

HED: Nourished by Time Is Unstoppable

DEK: How the 31-year-old musician became one of the biggest artists of the year after facing the toll of the gig economy.

When I first caught Marcus Brown at Elsewhere Zone One in 2023, the Bushwick venue's smaller room was packed with college-aged fans shouting along to every word, as if Brown were a messiah to the younger generation, with his songs about pushing through tough times and being fed up with capitalism. At the time, the musician, who performs as Nourished by Time, had just released his debut album, *Erotic Probiotic 2*, and had begun to tease what was coming next, closing the set with the title track of what would become his sophomore release, *The Passionate Ones*. Two years later, *The Passionate Ones* has turned him from a rising star to one of the biggest indie artists of the year, winning new fans over with his unreplicable sound—one that is the lovechild of David Bowie and Prince, taking cues from the late legends and blending their influences under the filter of '90s house music, R&B and indie rock, creating something wholly new.

When Brown and I meet up at his Queens apartment in late October, which he recently moved into, he's taking in the last few days of downtime between his North American and global tour. *NBA 2K26* is paused on his gaming monitor, and a suitcase from his latest travels is splayed out on the floor, with his guitars and keyboard tucked against the wall next to it. Despite dealing with a neighbor who sometimes complains that Brown's music is too loud, the musician has settled nicely into his new place, even with his extremely limited time to make it feel like home. With *The Passionate Ones*, it would be an understatement to say Brown has kept busy: he's been interviewed by seemingly every major music publication, did a 24-hour livestream leading up to the album's release and played sold-out shows during an extensive tour.

But Brown wasn't always sure he'd get this far. The 31-year-old grew up in Baltimore, taking after his parents, a music-loving mother and a bass-playing father. In his early teens, Brown joined his high school's marching band, playing the bass drum, and the symphonic band, where he played trombone, but neither instrument clicked. He found his musical calling when Michael Jackson died, leading him down an internet rabbit hole watching videos of the late King of Pop. He found a YouTube video of Slash from Guns N' Roses shredding in the 2001 televised special concert *Michael Jackson: 30th Anniversary Celebration*, overjoyed to find out the guitarist is half-Black. Eventually, he stumbled upon Jimi Hendrix. "After [getting into] Hendrix, I was like, 'OK, yeah, this is what I want to do.'"

Brown would sneakily borrow his father's guitar, trying to teach himself how to play. When he accidentally popped a string, his dad realized that his son was following in his footsteps and took young Brown shopping for his first guitar at Music Go Round. The music gear chain offered lessons in its basement, where the musician properly learned to play the instrument.

In a previous interview, Brown mentioned that he didn't really go out to shows or become involved in his local scene because he was a "really sad, depressed kid." When I ask if this is accurate, he clarifies that while he was often at home, playing guitar, "being sad and trying to

lose my virginity,” he wasn't isolated from Baltimore's music scene; rather, he faced the limitations of being a teen who was merely beginning to navigate how to find others who shared his interests. Brown explains that he went to a school that was “95 percent Black” and was mostly involved in music within that community. “I was playing a lot of music with my friends, in the neighborhood and at that music shop, which was kind of where I spent a lot of time,” he says. “I just had like four friends and there was this thing where I felt like I was a different person at my school 'cause none of 'em really knew I played guitar; my school was really weird about being different.” Without any friends from school to talk about his newfound passion for guitar, Brown felt like he was living a double life.

College changed that. At 17, he auditioned for Berklee College of Music, where he performed a chord solo version of “Goodbye Pork Pie Hat” by Charles Mingus. He remembers being “really fucking nervous” during the audition, since one of the requirements was to sight-read, but he knew he had nabbed a spot in the competitive program with his funk rendition of the jazz classic.

During his freshman year, he met Carrington Edmondson, who would go on to become his best friend, touring bassist and one of his biggest supporters since the start. At the beginning of his sophomore year, Brown's roommate's mom met Edmondson, then a freshman in the midst of orientation week, and thought he and Brown would get along. Edmondson, at one point, even joined Brown's first musical project, the Prince-inspired Riley With Fire, playing bass during live shows. He was later let go because, according to Brown, Edmondson was “too good” a performer, but the friends remained close. Edmondson ended up playing a big role in pushing Brown toward his breakout success, encouraging a move across the pond that would transform the musician's life.

