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‘With Eat Pray Thug, Heems Moves Past That Funny Rap Group with the 'Dumb' Name’

BY JAY RUTTENBERG

Himanshu Suri, a/k/a Heems, at his parents' Hicksville, Long Island, home

Photo by Jesse Dittmar for the Village Voice

It was in north Brooklyn that Himanshu Suri spent his post-collegiate years — a period that began in 2007 with the Wesleyan grad working on Wall Street and terminated, a half-decade later, with the dissolution of his surprise-hit hip-hop trio, Das Racist. The group had made him an unlikely big shot, but as it went, so too did Suri's closest friendships, his serious girlfriend, and, eventually, his bacchanalian ways.

Williamsburg, once the epicenter of his glories, became potholed with demons. And yet it is in the neighborhood where Suri wishes to meet, at a café with erudite bathroom graffiti and an $11,000 coffee pot.

Suri, who performs as Heems, wears a dark beard that ends abruptly at his sideburns, which are shaved short, as are the sides of his head; his thick hair begins again atop his head, undaunted by the razor's interruption. An

imposing gold chain inherited from his grandmother dangles from his neck, giving Suri the look of a man who decided to dress as Mr. T minutes before leaving the house for a Halloween party.

The rapper orders his drink, tips handsomely, and throws a wink at the barista. He snaps a photograph of the shop's bulletin board, where a flyer advertises the gallery show he recently curated, and tweets the image. He greets a fellow customer, telling him about the new Heems album — titled, like the art show, Eat Pray Thug — ducks into the bathroom, collects his drink, fidgets with his phone, and, finally, takes his seat.

"I feel like a lot of the association with me has been Williamsburg and Wesleyan and that type of world," Suri says, by way of introduction. "But this is not where I'm from. It's not the world I grew up in. I lived here in Brooklyn for five or six years. Eventually, I realized that it wasn't what I grew up enjoying about the city. I went to India for a while. I went to Asia for a while. When I returned, I refocused. I wanted to pull back and remember where I came from and remember what I like. I like family, Hinduism, and Sikhism. I like women. I like money. I like helping people and being a voice for my community."

His beverage is not yet cool, but Suri has had enough of the coffee shop and of Brooklyn. And so we retreat to his parents' Lexus and drive to Queens, where his heart struck its first beat and where — more than Williamsburg, Wesleyan, or India — it remains, 29 years hence.

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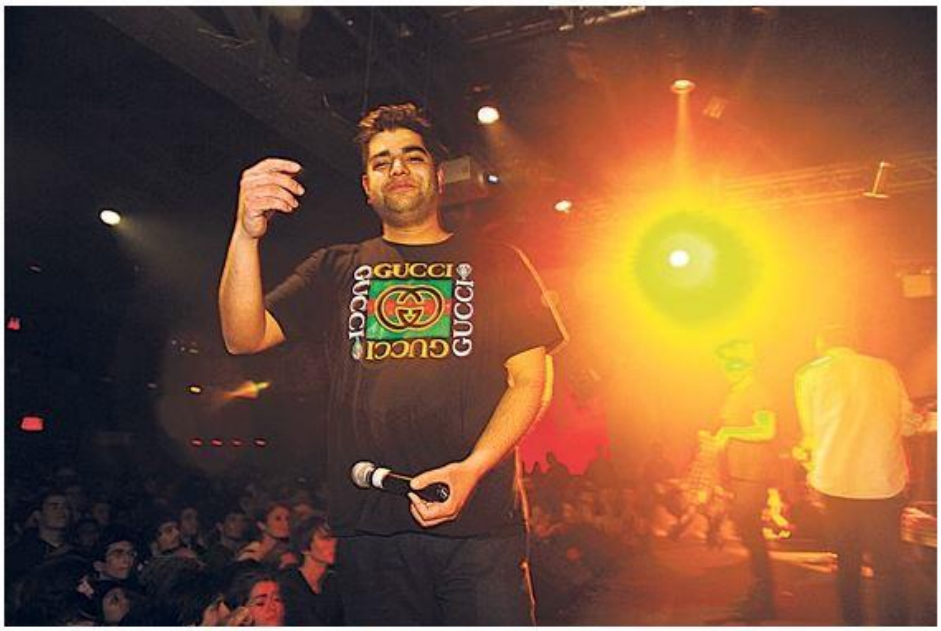
Das Racist announced themselves to the world in 2008 with "Combination Pizza Hut and Taco Bell," a novelty song in which Suri and his co-star, Victor Vazquez (Kool A.D.), trade lines about a fast-food hybrid on Jamaica Avenue. The song caught fire with the young and Web-savvy; to many in demographics yonder, it proved impenetrable. Even now, it remains difficult to appreciate why anybody would find "Pizza Hut/Taco Bell" particularly funny or exciting — but of course, older cranks once thought the same of "Loser" and "(You Gotta) Fight for Your Right (To Party)," to say nothing of "Blitzkrieg Bop."

