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[< Duckwrth Treats Hip-Hop As His Missionary Work](https://www.npr.org/2019/05/10/722139727/duckwrth-treats-hip-hop-as-his-missionary-work)

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AILSA CHANG, HOST:

The rapper Duckwrth grew up with a foot in two worlds - the Pentecostal Christian one of his mother's house and that of his neighborhood.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "SALLIE MAE")

DUCKWRTH: (Singing) Why you got to be so toxic?

We lived by an alleyway, and, like, every once in a while, we'd just hear, like, an explosion. We'd always hear, like, gunshots from, like, across the street. You know, like, there was even one time where I was allowed to go outside, and then, like, a drive-by happened.

CHANG: Duckwrth grew up in South Central LA in the '90s, during the height of West Coast gangsta rap and of gang life in his neighborhood. As much as he was interested in the music he was hearing all around him, his mom tried to keep him away.

DUCKWRTH: A lot of the people coming up in our neighborhood, there were, like, joining gangs. So she just didn't want me to be a part of a gang. But also, like, because I was raised religious, it was, like, deemed as secular to listen to music that doesn't have to do with Jesus.

CHANG: These religious themes show up throughout Duckwrth's new EP, "The Falling Man."

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "SALLIE MAE")

DUCKWRTH: (Singing) Like a drop kick. Will you be ready to fall? Oh-whoa. Will you be ready to fall? Oh-whoa.

CHANG: It felt like you grew up under - right? - like, contradictory influences. You had your mom's Pentecostal teachings, but then the neighborhood was the neighborhood; it was all around you. Even if you were inside, you were hearing it, you were seeing it. What was that like to be under, like, conflicting influences all the time?

DUCKWRTH: A lot of people, like - it can end up being, like - yeah, you end up, like, super scared, like, maybe either curious, or you just don't want to see that world at all. I think, me, I just made it my own world, and I think that's what, like, helped me become a creative.

CHANG: Yeah.

DUCKWRTH: Like, I did a lot of drawing. I did a lot of imagining (laughter). But I just - yeah, I made my own world.

CHANG: Is there a song on this EP that captures that, how music and art became your companion?

DUCKWRTH: I kind of, like, reveal a bit of, like, my upbringing in the beginning of "Soprano."

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "SOPRANO")

DUCKWRTH: (Singing) My tongue is a - what? - weapon, 40 caliber, shooting at the hecklers.

It reveals how music was secular, but I still was curious about the music I wasn't supposed to listen to.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "SOPRANO")

DUCKWRTH: (Singing) Lucifer sings in Soprano. Fallen angels listening to Zeppelin. Your mama told you not to - what? - listen to secular music. The devil's in the trap. Automatic weapon singing like tubas. Black Sabbath on vinyl. AC/DC in the summer. Killa Cam in the winter. This is what you always wanted.

But for me, it wasn't, like, in a form of rebellion; I just was just curious about it because I've heard, like, bits and pieces of it, and it just sounded good. Like, listening to, like, G-funk.

(SOUNDBITE OF THA EASTSIDAZ'S "G'D UP")

DUCKWRTH: G-funk was like Nate Dogg, 213, DJ Quik. Snoop Dogg did this side project called Tha Eastsidaz. It's this song called "G'd Up."

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "G'D UP")

THA EASTSIDAZ: (Rapping) I bang with the gang that don't need no intro. We run from East Long Beach to West South Central.

DUCKWRTH: And G-funk derived from funk from the '70s and '80s.

CHANG: (Laughter).

DUCKWRTH: And it also kind of reminded me, like, you know, the music I was allowed to hear, which was like - they for sure had Stevie Wonder, Earth, Wind & Fire vinyls (ph) in the crib, you know? So it's like, G-funk didn't sound that different; it's just, you know, they kind of spoke it from, like, a more of a gangsta perspective.

CHANG: Would you feel guilty inside when you were drawn to more of the G-funk or more of the gangsta sound, the stuff that you would hear on the street? Did it feel, like, bad that you liked it?

DUCKWRTH: Only because I couldn't, like, express that to my family, except for my sister. Like, my sister was the one that got me into hip-hop. So it's like, she listened to an album, I'd listen to it (laughter).

CHANG: (Laughter).

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "A WILDFIRE")

DUCKWRTH: (Singing) I swear the whole world's making me anxious. I feel like I'm at the bottom. Yeah, I'm still smoking on Newports; that's one more nail in the coffin. And when I crash to the bottom, that's one big fall, like it's autumn. My mama says call on Jesus, but I'm too ashamed to call him, yeah.

CHANG: So what does your mom think of your music now?

DUCKWRTH: She's getting used to it.

CHANG: (Laughter).

