we were able to just go and celebrate — and get a bagel. Bagels are my favorite treat. Then I had to go straight to Phoenix, Arizona, for a gig on Sunday. That was my first performance since the win. Now I'm back home. I get to see my boyfriend and I'm reorganizing everything today to do it all over again this weekend.

It sounds like you've barely had time to breathe, but have you made any big purchases with your \$200,000 cash prize yet?

That's a good question. I haven't purchased anything for myself yet. But all my friends were in New York, so I treated them all to a really big dinner, because they helped me with my package for *Drag Race*. And they've been there since day one. So it felt very nice to do so. But as for the future, I need to pay off my car. I want to pay off my debt for some of these designers because they absolutely killed it and I said I'd pay them back later, so that will be gladly paid off

now. And then, in this market, a house is crazy, so let me buy a house.

In the past, we've seen finalists resort to gimmicks or big reveals that can go horribly wrong during the lip-sync for the crown. Did you ever toy with the idea of doing something risky like that?

I thought this song didn't call for any big tricks or gimmicks. It's an emotionally driven song. I like to call myself the ingénue, the actress who takes on the role, and I wanted to take on the role of this song, which was a girl standing up for herself and finding her power, frustrated with what's going on around her. So, like RuPaul says, "You want to make money? Put on a suit!" So I put on a suit and my big old hat, and when I walked out, Miley Cyrus was like, "Oh my gosh, yes. Love the outfit. Very that." And I just let the message of the song be the show. I wanted to deliver what the emotions were giving.

When you're in that moment, were you keeping a constant side-eye on your competitor to see what they're doing? Like, if Nini started doing some cartwheels and flips, would you have shifted your routine? Or were you just more focused on yourself?

I was absolutely focused on myself. I didn't really notice Nini during that — I don't think she noticed me. Let me tell you, I've been performing for seven years. There's nothing as intimidating as performing on the *Drag Race* main stage. But I knew I needed to keep myself solid. I looked at RuPaul and Miley

Cyrus the entire time, because I'm trying to win them over and I'll let the other people get on the ride if they want to. But I was very confident with what I was doing.

Who would you say is the Season 18 queen you bonded with the most?

I feel like I bonded with all of them. I would say post-season now, Nini, Darlene and I have gotten very close. We spend a lot of time together and I love them. They're some of my besties now. But on the show, even today, I can text Jane and Athena at any time. I know they'll respond. I love Kenya. We FaceTime all the time. I adore Juicy. My venue was able to book every queen from the season, so I've had time to spend with every queen and I really adore them all. I wish I could tell you we're a cast full of drama queens, but no, we're all professionals and sisters and I really adore them.

One of the most gasp-inducing moments this season was when Jane Don't got eliminated. Do you remember what was going through your head at that very moment? It just goes to show that anything can happen, even to a front-runner.

Absolutely. Yeah, she said it herself: She's an incredible queen who had a flat tire that day. And the cards fell where they did and they decided to send Jane home. Do I agree with that decision? No, I think Jane deserved to be in the finale with the work she put in the season, but the show's unpredictable. In

the moment, yeah, I was devastated for her as a sister and a friend. But as a competitor ... she walked off the stage and I definitely realized, "Oh shit, I'm the front-runner now." Knowing Jane, she's resilient. She's one of the best drag queens I've ever met. So this is only going to aid her future of being ... the robbed queen. Sure, we'll give her that.

Now that you've crossed winning *Drag Race* off your bucket list, what's next as far as major career goals you want to achieve?

I want to move into more creative directing and producing and giving opportunities to queer entertainers who have the same vision for themselves as I did. I feel like Broadway or regional theater would be my childhood dream, and I would love to achieve that. But, oh my gosh, TV and film. It's just something that I could never get myself before the show. I would love that. Also, this is a stretch, but I think it's time for *SNL* to hire a drag queen.

Speaking of TV, you already made an appearance on *The Drew Barrymore Show*. Any chance you'll make a return?