Within a New York minute, Das Racist were minted stars, albeit in a vaguely underground, smarty-pants vein. The pair, who had met at college, were joined by a third member, Ashok Kondabolu (Dapwell). When Das Racist began, Suri — with his fancy economics degree and proud Indian parents — was working as a Wall Street headhunter while daydreaming of the creative life. Now the creative life was his. Through Suri's Greedhead label, Das Racist released a pair of mixtapes and, in 2011, a proper album, Relax. All were made in a more classic hip-hop strain than the initial single, but still conveyed the beautiful irreverence of youth and privilege.

"It was very internet and very rap," Suri says of his group, "and both those things were very zeitgeisty." Das Racist appeared on the cover of Spin's "Funny Issue" and in the New York Times Magazine's interview page. (Q: "Why, as two Wesleyan graduates who met in college, would you think you could rap?" A: "Would we even be on the page of this publication if we had not gone to Wesleyan?") They performed at splashy music festivals and on Conan. In one of the "five most exciting moments" of Suri's life, they were praised by one of his (non-Hindu) divinities, Lou Reed. As with much novel pop music, the group seemed an accident, underdressed gatecrashers to a formal event.



Heems at Das Racist's *Relax* record-release party in 2011

Nate "Igor" Smith

Das Racist seemed poised for a broader breakthrough, signing a deal with a Sony affiliate, Megaforce. Yet in late 2012, at much the same speed as it had arrived, the group collapsed, with an unfulfilled recording contract and a degree of acrimony. "*Relax* had come out amidst some creative tension between Victor and Himanshu," Kondabolu says. The strife involved "the music, touring, even the name — which was dumb and we all always hated. But imagine if a group like Das Racist was around for five, even ten years? That shit would be corny as fuck. We were a punk-rap group that exploded and imploded."

For Suri, a child of identity politics, issues of heritage were present even in the disbanding. "If you're in a rock band you might sing about love and girls," he says, inching along the BQE with Hot 97 thumping softly in the background. "But with rap, it's identity. A lot of the project was about being brown, and how the discourse in America has always been black and white. Das Racist was about wanting to insert ourselves in that discourse. Now, the project I wanted to do was about my community and about Queens."

The period surrounding the group's conclusion seems the calamity of Suri's young life. "I wasn't talking to my two best friends," he says. "My girlfriend of over two years and I broke up. And I was partying a lot." The musician pauses — a rare event, like a lunar eclipse — to let his words resonate. "I've always struggled with mental-health issues. In communities of color, anxiety and depression are seen as a joke. I felt very alone."

Having exited the highway, Suri is currently circling the type of residential neighborhood that, during such drives, would appear to dominate the city and yet still seem wholly removed from it. "What the...?" he exclaims. His phone has requested that he hang a left onto the same block that he has already twice traversed. He ignores the direction and takes in his surroundings. "Shit," the rapper says. "I think we're back in Brooklyn."