DUCKWRTH: She's getting used to it.

CHANG: It's still a transition.

DUCKWRTH: Yeah, it's still a transition. Because, like, I'm using profanity, like, I'm talking about different, like, perspectives and different, like, scenarios that, like, aren't aligned with Christianity. But, like, this is my form of missionary work, you know?

CHANG: Yeah, yeah.

DUCKWRTH: This is my form of it. It's me revealing, like, the realities right now. And it's also being able to, like, speak to a people but with their language.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "A WILDFIRE")

DUCKWRTH: (Singing) I won't ever stay down and out. I get mines (ph) and get gone.

CHANG: It's so interesting that you say that you got to speak their language because, you know, you did end up leaving South Central. You went on to study as a graphic designer. But when you listen to your music, there are a lot of references to violence, to gang life; that's part of the image of masculinity in hip-hop. But how do you want people to see you, like, in your music? What is the identity you're trying to refract back to them?

DUCKWRTH: I'm a reflection of them. The whole point of "The Falling Man" is saying that, like, this certain character can fall. People see artists as just, like, pedestal, and, like, they don't deal with the same stuff, you know. But it's just, like, within me, like, showing myself and, like, actually seeing me, like, fall to the lowest point, it's just saying - it's just like, I am you, too. Like, we deal with the same things.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "A WILDFIRE")

DUCKWRTH: (Singing) I want peace. I want a partner (ph). Everything about me - too busy finding love (ph).

CHANG: Do you think the idea of masculinity in hip-hop is something that's evolving still?

DUCKWRTH: Yep.

CHANG: Tell me how.

DUCKWRTH: I mean, like, even if you listen to the song I did, "Love Is Like A Moshpit," I'm literally, like, emoting, and I'm presenting my insecurities.

CHANG: Yeah.

DUCKWRTH: We've been falling out of love. Waking up from the dream, and I think I'm going numb. I don't feel anything. You been pushing, I've been shoving. We're just trying to feel something.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "LOVE IS LIKE A MOSHPIT")

DUCKWRTH: (Singing) You been going up and down, back and forth, in between. Why is loving never easy? None of us just want to leave. I just want to end it all. Hit me with the triple beam. We just pushing, now we shoving. We're just trying to feel something. It goes...

I'm just, like, crying. You know what I'm saying?

CHANG: Yeah.

DUCKWRTH: It's just like, there was a moment in music where men were emoting, and then that got flipped. And then, like - you know what I'm saying - it became more gangsta rap. And it's like, there was a flip that happened in 2008.

CHANG: Whoa, you can pinpoint it? What happened in 2008?

DUCKWRTH: I can pinpoint it.

(LAUGHTER)

DUCKWRTH: Kanye West with "808s & Heartbreak." Like, the name of the album is heartbreak.

CHANG: Yeah. Right.

DUCKWRTH: So it was, like, it lent way or, like, space for artists and male artists to emote themselves.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "LOVE IS LIKE A MOSHPIT")

DUCKWRTH: (Singing) Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. Love is like a mosh pit. Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. Love is like a mosh pit. Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. Love is like a mosh pit. Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. Love is like a mosh pit.

CHANG: So, you know, you're based in LA now. It sounds like you have evolved a lot since you were a kid growing up there. What does it feel like when you go back to your old neighborhood?

DUCKWRTH: I think it's beautiful. I love going back home. Like, the sun shines differently in South Central (laughter). I love, like, seeing, like, a lot of the old homies and stuff.

CHANG: Do you feel, like, when you're walking around, you're presenting yourself the same way you used to? Like, does the old you kind of revert back, or is there a different Duckwrth?

DUCKWRTH: When I was, like, in the hood, I wasn't even known as Duckwrth. They'd call me, like, Mohawk because I tried to have a mohawk.

CHANG: (Laughter).

DUCKWRTH: So they'd call me, like, Mohawk or Mo-Mo (ph). And, like, yeah, that's what they knew me as. And it's, like, now that I come back as Duckwrth, yeah, for sure, like, I'm different. And, like, I'm in a different place in life. So it's like, when they find my Instagram, they're like, yo, what the hell happened to Mohawk?

(LAUGHTER)

DUCKWRTH: This is wild, yo. I mean, so it's like, yeah, it's a different conversation, but then when we talk, like, they find I'm still him; I'm just, like, you know, doing different things.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "NOBODY FALLS")

CHANG: Duckwrth's new EP is called "The Falling Man." Thank you very much for talking with us.

DUCKWRTH: Yeah, no problem. Thank you for having me.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "NOBODY FALLS")

DUCKWRTH: (Singing) I can be your favorite song, set the mood and turn me on. Neon lights and alcohol. Days is short, but nights is long.

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