In conversation with DUCKWRTH

Written By shift.

Few artists can blend the electric elements of punk with hip hop, rhythmic R&B, and soul with the same class and flair as LA-based Duckwrth.

His sophomore album *SuperGood*, which is also the name of his creative studio, perfectly captured his ability to captivate his audience through vibrant words, melodies, and most importantly, visuals. Released amidst the chaos of 2020, the project was packaged as medicinal music for his listeners. Personifying happiness and spreading positivity, *SuperGood* was about sending an uplifting vibe out into the world through artistry and hoping people would feel good.

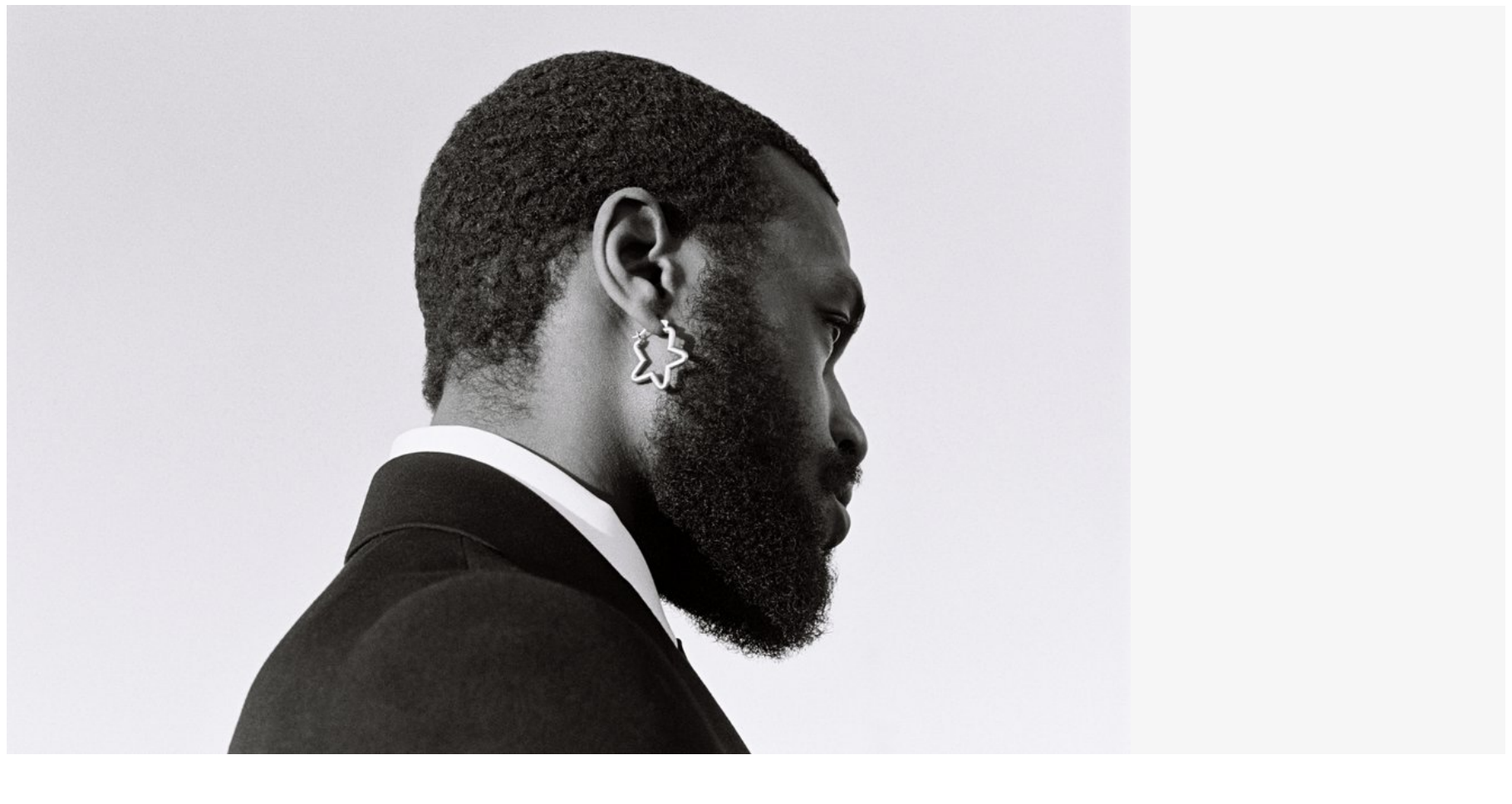
This year, however, Duckwrth kicked off 2022 with the release of a high-energy single, "Power Power" and a brand new character (or alter-ego) to accompany his new flow. From his dynamic sound to his exceptional visual perception, the South Central-native is an all-around creative who is only just getting started. Original Shift sat down with Duckwrth to chat about his creative expression through his characters, the significance of visual aesthetics as well as the breadth of different projects we can expect from him in the future.