Struggling to get his act in check, toward the end of his hellacious 2013, Suri flew to India. By the time of his birth, the extended Suri clan had settled in Queens, but Himanshu had spent pockets of time in their homeland throughout his life. Now he retreated to the beaches of Goa. "I was away from the vices that had plagued me," he says. "I wasn't playing these big shows like Bonnaroo — I was playing at the side of the road with friends. People would stop and park their scooters. One scooter would light us and if a car drove by you couldn't hear the music. I remembered that this was what I liked — rapping, freestyling, the way words fold into each other."

In December, he booked time at a Mumbai studio operated by Bollywood machers, writing and recording most of Eat Pray Thug in a three-day whirlwind. The record is the first Heems solo album following a pair of well-received mixtapes that were unleashed during his Das Racist tenure. Whereas in Das Racist the rapper claims he hid behind humor, on the new disc he appears as a man unmasked. He raps and sings of traumas personal (breakups, sobriety), political (drones, cops), and, especially, occupying the areas in between: say, his

community's weird obligation to shop for American flags in the wake of September 11th. In "Home," the one song completed before his Indian trip, Suri dispenses with rapping altogether to sing, accompanied by Blood Orange's Dev Hynes. "You addicted to the H-man," he croons, addressing a former squeeze. "I'm addicted to the H, man."

Eat Pray Thug, however, is its most ostensibly celebratory and airheaded: "Sometimes," the leadoff track and single. Over a cavernous beat from Gordon Voidwell, Heems sounds off on his paradoxes. "Sometimes I got game/Sometimes I'm mad shy," he raps. "Being sad in the club/Weird when you're this fly."

Even the most straightforward dullard can seem to host more than one persona. But Suri, like many second-generation Americans, negotiates worlds by the score. Days spent in his company reveal sundry Himanshu Suris. There is the poised art-world charmer at his Noho gallery opening, bedecked in a polychromatic suit of his own creation, holding himself with the regality of somebody who tested well as a child. There is Himanshu the lecturer, dourly discoursing about community issues in outer Queens and the Indian diaspora. There is the Himanshu who speaks deferentially with elders in Flushing and the Himanshu who rolls onto Bedford Avenue with all the subtlety of Genghis Khan's Mongol warriors rampaging through Eurasia. And then there is Himanshu the mess — sending torrents of fretful texts following each interview, tweeting that "doing press for this album has given me two panic attacks thus far...I don't know if I want to be an artist anymore." He is as neurotic as your average New Yorker, provided that your average New Yorker happens to be a mid-period Woody Allen protagonist.

His conflicted identity — American and Indian, rapper and visual artist, imbiber and thinker — is his central battle, that which renders him most absorbing and threatens to tear him apart. Its roots run deep. Suri's grandparents grew up speaking Punjabi in what is now Pakistan; as Hindus, they later emigrated to India. "So my grandparents' first language is Punjabi, my parents' is Hindi, and mine is English," he says. "I actually never thought about that before." Growing up, he spoke English at school, Hindi at home, and a hip-hop-informed parlance with friends.

That cultural schizophrenia can lead to that stalest of rap clichés: the well-bred nerd with a street patois. ("One time this kid from Bronx Science had beef with my boy," he recounts at one point.) It's a characterization that's not lost on Suri. "I'm very conscious of the fact that I'm appropriating a black art and I feel guilt about it," he says. "But at the same time, hip-hop is what I was raised with. It's what I think in. People are like, 'Oh, you can talk white, that means you're faking when you talk rap.' I just don't get that. I have my fun voice and my work voice. Being Indian, you have to navigate your way amongst cultures anyway."

Having shunned his phone's mapping advice, Suri is now driving along Queens Boulevard, through tony Forest Hills. "Growing up, it wasn't just being immigrants in America," he continues. "It was also being in Queens. We always looked at Manhattan with this gaze, being outside the city. In *Here Is New York*, E.B. White talks about how the commuters are the ultimate New Yorkers. I always felt like a New Yorker, but I've always felt like a commuter. And I think that's an important distinction. We were looking at America from India and then Manhattan from Queens."