After leaving Berklee, Brown was working at Barnes & Noble in Baltimore, saving up to move to Los Angeles. He wanted to give the West Coast city a try, as he had a friend who lived there and was hopeful it would be beneficial for his career. Brown, an avid cinephile, was also inspired by his love for David Lynch's films, most of which are set in Hollywood. But Los Angeles wasn't the easygoing place he imagined. Instead, the musician was overwhelmed with the side gigs he took to survive there. This includes a stint at Buffalo Exchange, where he worked as a buyer, likening the experience to *Empire Records*, as it was “literally a bunch of young kids running an establishment. It was anarchy.” Disappointed by his lack of advancement in the city, Brown drove back to Baltimore in 2019, where he occupied his time with more side gigs. “I felt like I had failed in LA because I didn't do anything [there]. I didn't do any sessions. I didn't meet anyone. I didn't do shit,” he says.

An opportunity for a fresh start arose when a fellow musician reached out, praising Brown's music. That musician sent it to his partner, who in turn sent it to her best friend, the experimental noise artist Bianca Scout. She connected him with the U.K. indie label Scenic Route, which released his two-song EP *Erotic Probiotic* in 2022. The label's head, Theo Fabunmi-Stone, encouraged Brown to move to London, but Brown was skeptical. He had already tried living in a different city, and it was a bust. But Edmondson encouraged him to give it a try.

Luckily, Brown listened. In London, he amassed an underground following with his unique sound. “I always say London is the first city that ever cared about my music,” says Brown. He performed his first show there at Servants Jazz Quarters in East London and was struck by how many people actually showed up to support. “I’d never experienced that before,” he reflects. By the time he released his debut LP, *Erotic Probiotic 2*, he was living between London, New York City and Baltimore. He points out that many outlets latched onto the fact that he was living with his parents while making the album, even though he was actually living with his ex. “I was being a bum with her; I wasn’t being a bum with my parents, but it was kind of funny,” he says.

When he put out *Erotic Probiotic 2*, Brown was bracing himself for it to become a hit within London’s scene, with no hopes that it would gain nearly as much attention stateside. But as we’ve seen with underground indie acts-turned-stars like Cindy Lee and Ethel Cain, great music will always find its audience. *Erotic Probiotic 2* put Brown on the map as an artist to watch. Not only was his music reaching millions of streams, but it attracted the attention of major label XL, which signed Brown in early 2024 and released his EP *Catching Chickens*, featuring his most popular track yet, “Hell of a Ride.” Up until this point, Brown had worked every job imaginable, from construction worker to barber. Suddenly, he was at a place where he didn’t have to strain himself by trying to stay afloat; he could finally focus all his energy on his craft.

Brown has said previously that he didn’t believe he would achieve mainstream success, hoping to be, at best, a respected underground artist. Given the trajectory of his time in London, did Brown find greater confidence in himself through that musical community? Brown admits that he operates in “strange mindsets: I can be really confident and also feel like I was a failure.” Rather than giving him confidence, seeing that there was interest in his music and getting involved in London’s scene gave him validation in his confidence. However, the boost to his career in London proved that he could be an accomplished artist, as he previously thought it would take at least a decade to get to where he is now. “That’s where the other side of it was, because I had confidence in writing music, but I didn’t have any confidence in putting myself out there, and I didn’t have any confidence in failing,” Brown explains. “It was really hard for me to put my music out there, and then no one cared. Then it felt like I was just doing it for nothing. So much of it was me having to change how I thought about music, what I was doing, and what I was doing as an artist, because I didn’t always have confidence. I didn’t always feel like I was good enough. London definitely started my career.”

When I ask if the success affected how he approached writing *The Passionate Ones*, Brown divulges that through his previous releases, he learned that the secret to his success is staying true to himself. “I learned from *Catching Chickens* that I don’t have to do what people want me to do,” Brown explains, “because ‘Hell of a Ride’ is a very strange song and it’s probably my biggest. It goes in all of these different directions, and it doesn’t sound like anything from the first album, but people still like it. So I think that after I saw that, it freed me in a way.”

Knowing that new fans connected with his most authentic artistic instincts allowed Brown to tune out the outside noise. Instead, he focused on intention and craft. “I definitely was thinking a lot

more about how I wanted it to be delivered, the colors that I wanted to use on it, and the textures,” he explains. “I always try to be as simple as possible with my lyrics, without, I guess, losing a genuine quality and without trying to seem too cool. But I think this album taught me that I can think about an album.”

Brown also drew inspiration from his conversations with Edmondson, who was living in Atlanta and had moved to New York City, and who was also struggling to make it as a musician while balancing numerous side gigs. “Carrington moving to New York reminded me of when I moved to LA after college and just shaking that whole thing out. It’s sad that it’s still so hard to do art and your passion,” Brown says. When I speak with Edmondson over the phone days later, he beams over Brown immortalizing their shared struggles in the track ‘9 2 5,’ calling it his “working class superhero song.”