Oh, she just left me a very nice message on the show. They posted it the other day. But at the end, she said, "Come back, please come back." I don't know if she's the booker for the show, but I would love to. If she ever needs a queen, I'm the queen to call.

What would you say is the biggest thing you learned about yourself during this competition?

I think my biggest takeaway was trusting my gut will get me where I need to go. That was the baseline lesson. There were a lot of times where I doubted myself or if I didn't know if I was making the right decision, but I went with what my gut was telling me and it worked out in the end.

And what is the most rewarding feedback you've gotten from Ru or one of the judges?

The first time I got RuPaul's seal of approval, on Snatch Game, she said, "You are a shining star." You can't beat that, come on!

As the show was airing, did you watch all the components that accompany it, such as Fashion Photo RuView or The Pit Stop with Bianca Del Rio? Were you ever like, "I have to see what Raja and Raven are saying about my looks!"

No, I think it depended on the week. If I knew I didn't like my runway that week, I avoided everything. But when I know I did a good job, I'd like to hear the opinions. I think I've learned to just take it on the chin. I think the biggest reminder is, every queen on the show has been through this and people have talked about them in every type of way. People talk shit about Sasha Colby and she's one of the best drag queens I've ever seen. If that can happen to her, I can take it as well.



PHOTOS OF COURTESY OF MTV



What's your personal rule on engaging with fans on social media? They're so passionate and they comment on everything, probably even on your own account. Do you turn a blind eye to it or do you actually engage when you can?

It depends. I think for Instagram, if this is my portfolio of stuff, people are very kind to me there. Twitter is kind of like the Wild West. You can really get any type of response. I will say fandom is — you can never predict it. Because when I was the underdog of the season, and I was about to get a win or not really getting a win, people were in my corner and they were really cheering for me. Then, I started winning things and — they turned. They were like, "Wow, she didn't deserve that. She doesn't deserve this." And, I'm like, *what?! Like, what happened?!*

I think my biggest takeaway is they want to see you win until you do. There's a portion of the fan base that just wants to be contradictory and wants to go against what the show is giving. Fine, it's your opinion, but damn, you can't start a private group chat? Why do you have to post it online? We're not that famous. We can see everything you're posting.

You were once a pre-teen fan watching the show, but now you've lived it and won. So what's your number-one advice to young drag queens who are thinking of auditioning?

Getting on the show, if you got on, that's already an achievement. The next step is, what do you think your weak spots are? Okay, you now have to do a camp of getting that down. I would say, get some sewing classes down, take an improv class, be on the microphone at your local gig or try to get some public speaking in. There's so much to it. This is not just *America's Next Top Model*, this is not *Project Runway*, this is not *The Voice*: It's everything in one. So you have to be well-rounded to make it. Oh my God, take a dance class, too. Jesus, I wish I did that too. There's such a limited time to get prepared. So just stay focused and know who you are and you'll do it just right.

RuPaul is 65 now and she's still doing drag for over 40 years. Do you see drag as a long-haul career? Can you see Myki Meeks doing drag well into her 60s or do you see yourself eventually pivoting to something else?

I think it's always going to be with me, whether I'm doing it five times a week or once a year. Myki Meeks will always be a part of my life. She's gotten me everything, you know? It's a whole expression of myself. So yeah, I for sure see it. But I might have to take a break for a while. I mean, I can't wait to celebrate my 60th birthday in drag.

Follow Myki Meeks on Instagram @myki.meeks. [IG icon]

WHAT'S UP POPPING UP

Getting Your Money's Worth at Happy Hour

BY MICHELE STUEVEN

Casa Dani by sbe in Century City is bringing a fresh, casual twist to Spanish dining with the launch of its new daily Happy Hour, running from 5 p.m. to 6 p.m. every day. There's an approachable selection of \$7 tapas and beverages, offering a taste of Chef Dani García's culinary style in a relaxed, social setting.