Suri's father landed in the States in 1979. The following year he returned to India, got an arranged marriage, and, with his bride, returned to New York. The couple settled in Flushing, where they remained through Himanshu's early years, ultimately squeezing thirteen family members — grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins — into a two-bedroom apartment. Suri's parents took a variety of jobs and operated a candy store, ultimately working for the city (dad) and selling life insurance for New York Life (mom). As their fortunes swelled, the Suris moved to more suburban areas of the borough: Glen Oaks and then Bellerose, where Himanshu came of age.

"As far as the diaspora goes, a lot of people had the same story," he explains. "They come to New York and settle in Flushing, then in Bellerose, and later go to Hicksville or New Hyde Park or Manhasset, and eventually to Dix Hills. Somebody was telling me that I was from 'fake Queens,' 'cause I'm from the part near Long Island. But that's what I love about Queens. It's so diverse — not just culturally, but in terms of city planning. You've got projects and then you drive five minutes and you're in a 'hood with backyards and mansions."

By the time he was twelve, Suri understood that he was expected to gain admittance to Lower Manhattan's prestigious Stuyvesant High School, long the city's beacon for its academic overachievers. "Asian kids start

studying for the Stuyvesant test when they're in elementary school," he says. "It was a huge deal when I got in." Attending the high school exposed him to a cross-section of students — "Korean and Chinese kids, Upper West Side Jewish kids, a few black and Latino kids" — whom, had he gone to his local school, the rapper says he never would have met. He was vice president of his class because, he claims, he "got along with everybody. But even though I was always popular at school, I was living two lives. I came home to this Indian existence. The only sandwich meat I knew about was bologna until I was fourteen. Then I was like, 'Oh snap, turkey.' "

On Kissena Boulevard, in east Flushing, Suri suddenly U-turns and deftly parallel-parks. His parking spot is just outside a pink building with a small gold dome — architecture, it seems, as practiced by a birthday cake designer. "We're here, yo," he says. "This is my temple."

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"Shoes off?" Suri is asked upon entering the temple.

"Dude," the musician responds. He shoots a look — as if the question had been "pants on?" — and points out a yellow sign reading: "Shoes and ego not allowed in the Temple."

Suri enters the building's main room. It is a mix of outer-borough shabbiness (folding chairs and patterned carpeting) and Hindu fabulousness (the shrine, wreathed in lights, is like a Matisse cut-out as viewed through a kaleidoscope). The rapper informally greets a priest in Hindi and heads upstairs. But for the priest, the temple is empty; Himanshu explains that things won't heat up for another hour or so. He has been coming to Flushing's Hindu Center Temple since he was too young to form memories. Upon entering, he seems to unload the weight that he typically carries atop his shoulders like some de rigueur accessory.

A balcony circles the temple's main space, with rows of flamboyant statues representing the various Hindu divinities lining the walls. Each window is covered by a plastic sheet, with a small red box out front for donations. Suri approaches the first statue, kneels before it, and softly recites a prayer. He breathes in the dramatic fashion now familiar to Westerners via yoga, rises to his feet, and moves to the next deity. "This," he says casually, "is the goddess of music." (The statue, which hardly resembles Beyoncé at all, must be fairly old.) Suri drops to his knees once again and recites a Hindi prayer.

On a typical visit to the temple the musician meditates, but today he wishes to give a tour instead. Although he has always been observant, his interest in Hinduism has spiked in the last decade, especially recently. "You might think that my American side pushes me toward capitalism and my Hindu side pushes me toward spirituality," he says, standing before the statue of Saraswati. "That's not the case. Because we're immigrants, and it's all about making money. Going to Wesleyan and places like that is what taught me more about the hippie-dippy shit. It's ironic. It encapsulates not just me but the whole phenomenon of why the West has hippies. It's because we feel guilty about our capitalist system. We assume that the East has the answers because of exotification Orientalist bullshit. But in reality, do you know how many billionaires are in India? We're coming for you guys."