Original Shift: What was it like growing up in South Central LA?

Duckwrth: It was hard. It was heavy at times, but it was beautiful. South Central is residential, so you don't go there unless you have a reason to be there. The family structure is strong. I was raised in the church so my upbringing in South Central was through the lens of Christianity. Outside of that, it was fun but it was dangerous, you know? I feel that the imminent danger that always around gave me a backbone. Being able to survive that, you feel like you can survive anything.

Who were some of your musical influences growing up, outside of your family of musicians?

I was raised on Classical and Gospel music, artists like Kirk Franklin and Fred Hammond. Later on, I got into Jazz and Rock, Miles Davis of course. After that, it was hip-hop, Common, Mos-Def, Talib Kweli, Outkast, and Jill Scottand Erykah Badu. A lot of good music.



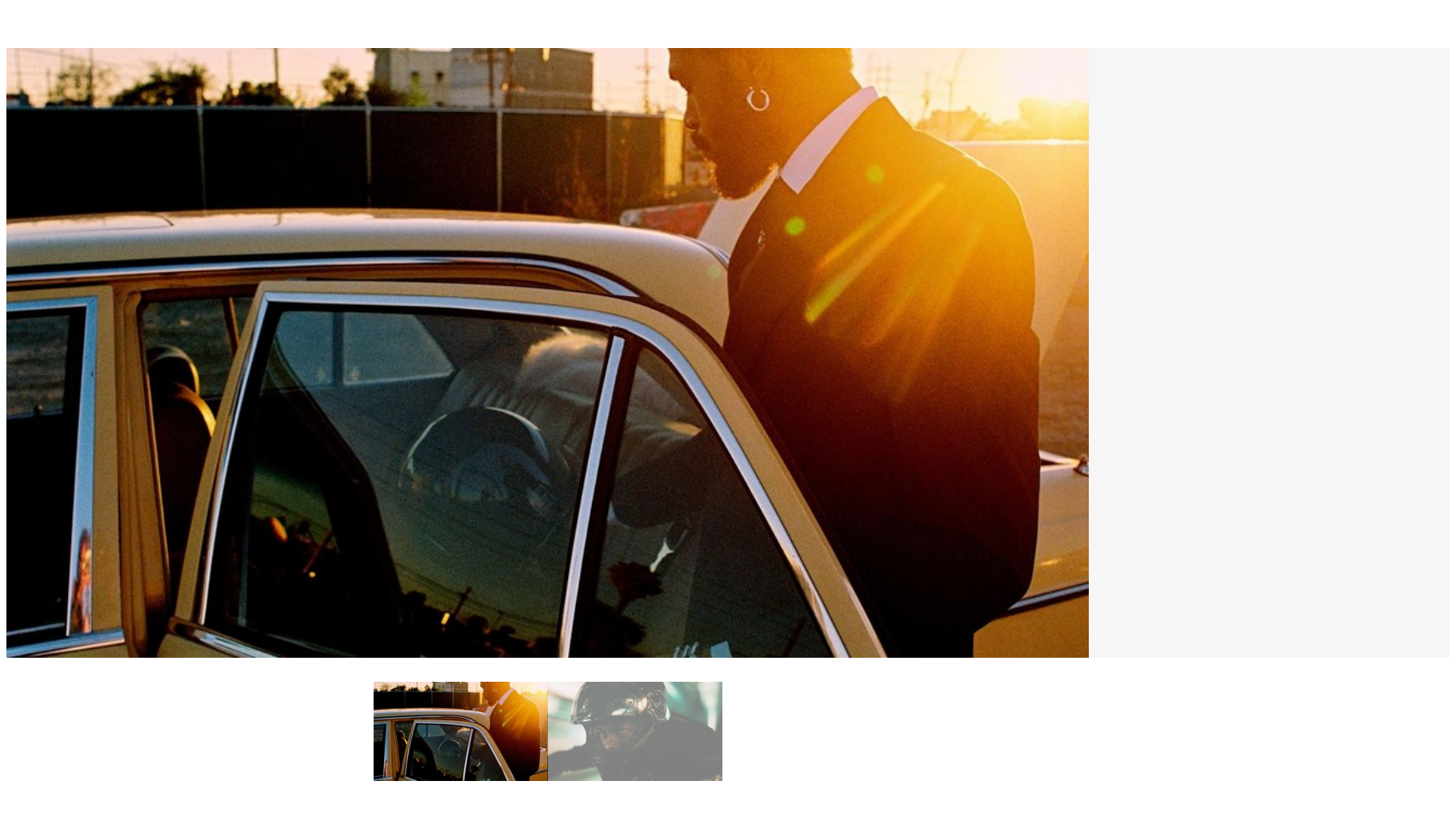
You said that Kanye, Pharrell, and Lupe Fiasco were superheroes for the nerds growing up. What was it about those artists that you identified with?