Featured tapas include pimientos del Padrón with hummus, spicy tuna croquettes, oxtail brioche with bull sauce, and grilled California avocado with feta and cilantro pesto. Beverage offerings include Estrella Damm, house red and white wines, and red sangria.

With appetizers like wood-grilled artichokes for \$8 and pan con tomate at \$5, mains including a crispy chicken sandwich or burger at \$12, \$11 salads, and Bolognese pappardelle, the Golden Hour at **Lunetta Santa Monica** is an early bird's dream. Pair with those with \$12 cocktails, \$14 wines, and beers at \$6, it's a gourmet steal Tuesday through Saturday from 3 p.m. to 5 p.m.

Sean Brock's WeHo joint **Darling** is now serving Happy Hour Wednesdays through Saturdays from 5:30 to 6:30 p.m. with a tight menu of savory selections including 5 Fat Fried Chicken with house hot sauce, honey and pickles (it uses five different kinds of fat), shaved southern country ham with apple butter and thyme, and devilled eggs with bluefin tuna belly and Sansho from \$12 to \$16 each. Bar Director Jason Lee created a Happy Hour drink menu featuring six martini variations, each priced at \$13, and wines are \$10 a glass.

Settling into its new home in Westwood, **STK Steakhouse's** signature \$3, \$6, \$9 happy hour offerings are available Monday through Friday from



Rock shrimp ceviche at Lunetta

COURTESY OF MICHELE STUEVEN

2:30 p.m. to 6:30 p.m., and on weekends from 2:30 p.m. to 5:30 p.m., with a late-night menu Sunday through Thursday from 10 p.m. to close. Hosted in the bar, lounge, and patio, the menu is designed as a curated introduction to the brand's core offerings, featuring dishes like short rib quesadillas, Japanese A5 wagyu tacos, and STK and frites, alongside \$9 cocktails and wines by the glass.

Founded in Venice, Calif., in 2016, **Tocaya** is turning 10 and to celebrate, they will be rolling out a 10-day lineup of daily offers, giveaways, and loyalty rewards now through Monday, April 27. The brand will offer rotating daily specials throughout the promotion. 🍷



Tuna tartare tacos

COURTESY OF STK STEAKHOUSE



Happy Hour at Casa Dani

COURTESY OF JAKOB LAYMAN

MUSIC

WALLIE THE SENSEI UNLEASHES HIS 'MAD DOGG'

BY MARK STEFANOS



Wallie the Sensei

COURTESY OF SALTY STATE

Wallie the Sensei plans to walk into California prisons this year with a microphone and a brand-new mixtape.

He hopes he'll be able to step onto the yard and perform for his older cousin — a man who grew up in the same house and is like a brother to him — seeing him for the first time in 16 years. His cousin is serving 98 years and he hasn't seen or heard Wallie play his music live. The artist says performing for his cousin will be one of his life's biggest accomplishments.

The mixtape fueling the tour is *MAD DOGG: THE MIXTAPE, VOL. 1*, which came out this Tuesday, April 21. Its title is an acronym Wallie spells out plainly: Managing Angry Demons, Deprived of God's Grace. "That's just a good explanation of how a lot of people have to maintain and get through where I'm from," he told *LA Weekly* when we talked just before the tape dropped. "It's how you might feel most of your life if you're trying to do something and you're just in turmoil."

The project arrived at the perfect moment. Fresh off a Cactus Jack signing and a Kendrick Lamar feature on *GNX*, Wallie is no longer the underground Compton voice hoping for a shot. He is the artist who can now take the music back to the places that shaped it, and to the people who rarely get front-row seats. His journey — his upbringing, the music, three daughters at home — all flow through a relentless current.

In the studio, Wallie's process is simple and instinctive. He hears a beat and rides the first impression. "If it made me feel something, then I can do it," he explains. Most songs fully form in that initial vibe. He still works the same way he did when he booked his very first two-day studio session years ago.

