

Interview with Slug from Atmosphere



Ever since the start of their own record label with Rhymesayers Entertainment and the release of their debut album *Overcast!* during the mid-'90s, Minneapolis hip-hop duo Atmosphere has risen to be one of the biggest names in independent music. Recently I managed to have a chat the MC of the duo in Slug about the group's North Of Hell Tour making a stop at Lupo's Heartbreak Hotel on November 18, their new album *Southsiders*, life continuously on the road, and an inside look at one of the most talented rappers around today.

Rob Duguay: Atmosphere will be coming to Lupo's on November 18 to once again set the stage on fire. You've performed in Providence numerous times, so what always makes you want to mark The Creative Capital on your calendar when you head out on tour?

Slug: We'll go anywhere that'll let us perform so there's no real way to answer the question on why we keep coming back. The real question is why do you let us keep coming back? We keep coming back to Providence because you guys treat us like you love us. You guys treat us like we're amazing and that's the kind of validation you just don't get everywhere. I'm a freak for validation, I love it, it's like orgasmic. Technically we'll go anywhere that lets us/ Estonia, Providence, Uruguay, anywhere.

RD: We're all looking forward to the show at Lupo's and it should be a blast.

Slug: I'm looking forward to it as well, I really like Lupo's actually. There's few venues around the world that get it the way that I get it. I grew up in Minneapolis attending and later performing at a venue called First Avenue, so I was trained a certain way as far as how we work and how we do our job. Lupo's definitely fits the way that I was taught, it's very comfortable from the loaders to the sound engineers to the bartenders and the staff in general. It fits my view on how things should work.

RD: That's awesome that you feel that way. Lupo's is a great club that treats everybody right. You attribute a lot of Atmosphere's success to going on tour relentlessly. If you had a story that comes to mind from being on tour whether it was a crazy girl or a crazy situation at a club what would it be?

Slug: There was a woman outside of the old Met Café in Providence back in 2001 across the street from an ice cream shop. This woman was out there after the show and the crowd pulled out into the street. Back then we weren't that popular so there was probably only around 100 people. We're all just kind of standing around and this girl just took her shirt off. She started kind of making a scene outside and she was yelling at us. I'm not totally sure what she was attempting in general, but she was trying to get everybody's attention. She was asking "Am I the jezebel? Am I the jezebel? Am I the jezebel?" and there

was this guy I'm sure a lot of people in Providence know named Sage Francis who pointed at her and said, "You're the jezebelly!"

It stuck with me. I feel that there was something inside of that moment that kind of stuck with me forever just as far as how I work with people and how I interact with people. We all have our own interpretations, every action is entitled to some sort of intention. What the problem is that we all don't necessarily interpret your actions as vain as nobody interprets my actions as vain. It's the kind of thing at that moment where she was the artist, she wanted us all to see but she had no control of how we interpreted her art and that stuck with me as far as how I interact with my audience and I don't have these expectations of people to interpret my art the way I mean it. On that particular night, whatever that woman was trying to get across, our interpretation of it was far more interesting than whatever she was trying to say with her actions. That's my favorite part about art. I might write a song and there's no way that it's going to be as cool as how an audience member interprets it and that's what gives the song its life. Otherwise, it's just this linear path that I'm on as an artist.

RD: It's crazy how much an event like that had an effect on your artistry. Speaking of art, this past May Atmosphere put out their seventh studio album, *Southsiders*. A lot of musicians and artists who have an extensive catalog like your own always manage to have at least one sub-par release, while on the other hand, Atmosphere has always put out a quality record. What do you think is the main reason why you and Ant have always managed to keep things so fresh?

Slug: Well, I have no idea. I'm not even sure, we may have fallen off but I don't know how to measure that kind of stuff. I just know that we are fortunate that people allow us to continue to do this and therefore we just try to do our best. I don't really know what I'm doing, I'm still trying to feel my way through. We just see it at eye level; at a higher level it's just a matter of marketing, promotions and having business strategies. When you're running on your own steam I don't know if there is a secret, you just do your best to be yourself and do your best to do your best. If you're fortunate enough to get the gig then cool, but if not then it's ok, it's not the end of the world.

RD: Ever since the *At It Again* tour that you did in the mid-2000s, Atmosphere has been known to perform with a live band. When you first had this idea come to fruition, did you experience any challenges while you were teaching all of these musicians how to play hip-hop tracks?

Slug: At the time I thought that the reason to do it was to challenge ourselves. The reason I even started to go down that path was because I was becoming comfortable doing what I was doing with just a DJ. I felt that it was probably not ok to feel comfortable so when I started working with live musicians it was 100% challenging. Obviously hindsight is 20/20; when I look back on it I feel it was just a part of me that wanted to stretch, grow and to just make sure that I wasn't allowing the audience to become complacent and allowing myself to become complacent. The challenge just wasn't to challenge myself or just to challenge the musicians I was working with but it was also to challenge the audience. In underground rap it was kind of a no-no to work with a live band because that was what The Roots were doing and if you did it you were just trying to be like The Roots so there was a part of me that really wanted to challenge our audience.

RD: There's nothing wrong with taking a risk, especially when people appreciate it. You've done numerous collaborations with the likes of Murs, Aesop Rock, KRS-One, Sage Francis who you mentioned earlier and even Minnesota indie rockers Lifter Puller who was lead by currently frontman of The Hold Steady Craig Finn. Is there anyone else you'd like to do a project with in the near future?

Slug: It's hard to say, I don't really make a list of people for that kind of stuff. I did a song with Tom Waits a few years ago and that was kind of like the last big fish for me. At this point I'd love to do a song with someone like Willie Nelson. He's probably the last starfighter for me, I'd love to do a song with Willie.

RD: That sounds like it could be pretty interesting if it ever happened. What can fans of Atmosphere expect next year? Are you going to do another album? Are you doing a big tour? Will you be producing?

Slug: I'm not sure. I want to spend a decent amount of time with my kids. I do intend to do some traveling and go around playing music and writing songs. As it stands right now we'll be definitely be doing another tour to hit up a few cities that we missed out on this time around, but other than that I just plan on enjoying my life.

Atmosphere's website: rhymesayers.com/atmosphere