My group of friends and I were nerds that were into comic books, Japanese Manga, and Slipknot. Growing up, we didn't have anyone in the public eye that was outward with their "nerdy" interests. Kanye was one of the first rappers of that time to say "*I'm insecure. I deal with emotions,*" and he would display his insecurities. To have somebody like that who was Black and famous was important. The tone of being a Black male, especially during the time of gangsta rap and even New York rap, it was still hard. Even with gang culture, it's because you didn't have anyone to look up to, so you felt like that was the only route.

People who embrace the idea that being a Black man isn't two-dimensional or defined by a stereotype, I think helps others become more accepting of themselves.

You describe yourself as a visual artist, championing the way things look as having just as much importance as how they sound. You also have a background in graphic design, so has that always been a priority for you?

Even before graphic design I was always intrigued and dead-set on how things looked visually. If you put a visual to it, I could grasp anything. That's just how my mind worked. But noticing how people respond with certain colours or shapes, or how certain fonts and colours work together, I saw how these complementary pieces create an emotional response. I learned that at a young age. Then going into music, everything was about how you represent yourself visually. Imagine you're in a vintage store and going through vinyls – sometimes you don't know the band, but you may get the vinyl just because the cover is a piece of art, and you want something that looks amazing. We're really living in a visual generation. We're judging books by their cover, easy. I learned the importance of that in high school, doing graphic design with T-shirts.



What were the T-shirts about?

I started a brand called Acoustic. It was a streetwear and skate brand, I guess. We had a skate squad, Dumpster Truck Dimes. I was really inspired by BBC Ice Cream. I would make the graphics using Windows Paint and would print the graphics onto an iron on, iron them onto the shirt and I pulled up to school. I was tired of people wearing the same shit so I started making my own shit. People started saying "Yo that's hard, can you make me one too?" Before I knew it, I was making like 20+ shirts [laughs].

Do you still have them?

I have some in a chest somewhere and my mom has them too. I definitely do still have them.

Photo by Steven Piper

You recently launched your brand. What was the purpose behind the brand and naming it SuperGood?