The result on *MAD DOGG Vol. 1* is a wide, restless sound that draws from his many capabilities. West Coast bounce sits comfortably next to atmospheric, psychedelic textures that carry the Houston rapper Travis Scott's Cactus Jack imprint. Tracks like "4Lines" and its second half, "Self Destruct," split the difference between rapping and singing in a continuous emotional arc. "No Shirt" leans into a paced, melodic pocket he had been exploring privately for a long time but hasn't released — "It's something that I do often and just never put out," he says. True to its name, the title track "MAD DOGG" has an aggressive growl to it, but speaks to the complicated Compton life the acronym dissects.

The tape is shaped by a host of producers who understood the assignment. "They challenge me when they give me beats," he says, "and it always turns out

good. It's always something refreshing." The goal was never to abandon his core audience but to show the elevation that comes from the daily grind of expanding his craft. "I feel like it's barely the beginning of trying to understand the sounds that I got," he adds.

Wallie grew up on the west side of Compton, the first-generation Californian born to parents from the Midwest. His mother, from Chicago, came to California before he was born to be close to his grandmother. His dad is from St. Louis and joined in California for a little bit, but left around the time he was born. "I took the bus to St. Louis to see him when I was about 11 years old. Maybe spent about a week out there, still only seen him maybe once," he says. "In my life, I probably haven't spent more than an hour with my pops."

His grandmother kept the family anchored in LA churches, True Everfaithful and Greater True Light. As a boy, Wallie sang soprano in the choir — not out of spiritual awakening but because his grandmother's father paid him \$50 and everyone loved his high voice. But his spiritual path went sideways when, at age nine or ten, he found his first gun inside a bag of donated toys at another church. After that, he stayed away from services for years, but the vocal foundation remained.

The church choir, he says, "just gave me a base. It gave me an identity. I didn't know that I was going to do music. I never knew. It's kind of weird, right?" Music wouldn't come back into his life until he was about 15.

At home, his mom was raising multiple children, and Wallie spent much of his youth outside. "I ran the streets most of my younger days," he says. "From about eight years old until I was grown, I was just out."

Sports filled a lot of that, with Gonzales Park in Compton becoming a second home. He stayed active: baseball, football, basketball, soccer. "Baseball was my first love, but I played everything." It sounds like he was no slouch either, racking up points, trophies, MVPs and MIPs.

But the neighborhood was rough. "The west side of Compton is an interesting place, bro. A very interesting spot. You got a lot of talent over there." He adds, with some lament, "Growing up, talent was probably the last thing that people focused on in my area. It's a heavily gang, territorial place. But it's a real community. We're like a big family."

That duality of faith and fracture, territory versus community, resurfaces years later in the storytelling on *MAD DOGG*.

At 18, Wallie already had a 16-month-old daughter and needed money. He spent a lot of those years, "just cooking up the idea of trying to find a legal and



Wallie the Sensei

COURTESY OF ONESHOT

positive way out of a city like the one that I'm from," he says.

He overheard two men on a bus talking about seasonal work in Alaska. He eavesdropped, asked for their newspaper, and two weeks later boarded his first plane to Dutch Harbor, on the island of Unalaska — 14 hours of travel, including on a tiny, shaky aircraft that felt like it was heading halfway to Russia (because it was). It was his first time flying.

The plant employed no English speakers. Wallie was one of three Americans, and the only black guy, among Filipinos, Africans, and Hispanics. He helped process a million pounds of fish on the giant vessel Seafreeze America, pulling 20 shifts for months.

Music was his lifeline. His phone held only one album: U2's *Songs of Innocence*, the record Apple had forced onto every iPhone that year. He listened to it on repeat for three straight months. "It actually helps me still to this day," he says. "I still reference that album all the time. It was some dope songs on there, just some

sounds that I never heard before."

He came home on break and ended up in a challenge with a friend, part of a group that had all been rapping since elementary school. "He bet me if I didn't have \$40,000 in the bank on my birthday that I would have to make a mixtape and put it out. I lost the bet."

