

People & Places

People

Tries to find harmony

Mystikal opens up on dropped rape charge

NEW YORK, April 18, (AP) — After spending more than four years under the “bad dream” of rape and kidnapping charges that were recently dismissed, rapper **Mystikal** says he wants to shed the sexually-charged songs of his past, and now has a higher audience in mind.

“When I look back and listen to the music, man — I was a nasty lil’ rapper!” he said with a hint of embarrassment in an interview with The Associated Press. “A lot of my music now, I imagine myself rapping it to God and if I can rap it, I’m proud.”

The Louisiana hip-hop legend spoke to The Associated Press in one of his first interviews after first-degree rape and second-degree kidnapping charges stemming from a 2016 allegation were dismissed in December. The rapper, who pleaded guilty in 2003 to sexual battery and served six years in prison, initially denied involvement with the woman and spent 18 months in jail before being released on a \$3 million bond. Louisiana’s Caddo Parish District Attorney closed the investigation after new evidence was presented to a second grand jury that declined to bring an indictment. The district attorney then filed to dismiss the charges.



Mystikal

The long ordeal “was like a recurring bad dream,” he said. “I didn’t know how it was going to work out.”

Now he wants to make changes to his career — and life — as he tries to find harmony beyond a troubled past. Though Mystikal says he “can’t go to God” with lines like the dirty opening verse of his hit “Shake Ya A(asterisk)(asterisk),” don’t expect him to start appearing on the gospel charts.

Dismissal

Within days of the case’s dismissal, a blitz of film trailers for Eddie Murphy’s highly anticipated “Coming 2 America” began airing, featuring “Feel Right,” Mystikal’s 2015 smash with Mark Ronson. The New Orleans product said he had no idea the song would be used, but he doesn’t believe in coincidences.

“It felt like God was winking his eye at me,” he said, smiling. “That’s what strengthens my spirituality right now, things like that.”

Mystikal maintained his innocence, but few sought his work. But bookings for live performances are picking back up, and his life story will be featured on the upcoming season of TV One’s popular music docuseries “Unsung.”

Mystikal’s most recent trouble began in October 2016 after his performance at a “Legends of Southern Hip-Hop” concert in Shreveport, Louisiana. According to police records obtained by the AP, Mystikal and a few members of his entourage, including hopeful rapper Averweone “Lil Hood” Holman, partied with Holman’s female friend and her boyfriend.

The victim, who told police they continuously gave her drinks, became separated from her boyfriend for a few hours, the records said. When they reconnected, the boyfriend said she seemed disoriented.

Holman told investigators that he and the victim were both intoxicated and had intercourse. He said they were the only ones in the room.

Police noted that while the victim said she didn’t remember certain parts of the night, she recalled waking up on a bed with her panties down and Holman’s penis out. She also had another memory of her buttocks hurting with Mystikal standing behind her, according to the police report.

Mystikal told police he wasn’t in the room during the incident and he “did not hear anything.” But DNA forensic tests showed the rapper had an intimate physical encounter with the victim.

Mystikal hesitantly admitted to AP that a sexual encounter did happen. He described it as consensual, believing the victim stated she was raped rather than admit the indiscretion to her boyfriend.

“There was additional information that surfaced that the original grand jury did not have an opportunity to consider at the time that the charges were brought forward,” said Britney Green, who oversaw the case for the Caddo Parish District Attorney’s Office. “We then decided that the case needed to stop there because the (second) grand jury did not return an indictment after the review of the additional evidence.”

The woman or a representative for her could not be reached for an interview.

Motives

The AP was unable to obtain the secret grand jury documents that were the basis for the dismissal as they remain sealed. Prosecutors do not plan to recharge Mystikal, and will not charge the victim, believing she had no improper motives.

“We never want to be a part of any process that has an innocent person tied up in the criminal justice process,” said Green. “I just want to say that there is a distinction between not guilty and innocent, and that also because the case is dismissed or a case is resolved in a fashion other than at trial, that it doesn’t necessarily mean that an incident did not happen.”

Holman pleaded guilty to the lesser charge of simple kidnapping in June 2019 and was sentenced to time served, court records show.

Mystikal burst onto the music scene in the mid-90s with the regional smash “Here I Go.” A hip-hop hybrid with the tongue-twisting speed of Twista combined with Busta Rhymes-like theatrics, Mystikal crafted crossover hits like “Danger (Been So Long)” and the Neptunes-produced “Shake Ya A(asterisk)(asterisk)” featuring Pharrell Williams, earning him a 2001 Grammy nomination. (The radio version is titled “Shake It Fast.”)

In 2002 he was charged with aggravated rape and extortion after his then-hairstylist said he forced her to perform sex acts on him and two bodyguards in retaliation for allegedly cashing \$80,000 worth of unauthorized checks from his account.

The acts were filmed and the video sealed his fate. Hoping to dodge the potential life sentence a rape charge can carry in Louisiana, Mystikal pleaded guilty in 2003 to sexual battery and served six years in prison.