In the pandemic, things were a bit dark and uncertain. Nobody knew where life was going to go and everybody was just scared. I felt like it was important to have something that was a light in the dark cave. The album I dropped in 2020 was called *SuperGood*. I wanted something where when people press play, they felt super good because of the melodies I chose, or the chorus, or what I was rapping about. I just wanted people to feel good. From there I loved the name of it and thought it would be sick to add a graphic to it. I created the font, and made it italicised so it has this emotion, even the oval around it is slightly tilted to make it feel like a motion. That design stemmed from the pandemic and feeling hopeless. I wanted to convey that in your most stagnant moments, there are ways to keep moving even if you aren't moving at your usual pace of life.

It's called SuperGood Creative Studios, but the idea behind it is to have a hub where if I wanted to make an animation, boom. If I wanted to make a sound for the animation, there it is. If I wanted to make garments, furniture, or anything I fucking please [laughs], I wanted there to be an umbrella company for it. Using it in an album form was the perfect way to introduce it, to familiarise people with the name "SuperGood" it was easy to go from there. Right now, it's in garment form, but the ultimate form is a creative studio.

What are some projects you'd love to do?

Animation is one of them. I don't want to reveal everything, but doing TV voice overs and making the soundtracks for those episodes. I guess Insecure does that, but my vision is to not just have artists make the music for the episode, but also play the characters. It's tight, it's like an album from your favourite artist. But also, it's employing artists outside of a regular DSP and hoping that blows up. The pressure as an artist is defeating as fuck 'cos not everything gets picked up and not everything goes. The pressure to always have something popping, that shit is a lot, and it takes the joy away from making music. Just to have an avenue for artists to have fun and play in that child-like space and pull from that area, I want to help build that. Not having to think of clout and shit but to also have that monetary gain.

That's thoughtful and as you said, fun. You mentioned a foray into furniture, can you give us any details?

I literally just finished designing a coffee table. Vans commissioned me to make something and I was just like it would be sick to make a coffee table where we use the rubber sole of Vans to make the top, and place a glass on top to emphasise the grip.

Yo, that's sick..

I'm pretty stoked. It came out better than I expected. That was my first exploration into furniture design – I'd like to design a whole living room in the future. I like IKEA for its user-friendliness and putting it in the buyers hands. Even though they give instructions, I think it's sick to put it together yourself. I'd like to implement that into the designs that I'm doing.

Photo by Steven Piper

I get the feeling that there's so many things that you could have found success in, but it's just music that ended up working out first. So outside of music, what could you imagine as your day-to-day?

Design. Music was an accidental passion. Coming from gospel, it was just in my family, in my DNA. But design… I have just as much joy designing something as I do making music. Only thing that beats that is being able to perform, and the reciprocation that happens when you're on stage. You put that energy out and someone takes that energy in and throws it back. There's nothing that beats that.

Do you remember the first time you had people singing your lyrics back to you at a show?

Last year. The *SuperGood* show, it was like my second headline or something. 'Cos when you're coming up you hope that people want to see you. With rap, you can pack so many words into a song but with *SuperGood*, I found ways to minimise it and give you the same feeling of rap, but be more intentional about it. It's not about how deep something is. I feel like the sauciest motherfuckers are the ones who can say something simple but have layers and depth to it– that's a bigger challenge than any deep lyric. So, I found out how to do that with *SuperGood,* al had the melody to it, that's also the winner. But last year was the first time people were singing my shit. That's all I've dreamt of, people being familiar with my music and singing to it.

Photo by **Sariel Eklaim**

You've mentioned the importance of your music having a physical presence and that if you can't touch it, it's hard to feel it. How did you manage to cope during the pandemic?

During isolation I had a partner, so I wasn't alone. She got me through it. She's a herbalist and we were practising natural ways of taking care of our health. I think during the pandemic and lockdown, you were forced to go outside of your comfort zone and your profession. It was about survival and fighting to live at that moment so I was like fuck this music [laughs], fuck all this shit, I'm trying to live. I missed it and everything, but I gave myself the time and space to just be, exist, and take care of my human. As far as being separated from my family, that shit sucked. My mum got married on Zoom! [laughs]. That was weird, that shit was mad meta. But it's signs of the times man. I predicted it, I said in 2020 they're gonna introduce so much new technology. Something they probably wanted to introduce for a while, but 2020 was just the perfect segue. It's a different approach when it becomes necessary for humans to use technology. Even the Metaverse, I'm sure they've wanted to introduce that for a while now and 2020 was just the perfect opportunity.