Fast forward to two days in a modest home studio where Wallie produced three songs per day. Rapping over YouTube beats, he created seven-minute-long tracks with no idea about hooks or structure, and released them anyway. They went viral. "I fell in love with it at the same time," he recalls. "I was so surprised that people actually fucked with the music." He has been locked in the studio pretty much nonstop since.

Today, Wallie has three daughters, aged 12, eight, and three. It's the job he's always wanted. "Being a dad probably was my career choice growing up," he says. "I always wanted to be a dad and be a better example, since I didn't like not having one so much growing up."

His daughters' lives light up every conversation: the eldest is a Level 6 gymnast, the middle daughter loves shopping and fashion, and the youngest is "the big bully in the family." In the car they demand one song on endless repeat: "MAD DOGG, MAD DOGG, MAD DOGG." Wallie laughs, "That's all they want to hear." He credits them with maturing him in ways nothing else could. "When you got somebody that love you so much no matter what, it do something to you."

Success has not pulled him away from the community that raised him. Once or twice a year he throws "Wallie and Friends" events (sometimes under a different name) right in Compton. He brings in fellow artists, hands out free haircuts, clothes, shoes, and food. Volunteers help expunge records, open bank accounts for people who never had one, and line up job opportunities. On holidays, the goal is to simply make sure no one gets left out.

"It was always on my conscience to remember what I come from and the type of people that raised me, and never forgetting the daily struggles, and the inspiration being needed," Wallie says.

The prison tour follows that impulse. Wallie has had the idea for years, but his cousin's situation especially makes it hit home. "He never seen me perform," Wallie says. "He never got to see me in the studio. I didn't make music when he got locked up." The stops planned for a few prisons carry the same message: the music is for the people who feel forgotten. "There's a lot of people that I got love for in the correctional system."

His outreach efforts carry on the legacy of the giants he stands on the shoulders of. "I'm just glad to be doing something that gives people where I'm from some type of hope," Wallie says. "Just like the guys before me — seeing The Game and Kendrick and Dr. Dre and all these other dudes perform so well and leave their impression on the world — it just made me feel like it was possible. If it wasn't for that, I wouldn't be here."

"I always try to give that same hope to the kids coming up around there, just letting them shake my hand sometimes or ask me questions — to see the dedication that I have and hope that it rub off on them and whatever they're doing."

That hope has been reinforced by the mentors who entered his orbit after the Cactus Jack deal. Travis Scott's relentless work ethic left the deepest imprint. "He's like a train just booming through the music and fashion world and constantly raising the bar," Wallie says. "The things that he does is so impactful to everybody ... He just got that effect. If you watch him enough and you pay attention, you got no choice but to be inspired, you know?"

Travis Scott's influence has made Wallie stay extra busy: no breaks, no cutting corners, and to get in tune with himself and add his own sauce to everything.

Kendrick's impact resonates considering their shared roots, and they had crossed paths before the *GNX* feature. "Coming from the same area, he inspired me on a scale where I can't really think of another." In the studio, Kendrick offered pointers that both men seem to live by: "never giving up and always going the extra mile to make sure you're happy with your work."

Wallie plans to release two projects this year. A June tour begins in New York and then sweeps the West Coast. He wants to stay close to the supporters who have been there from the beginning while reaching everyone who is just now hearing his name. The music keeps evolving, but the subject matter stays rooted in the realities he has always known, the same ones experienced by the great rappers that came from Compton before him. "I talk about the same shit," he says, "I just find different ways to make it sound."

Between car rides with his daughters, the prison-yard performances, and the next studio session, the *MAD DOGG* ethos is the bridge that carries Wallie back to the people and places that made him, and will push him to whatever's next. It's a framework that balances the divergent threads of his life — his struggles, his creative process, his responsibilities, and where he came from.

"Being from a place like that, there's a lot of pain and losses of friends," he says. "But there's also love."

Follow Wallie the Sensei on Instagram @walliethesensei. 



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