He said his faith sustained him during his 18 months behind bars in the most recent case. Mystikal, 50, understands the public may not be as forgiving.

“I can’t do nothing about that, but I try to understand where they’re coming from,” he said of critics. “At this point in age, I’m just grateful to still be able to participate. At my concerts, man, I still (have a) packed house after all this time. It’s amazing.”

He has received suggestions to have women he’s involved with sign non-disclosure agreements, but says he’d rather mature in his decision-making.



In this Jan. 27, 2021 file photo, a model wears a creation for Fendi’s Spring-Summer 2021 Haute Couture fashion collection presented in Paris. (AP)

Fashion

Virus forces a rethink

Fashion industry evolves amid pandemic

PARIS, April 18, (AP) — The pandemic has torn a multibillion-dollar bite out of the fabric of Europe’s fashion industry, stopped runway shows and forced brands to show their designs digitally instead.

Now, amid hopes of a return to near-normality by the year’s end, the industry is asking what fashion will look like as it dusts itself off and struggles to its well-heeled feet again.

Answers vary. Some think the Fashion Week format, in use since the 1940s, will be radically rethought. Others believe Asia will consolidate its huge gains in influence. Many see brands seeking greater sustainability to court a younger clientele.

Impact

“The impact of the pandemic will be unquestionably to increase the importance and influence of Asia on fashion,” said Gildas Minvielle, economist at the Institut Francais de la Mode in Paris.

“Luxury in Europe has already rebounded but it’s only because it’s globalized, only because of Asian buyers,” Minvielle said. “They spent on European brands.”

Asian buyers are still considered a largely untapped market, yet their wealth has recently tipped over that of Westerners. China, in particular, was already considered the worldwide engine of growth in the luxury industry before the pandemic. Its quicker containment of the virus will leave it in an even stronger position.

“In the next 50 years money will come from the East as it has been (coming) in the last 50 years from the West,” said Long Nguyen, chief fashion critic of The Impression.

This could see a designer aesthetic that panders more to Chinese tastes.

Another trend that’s been strengthened during the pandemic is the decision to forgo the frenetic pace of runway calendar shows.

As the virus tore across the globe from East to West, these morphed overnight from a live, in-person, sensory experience to a pre-taped digital display released online. Many predicted devastation for the industry, but houses have proved surprisingly resilient. That’s because the system was already overdue a shift.

Since the advent of social media, brands have become much less reliant on traditional advertising outlets such as fashion magazines. Now, they create their own online channels, circumventing the glossies, to get their designs out.

“Each brand is a media entity unto itself,” Nguyen said, calling the way the industry operates “obsolete.”

Moreover, as buyers themselves move online, houses have necessarily become much less dependent on traditional sales outlets such as department stores.

Some houses have done better than expected with the new digital format. Smaller brands, in particular, have welcomed the break from staging run-

Gucci celebrates 100 years with the ‘Aria’ collection by Michele

MILAN, April 18, (AP) — Gucci creative director Alessandro Michele is celebrating the fashion house’s 100th anniversary this year, giving historic sweep to a collection unveiled virtually Thursday that embraced its equestrian heritage, borrowed references from the Tom Ford era and outright stole from the French sister-brand Balenciaga.

“Gucci was born under some kind of constellation, because the power it holds is nearly inexplicable,” Michele told a video press conference.

The celebration party was set in a film-set version of London’s Savoy Hotel, where fashion house founder Guccio Gucci got inspiration to return home to Florence and open his own leather goods shop, specializing in travel bags that he had admired working as a bellhop in London.

The collection was titled “Aria,” a reference to another Italian creation, lyric opera. Models walked down long corridor runways outfitted with hundreds of flashing cameras nailed to the wall in the place of absent paparazzi. A medley of Gucci-themed pop songs — proof, if needed, of the brand’s enduring relevance — provided the soundtrack.

The first look was a jag on Tom Ford’s 1996 red velvet suit, with a kinky leather harness over a powder blue shirt. Michele said in notes that he had “plundered” the “sexual

tension” of Ford’s decade at Gucci from 1994-2004.

“Tom understood right from the beginning that Gucci had some kind of magnetism, this cult power,” Michele said.

Michele, who took over as creative direction of Gucci six years ago, put a fetishized spin on Gucci’s trademark equestrian references, including riding caps, fringed leather riding crops and spit-polished boots mixed with glamorous sequined evening wear, or subverted with erotic sheer dresses of logo-embazoned netting. Models dangled long jewelry from their noses.

In one of the collection’s most surprising turns, Michele borrowed, or hacked, looks directly from Balenciaga, the Paris fashion house owned by the same parent company, Kering. They included a version of the Balenciaga Jackie bag and a glittery silver suit emblazoned with both Gucci and Balenciaga.

This was the first collection of 2021 for Gucci, which has left the fashion calendar and committed to only presenting two collections a year. The video presentation stuck strictly to the runway format during a pandemic year of experimentation that has all but shut down in-person shows.