I find it wild. It kind of scares the shit out of me.

Yeah, as it should. Even in sci-fi movies it's always the same premise – technology takes over and kills humans or turns them into batteries. It's definitely that narrative for sure.

I've never seen a good ending in a film like that. It's always everyone dies or Will Smith saves the day.

[Laughs] One that I did like was *Bicentennial Man* with Robin Williams. He was a robot but wanted to be human. He'd fall in love with women and then live beyond them as a robot, so he wanted to become human in that way. I'm botching the fuck out of this film but the angle was tight [laughs]. It was interesting and beautiful.

Photo by **Sariel Eklaim**

Are there any specific forms of art you gravitate towards when you need references for a project?

I'm gonna keep it 100 with you. Pinterest bro [laughs]. I'd like to sound deeper, but Pinterest.

Pinterest is like an online library. It's not as romanticised but it has literally everything you need. Where do you get the inspiration for your style? Pinterest too?

[Laughs] My spinal cord is punk, so I'm always in some kind of hardware. Really just silver hardwear, a choker, anything with a tone of rebellion. Other than that, it can go from super prep or posh to grime. I'm more so now getting into a high-end taste level. The character I'm playing right now wears a 2-piece suit, double breasted, Italian cut, white button up, black tie, moto gloves and a helmet. That is who I am at the moment. Or at least in music, that's my character. I like him because – and don't be confused by the suit – he's gonna sweat, he's gonna move, maybe even end up in the mosh pit. He's an asshole that you'd like to kick it with.

Do you build characters for different songs or projects?

Yeah. Not even purposely, it just happens. My favourite artists do. In every project, you'll see someone new. The Weeknd does it, I just respect him 'cos he stays true to the character. The best way to tell a story is through character development. The character I'm playing is always a true reflection of me at the time, maybe just exaggerated. Who I am on stage is way more bold and pronounced than who I am in real life, I find myself to be way more introverted.

Introverted? If I had 100 adjectives to describe you, introvert wouldn't even come close.

[Laughs]

What is one misconception people have that irks you?

Maybe it's that misunderstanding. I guess people find me to be a mystery but I try to not hold my tongue too much. I guess people just don't understand me in that sense. Sometimes in my vast array of colours, they find me a bit much at times. But I'm an artist, I should be that. Who wants a one-spectrum creator? My favourites are the ones pulling from the Aurora Borealis or the rainbow.

Speaking of colour, when you dye your hair a new colour, is there a specific meaning behind it?

Yeah. With *SuperGood* my hair was a burnt orange, and before that it was a raging red. I became more calm in 2020 so that red turned into orange, a calmer tone. That was the vibe of the album. Then with *SG8** I was ready to get out. I was done with being inside and I wanted to be more vibrant. I think that's reflected in the song "4K." That song is all about vacation. It was literally when they opened up all the borders and everybody was going on vacation to Costa Rica, Hawaii, or wherever else. So "4K" was me reflecting that time of people vacationing so hard. Like I'm on vacay I'm gonna dye my hair pink, I'm gonna be out here. After that, everything went back to normal so I cut off the pink. Recently it was silver, and that was me getting into more futuristic vibes. Black, white, chrome…more cutting edge. So yeah, it just happens like that too. I don't do it very intentionally, but I look back and I'm like "Ah yeah that makes sense."

What is some of the wildest shit your fans have done?

[Pauses]

[Laughs] PG answers.

[Laughs] I've had big painted pieces of art made for me. It's not really wild, but it's beautiful. Wild is such a specific word. Someone tattooed my album on their lip. I guess that would be wild.