“After college, we all went our separate ways, and a lot of kids at Berklee had a place to land,” Edmondson explains. “[Meanwhile], Marcus and I went back to where we’re from and found ourselves in the job force. It was an eye-opening moment because we had been trading stories about working-class life. We were talking on the phone, going through it together, so ‘9 2 5’ became a composite song about our working-class experiences.”

The plight of musicians stuck in the gig economy is one of many causes that Brown calls attention to in *The Passionate Ones*, including calling out Israel’s genocide of Palestinians in “BABY BABY” (“If you can bomb Palestine, you can bomb Mondawmin”); politicians’ cult-like exploitation of those who are looking to better their lives (“Cult Interlude”); and the ruling class in “It’s Time.” Brown acknowledges that it’s challenging to make music that speaks out politically without sounding “super preachy and corny.” He adds, “I don’t think everyone has to make music that’s calling out corporations and shit. I try to do it in a way that people don’t even really know it’s happening, because I don’t want to hear that shit, either.”

While Brown has dedicated his personal life to calling out the tenuous political climate, even posting on social media earlier this year that he was “radicalizing” his mom, he admits that his views are always evolving. “I remember the last really liberal thing about me was guns,” Brown recalls. “I was just like, ‘No one needs a gun.’ I still don’t think people need assault rifles or fucking AR-15s or anything that can hurt children. That shit’s insane. But I kind of want a shotgun or some shit like that. It is a very American thing. I’ll say that in Europe, and people look at me like I’m insane. I get it because it is a cultural thing. I also see it from a leftist perspective, too. I do think leftists should know more just how to fight back in certain situations.”

Besides being an activist at heart, using his platform both through his music and social media to speak about social justice issues, Brown speaks his mind freely, letting fans see him for who he truly is, rather than carefully curating a superficial version of himself. If one thread ties Brown’s catalog together, it’s his ability to bare his soul in his writing. While some artists grow more guarded as their profile rises, Brown prefers to let it all out. “I think, at the end of my career, I want to have nothing more to say,” he states. “I see being an artist as such a sacrificial job in so

many ways, and that's kind of what we sign up for. The goal is to reveal as much as I can in the most simple and classy of ways.

"I'm not that interested in mystique, honestly," he adds. "I find more mystery in people that do talk a lot and reveal a lot about themselves. I just find it more interesting; people are able to relate more when you are more specific about things in your life."

He notes that his approach to writing *The Passionate Ones* shifted from *Erotic Probiotic 2*, seeking to be even more open. "For this album, I was trying to be more expressive and honest about my life," he says. "The first one, lyrically, was really poetic. There's a lot of metaphors and lots of stories. [For *The Passionate Ones*], I was trying to do what Frank Ocean did with *Blonde* and just open up more about my life."

While we get to know more about what Brown stands for politically, *The Passionate Ones* also allow him to give glimpses into the cracks of his personal life. He references his addictive personality, from crooning "I can always choose drugs" in "It's Time," to getting high "for a thousand days" to mend a broken heart in "Tossed Away." Speaking about this, Brown says, "I think a lot of what makes the music industry unsustainable is what artists have to do to keep going. I think if you ask any artists, they have some sort of habit that they probably didn't have before all this touring and stuff, or they had a problem that maybe touring made worse, or just all the pressure of everything made it worse."

He brings up *Nuggets*, the 2014 video by Film Bilder, in which a flightless bird called Kiwi tastes a golden nugget, which makes him float and feel elated; but once the effects wear off, Kiwi seeks out the nugget, each time flying lower and falling harder. "I always think about that because it's such a good metaphor for addiction, but also life in general, just toxic things. But it's also really hard to do because so much of the touring world is surrounded by alcohol, and you're just surrounded by people who are drinking," Brown says. "I totally understand why people leave big cities and start families and just look for stability. Not that that's [necessarily] why they do that."

Brown admits that he's dealt with some form of addiction throughout his life. "I have a very addictive personality, and sometimes it works well because I can write a lot of music," he explains. "I have a lot of energy. I can do 24-hour live streams and do really ridiculous things and put out a bunch of music and records. But I also need so much stimulation in my life, and that's not really sustainable at times." Brown **reflects** back at his last two years on the road, where he was unable to go to therapy because holding sessions over the phone doesn't work well for him. Finally settled in New York City, he looks at the bright side: "Now that I have a place, I'm excited to go back to therapy and just fucking process how strange my life has become. It's like an episode of *Atlanta*."

The Passionate Ones is an outstanding album from an artist who hasn't peaked, but is rather a skilled tastemaker just getting started on his hit streak. But for now, Brown is still adjusting to achieving the life he dreamed of and the downsides that come with it. Instead of already

scheming his follow-up, he's taking a breather, settling back into life in New York City and letting his next masterpiece come when it needs to—a sign of a truly passionate one who is in it for the art, not to keep up the momentum of fame.