Reflecting on the century marker, Michele said Gucci’s magic is its ability to redefine itself over time, unbound to any strictly defined image.

way shows that can be astronomically expensive — for relatively little return.

Paris couture designer Julien Fournie said the virus has led him to question “whether fashion shows were really necessary” in the first place.

The virus saw many brands, including Balenciaga, Alexander McQueen and Bottega Veneta of French luxury giant Kering, tearing up the traditional calendar to show their new collections when it suits them — both creatively and financially. Saint Laurent started the trend last year, drawing headlines for quitting Paris Fashion Week to “take control of its pace.”

Advantage

The advantage for these brands is to set dates on their own terms, with collections that don’t compete with others for attention at the same time. Yet many nostalgic critics, buyers and consumers argue that nothing can replace the physical runway experience.

“Brands have been deciding more and more when their optimal time to show is... They want to control their business more and that is their right,” Pascal Morand, Paris fashion federation Executive President.

“But this is not the end to Fashion Week. No matter what people say they

are all awaiting a return to the runway and to come back to the physical experience.”

Stella McCartney, who unveiled her fall collection off-schedule last month, said that the industry has been seriously questioning the relevance of seasons “even before COVID,” as climate change has sadly highlighted how absurd it is.

“There was a moment at the beginning of lockdown — in the sky there were no airplanes, you could hear birds,” McCartney said. “Everyone was talking about nature reclaiming its rightful place,” she added, expressing frustration with the industry’s lifestyle that requires thousands of kilometers of travel per year.

McCartney said that across the industry now there is a sense that brands must embrace sustainability “in order to survive,” especially to attract the young, more environmentally conscious consumer.

One example of such eco-thinking is in reducing waste in collections. Luxury giants have been criticized in the past for burning unused or unsold luxury goods.

And McCartney also doesn’t seem to think that this will be the end of the runway show.



Diane Warren arrives at the 90th Academy Awards Nominees Luncheon in Beverly Hills, Calif on Feb 5, 2018. Warren is nominated for an Oscar for best original song for her work in ‘The Life Ahead’ starring Sophia Loren. (AP) — Details on Page 12

Variety

LOS ANGELES: J-Lo and A-Rod are no longer J-Rod — officially.

Jennifer Lopez and Alex Rodriguez told the “Today” show Thursday in a joint statement that they are calling off their two-year engagement.

“We have realized we are better as friends and look forward to remaining so. We will continue to work together and support each other on our shared businesses and projects,” it said.

“We wish the best for each other and one another’s children. Out of respect for them, the only other comment we have to say is thank you to everyone who has sent kind words and support.”

The couple started dating in early 2017. They issued a statement in March that disputed reports they were breaking up.

The couple was given the nickname “J-Rod” three years ago after they landed on the cover of Vanity Fair magazine. (AP)

CAMBRIDGE, Mass.: Viola Davis was named Woman of the Year on Friday by Harvard University’s Hasty Pudding Theatricals.

“Viola has inspired our company with her incredible grit and determination, and we cannot wait to celebrate her successes, strong character and wonderful talent,” said Jessica Moore, the group’s president, in a statement.

Davis is scheduled to be honored April 22 in an online ceremony that will include a roast, a discussion and a speech from Davis as she is presented with her ceremonial pudding pot. Because of the pandemic, the event will not include its traditional parade through the streets of Cambridge.

“We’re very excited to honor Viola Davis as our 71st Woman of the Year because of her immense impact in Hollywood, especially in such a historic and difficult year for the arts,” said Natalie Needle, the event coordinator and producer.

In March, Davis became the Oscars’ most nominated Black female actor ever when she landed her fourth nomination, this one for her lead role in “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom.”

The film, based on an August Wilson play, is set around a recording session in 1920s Chicago as a blues band awaits the arrival of Ma Rainey. The movie also includes the final performance from actor Chadwick Boseman, who died last year of cancer. (AP)

THE HAGUE, Netherlands: A photo symbolizing “love and compassion” of an 85-year-old Brazilian woman getting her first embrace in five months from a nurse through a transparent “hug curtain” was named the World Press Photo of the Year on Thursday.

The choice of a winning photo portraying the global pandemic was almost inevitable for the contest covering a year

in which news around the globe was dominated by the virus that has killed nearly 3 million people, including more than 360,000 in hard-hit Brazil.

The image by Danish photographer Mads Nissen captured the moment Rosa Luzia Lunardi was hugged by nurse Adriana Silva da Costa Souza at the Viva Bem care home in Sao Paulo on Aug. 5.

A curtain of clear plastic — its yellow edges folded into a shape resembling a



Lopez



Davis

pair of butterfly wings — offers protection, as does the nurse’s face mask.

“This iconic image of COVID-19 memorializes the most extraordinary moment of our lives, everywhere,” said jury member Kevin WY Lee. “I read vulnerability, loved ones, loss and separation, demise, but, importantly, also survival — all rolled into one graphic image. If you look at the image long enough, you’ll see wings: a symbol of flight and hope.” (AP)