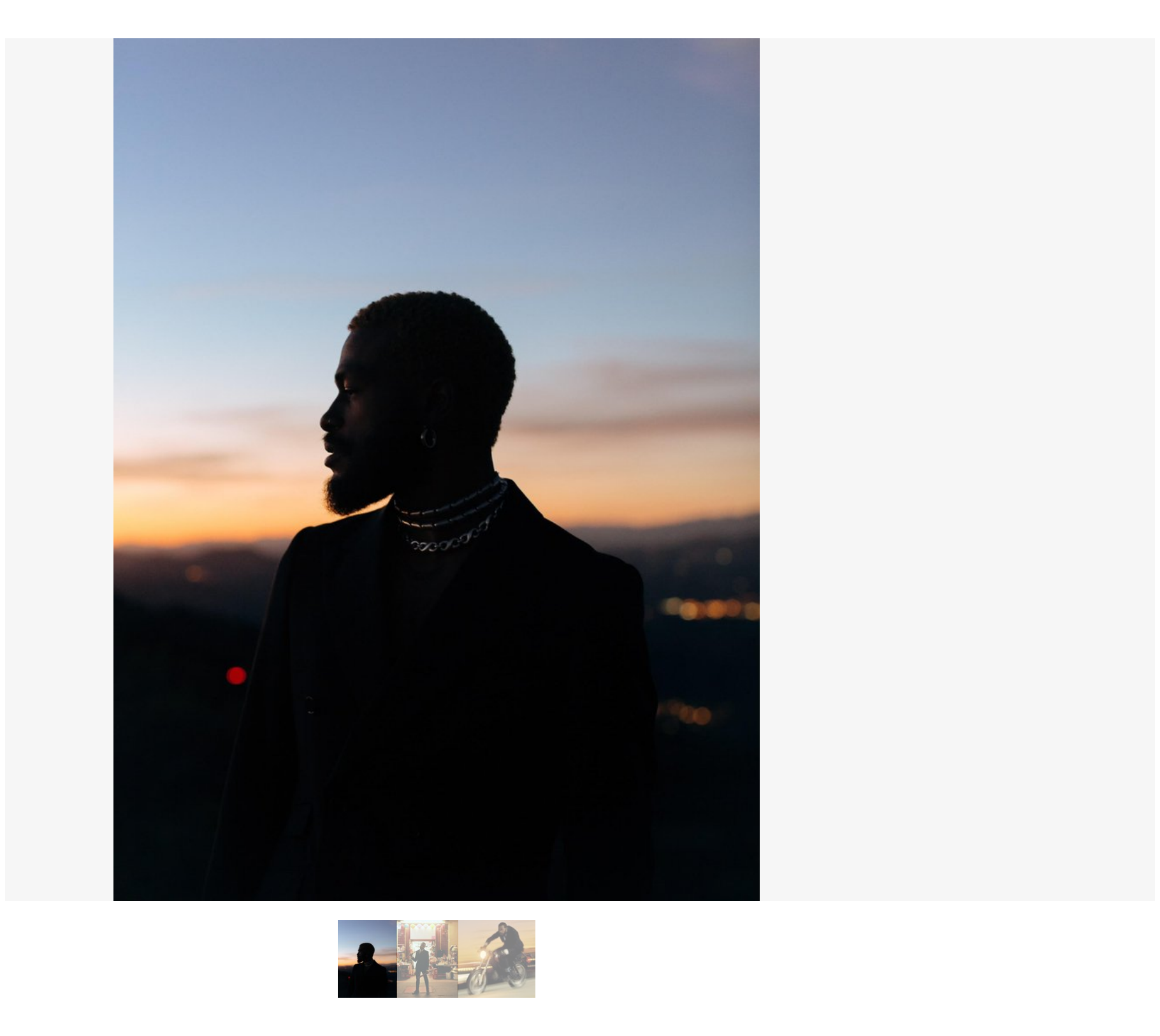


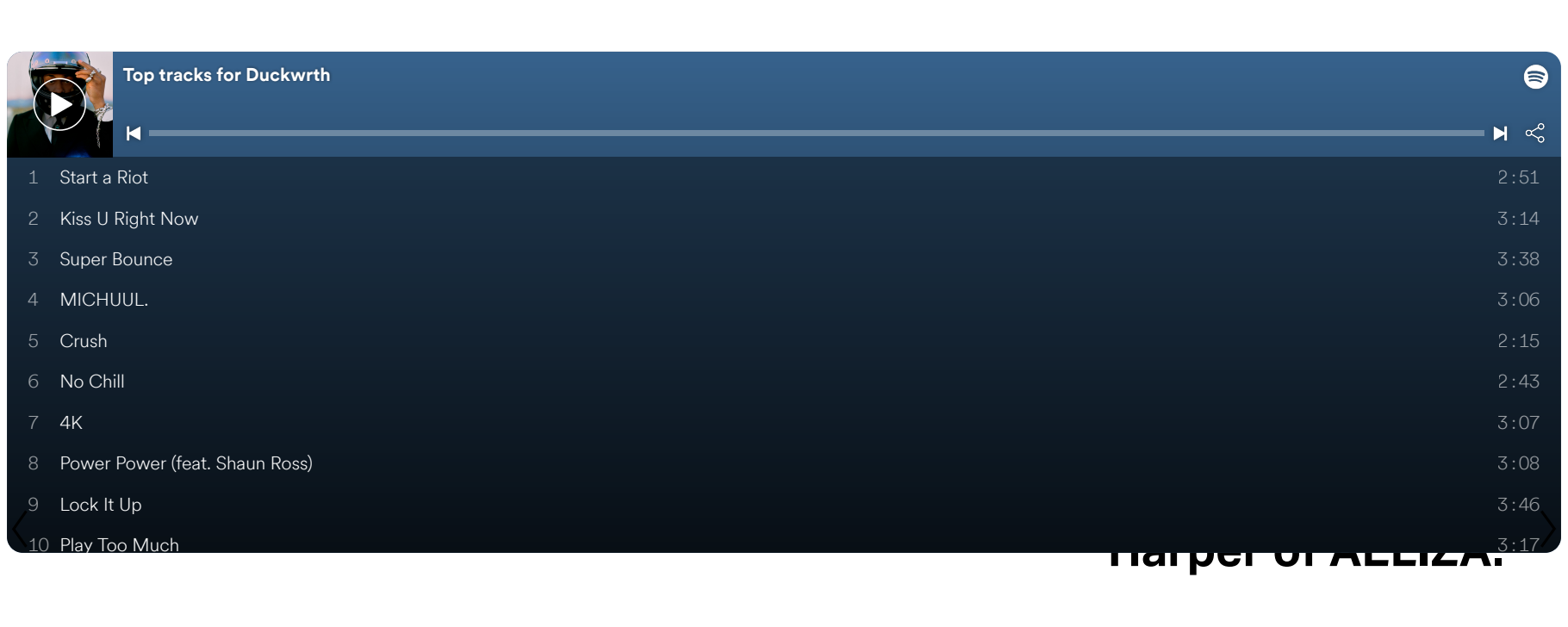
Photo by **Mancy Grant**

That is wild, that's permanent bro [laughs]. I know you have an upcoming performance in London this December. Have you been to London before?

Millions of times. I love it. It's cold as fuck and grey and gloomy, but I've also been there when it's been sunny. I've loved London for a long time. Just loving the old punk scene and understanding the shit that went down during the '70s, it's extraordinary.

What should we be looking out for?

This interview is going to come out in the future, but today is the release of my new song "Power Power" – it's the first time I truly got to introduce the character I'm playing. Hopefully I'll be in this character for a while. I'm about to go on a tour and I'll be wearing this double-breasted suit with a tie and…we'll see how long that lasts [laughs]. We'll see.



Top tracks for Duckwrth

1 Start a Riot 2:51
2 Kiss U Right Now 3:14
3 Super Bounce 3:38
4 MICHUUL. 3:06
5 Crush 2:15
6 No Chill 2:43
7 4K 3:07
8 Power Power (feat. Shaun Ross) 3:08
9 Lock It Up 3:46
10 Play Too Much 3:17

Harper of ALLIZA.

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Imagery courtesy of Duckwrth