

Time Out

Chicago

*Yes, you
Cannes!*
Host your
own outdoor
film fest

*Roast with
the most*
A coffee buzz
at cocaine
prices

Plus
New music
from Thom
Yorke & the
Handsome
Family

hip-hop special

Rhymefest:

“White people
don’t have to do
blackface. We do
it for ourselves.”

Cover Price \$2.50



0 71896 44501 5

'Fest in show

Hometown MC Rhymefest is set to break out with *Blue Collar*. But will his everyman ethos resonate with hip-hop fans? By **Matthew Lurie** Photographs by **Calbee Booth**

At first glimpse, Rhymefest seems like an average dude. He doesn't sport bling, his entourage rolls a meager two-deep and he doesn't expect favors from the clerks at Wicker Park's Dusty Groove. Everyone here seems unaware this Chicago native is about to drop the year's most anticipated debut hip-hop release.

That album, *Blue Collar*, arrives this week, and people like J Records mogul Clive Davis are banking on it to make Rhymefest the first Chicago MC to break out since Kanye West. Rhymefest's relationship with West goes way back: They've known each other since their teenage years on the South Side hip-hop scene. "I look at Kanye and people are like, 'Wow!' [and] I'm like, 'This dude?'" the 28-year-old Fest says with a laugh. Fest also co-wrote (some believe solely wrote) West's Grammy-winning hit, "Jesus Walks."

Most notably, though, Fest expands West's jaded Gap-worker shtick into existential terrain. *Blue Collar* shows inklings of a hip-hop Studs Terkel, telling the stories of the working class in unsentimental terms. As he puts it on the album: "I'm ahead of my time, but I'm behind on my rent."

Inside Dusty Groove, Fest goes through the CDs tentatively, insisting he's "not a record collector." But his pick—he settles on EPMD's classic *Unfinished Business* after not finding CDs by Biz Markie and Dizzee Rascal—shows Fest knows his old skool from his new school.

Unlike the lives of other hip-hop icons, Fest's background is not filled with dramatic gunfights or near-death accidents—only the mundane grittiness of South Side working-class life. Born Che Smith (he's named after revolutionary Che Guevara) in Jeffery Manor, Rhymefest grew up

in—and draws inspiration from—a troubled family. His mother gave birth to him when she was just 16, and his drug-addicted father deserted the family.

Fest dropped out of South Shore High School at 17 and began a string of low-paying jobs, including working for a flower-delivery service and at a dry cleaner. He went to night school to get his high-school diploma, then started at Columbia College. Eventually, he quit his last crap job, at McDonald's, to focus on being an MC. "There's no way you can work on your craft and be successful at it when it's on the back burner," he says. "When I said, 'I'm gonna quit these jobs, fuck it all—I'm gonna sink or I'm gonna swim,' that's when success started to happen to me."

Quitting his job meant hustling music became full-time work, and he does just that when we enter Gramophone Records. Fest introduces himself to customers, schmoozes the clerks and collects money for some of his mix-tape CDs that Gramophone has sold.

Yet his mind is by no means always on the money. *Blue Collar*'s lead single, the West-produced "Brand New," mocks a materialistic culture with its "I don't like it unless it's brand new" hook. It sounds funny, but Fest is dead serious about its implications: "Watching my people value things that aren't really valuable, like rims or shoes, is depressing. White people don't even have to do blackface. We do it for ourselves—we are caricatures of ourselves."

Blue Collar's lyrics concern these tribulations, but the beats are cash money: Fest's festive sound comes from L.A. pop wizard Jon Brion, Ronson and Just Blaze. But most

him a household name, but he says he's tired of the internal squabbling in Chicago hip-hop. "We need Kanye and Common—and hopefully Rhymefest—to come

"Watching my people value things that aren't really valuable, like rims or shoes, is depressing. White people don't even have to do blackface. We do it for ourselves."

crucially, NO.I.D. chops up everything from Alicia Keys to La Lupe's "Fever" with his trademark jazz-tinged boom bap.

Fest swears he won't forget his Chicago roots if *Blue Collar* makes

back and unify and mobilize [the scene]," he says. "We can't go for no wack-ass excuses no more."

Blue Collar works its way onto shelves on Tuesday 11.