Suri crosses to the balcony's other side, where Ganesha, the elephantine god of obstacles, awaits him. "The title Eat Pray Thug is about my own hypocrisy," he continues. "Even me, when I freaked out, I went to India. It wasn't spiritual tourism, but it was where I went searching for answers." He mentions that he's not that different from Elizabeth Gilbert, the author whose spiritual journey to India inspired the memoir that inspired the pun that would become the title of Suri's solo album. "Maybe when you see me you see Indian," he says, "but inside I'm just as American as her."

As he passes the statues, the musician explains the various gods' provenance and meaning. Ganesha gained his elephant head after an unfortunate sequence in which a sword robbed him of his original, human head. Rama contends with a wicked stepmother. Krishna, with an ever-present flute, was adopted by the Hare Krishna movement. Finally, Suri reaches his deity of choice. "This is Shiva," he gushes. "Shiva's considered the destroyer. People look at the others as regal, morally correct gods. Everything else was put into Shiva. People say he used

to eat meat, drink wine, smoke weed. People say he took mushrooms. I like Shiva because he appreciates music and dance. Shiva used to hang with the bottom of society — the vagabonds, the musicians, the prostitutes. Those were his people."

Himanshu quietly raps a line from his new record's "So NY": "I'm like Shiva, I roll around with freaks/I'm on my play, a player/Yeah, I roll around with freaks." He looks the statue up and down.

"Shiva represents everything good to me," he continues. "He's male but he's also female — he's in touch with his feminine side. He's at once about dance, 'shroooms, and weed. He's also this guy who represents living in the mountains and pulling away from society. Mondays, I fast for Shiva. I find my faith in Shiva helps. The idea that even gods are evil shows me that we have moments of evilness, but we don't have to remain evil. If the gods have moments of imperfection, then who are we to be perfect?"

Bored with music, Heems is considering writing a novel set in Queens.

Jesse Dittmar for the Village Voice

The most typically hip-hop aspect of Suri's life is his house in Hicksville, Long Island. It is constructed of red brick, built only recently, and covers seemingly every legal inch of its plot — the Goliath of the block. "Oh that one," the approaching cab driver says, his derision unchecked. "The house that doesn't belong in this neighborhood. It looks like it should be on the North Shore." The Lexus — at rest following the previous day's excursion to Queens — sits on the driveway, alongside a BMW. Inside are vaulted ceilings and colorful works of art, generous flatscreens and plush sofas. The master bedroom seems the resting place of kings.

And yet the rapper does not sleep in the master bedroom. His mom and dad, to whom this well-appointed house belongs, get to do that. Himanshu, who moved back home last year, stays down the hall, in the small room with the displayed diplomas and shoeboxed relics from his teenage years. He is that rarest of creatures: the boomerang child with a record deal.

The Suris built their house about five years ago, after saving for the suburban haul for much longer. "Especially in Punjab, the goal is often getting land and building your own house," says Himanshu, who, as the eldest son, has always chipped in on bills. "Even in Queens you'll see Indian people build these gigantic houses that don't fit in their neighborhood and have columns for no reason." In a song, he christens the style, which so offended the aesthetic sensibilities of the cab driver, "Punjabi Greco."

Suri's mother and father seem gentle and cute, in the universal parental sense; his mother is adamant that he offer a guest coffee and dress appropriately for the cold. The Hindi translation of "My son, the rapper," seems planted in her thought balloon. Soon, the Suris beckon Himanshu to their room with big news: India has bested Pakistan in the Cricket World Cup. Himanshu, a Yankees fan in spite of his Queens heritage, returns to his bedroom beaming, pleased to once again be on a winning team.

It is noted that the musician has displayed nary a single Das Racist artifact in his room. "I have thousands of dollars of contemporary art on my wall," he replies. "Why would I have a photo of myself? I took Das Racist money and spent it on art." Although his official background in visual art does not extend beyond some college courses, Suri is no dilettante. Not surprisingly, his interest lies in South Asian art with an urban slant. He bought his prize piece, painted by a Bengal School artist and displayed at the home's staircase landing, at auction. "There was this old Indian man in a business suit," he says. "I didn't like his vibe, so I kept bidding against him." And $8,000 later, the painting was his.

Suri was drawn to the painting in part due to its theme of aviation. Airplanes, depicted on his modest arm tattoo, initiated the two central events of his life: immigration and the World Trade Center attacks, which he witnessed from Stuyvesant, blocks way. He was sixteen, "engaging in all the adolescent existential things that a person goes through — and then I saw that." The afternoon of the attacks, making his way uptown with friends, Suri witnessed a construction worker taunt a classmate who was wearing a hijab. "We were taken aback at how a grown-ass man could yell racist shit at a fifteen-year-old girl," he says. In the wake of the attacks, Suri, as student union vice president, gave a speech at assembly about tolerance. He earned his first round of press attention. (From the Los Angeles Times archives: " 'The fact we haven't had school, you know, classes, well, I didn't like that,' said Suri, the student union vice president.") He was sent to Germany courtesy of a cultural exchange program intended to show the world to public school students who were affected by 9-11, meeting then-chancellor Gerhard Schröder.

The attacks and their aftermath cloud his life and inform much of his work. The themes are especially acute in the exhibition Suri recently curated, which unites artists from India and Pakistan with second-generation Americans. For Manhattan's Aicon Gallery, which specializes in Indian art, showing work by younger and American-born artists was a particular draw. "A lot of the show is allowing the art from New York to interact with the art from South Asia," explains Aicon director Andrew Shea during a tour of the gallery. "Many of the artists deal with 9-11. There's a connecting thread of this huge traumatic event that brings all South Asians together, whether they were down the street or sitting in Karachi."

The featured work is current and chic. Chitra Ganesh, a New York–born artist, appropriates Hindu educational comic books, like Lichtenstein with an unexpected accent. Adeela Suleman, born in Pakistan, adds gruesome drawings of beheadings to traditional plates she buys at bazaars. In an edifying series of photographs, Chiraag Bhakta and Mark Hewko depict Indian-owned American roadside motels. One photograph shows a lobby's welcome desk, with a cross and American flag displayed for guests and Hindu religious objects concealed behind the counter for staff.

Suri's own work at Aicon includes a video depicting a skin-lightening process and a collage involving the MTA map. (He notes that coming from rap, collage fits naturally.) Most notable is a series of boxes he created in collaboration with Bhakta. The boxes are overtly indebted to Joseph Cornell — another Queens artist, Suri points out, who lived with his mother — with various objects displayed inside antique Indian tins. In one, the Dunkin' Donuts logo rings an inlaid airplane safety manual; an inhaler and pillbox sit within, suggesting the approximate contours of a "9" and "1." Shea claims that the boxes "are actually among the strongest pieces in the show. It's not a musician screwing around."

'I REALLY FEEL THIS MIGHT BE MY LAST [ALBUM]. MUSIC... IT'S JUST A CONSTANT HUSTLE.'

The Aicon exhibition illuminates the astonishing fluidity with which Suri moves between worlds. "I like his drive, which goes in so many directions — writing, music, visual arts," says Salman Rushdie, the author with whom Suri has kindled an unlikely friendship. "And he's helped me to get a better understanding of a younger generation of Indian Americans."

In the past few years, Suri has lectured at Princeton and Stanford, acted in small films, dispatched more than 76,000 Twitter posts, and directed a music video featuring au courant comics Eric André and Hannibal Buress. His Greedhead label continues operations, releasing work by rappers, a bhangra act, and even the stand-up comedian Joe Mande.

Suri is especially eager to begin work on a novel that he has been turning over in his head, involving working-class immigrants in Queens during the Nineties. With a chutzpah that Kanye himself might envy, he sought creative counsel from Rushdie after the two met at a 2013 Asian American Writers' Workshop event. (One man was being fêted, the other DJ'ing.) A few weeks later, the pair met for drinks at Soho House. "He's very smart and sharp," Rushdie tells the Voice. "I've been encouraging him to write the novel he's thinking about, which sounds very interesting."

Still apparently bored, Suri recently took a day job at the digital advertising company Moat — more for structure and his interest in business start-ups, he claims, than for money. "I was trying to figure out what I want to do in my thirties," he says. "I thought, 'Start-ups — those sound hot!' The greatest minds of our generation were no longer going into banking, but tech and start-ups. It's funny, 'cause the people at work kind of know who I am. They'll be like, 'Oh, I have you on my iPod.' "

While musically he remains rooted in hip-hop, his tentacles reach further afield. Over the years, he has collaborated repeatedly with Vijay Iyer, the acclaimed jazz pianist and composer, who says he shares with Suri "the peculiar plight of being brown in public and being involved in black art forms that are largely marketed to white people." Iyer, who recently invited the rapper to perform as part of his residency at the Stone, adds that with Suri, "there's a rawness that almost scares people, or makes them laugh nervously. But as a musician I'm familiar with that kind of energy. It's actually a big part of making music, and particularly it's the part of ourselves that we tap into when we improvise — that unfiltered expression of self."

Nonetheless, Suri is considering pulling out from music altogether. "I turn 30 in July," he says, standing in his parents' living room by his niece's toy pink piano. "I really think this might be my last work. In the music cycle, you get chewed up and spat out. It's just a constant hustle." He begins to check off the various fields he wishes to explore, tapering off somewhere around choreography and fashion design.

"I'm quite confused," he says.

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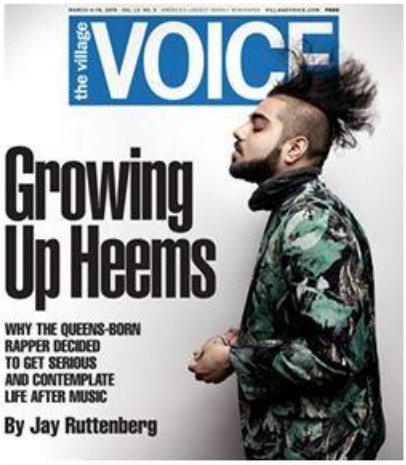

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Jesse Dittmar for the Village Voice

A day prior, Suri exits the Hindu Center Temple, breathing in the crisp air along Kissena Boulevard. He walks a block to a Shanghainese restaurant, places a take-out order for soup dumplings, and tells the waiter he will return in fifteen minutes. Then he traipses through sleepy, snowy Queens streets to Dosa Hutt, where, speaking Hindi, he order $21 worth of food. He arranges for take-out but then decides to eat at the restaurant. "Yo, this should blow your mind," he warns before taking a bite. "If you have any soul."

As he eats, Suri expresses worry about his album. As a byproduct of the fruitless Das Racist deal, it is being released through Megaforce, which generally traffics in heavy metal. Thus far, the label's grasp of hip-hop has left Suri, long accustomed to handling every last detail himself, underwhelmed. When he rented the studio in Mumbai, Suri was fronted $4,000 from his parents, not the deep-pocketed record company. While he remains proud of

his album, he was unable to use certain tracks after Megaforce declined to clear Indian samples or pay the fees of producers who had sent Suri beats. These included high-profile friends Diplo and A-Trak, who, as with the sampled Indian records, do not appear on the finished album.

Upon completing his dosa and label rant, Suri gets a panicked look: the dumplings! Returned to the Shanghainese restaurant, he apologizes to the waiter, who hands him his take-out bag. "I think I'm gonna eat one here," Suri says.

"Did you eat here last week?" the waiter asks.

"Yeah — my temple's here. Hindu Temple?"

The waiter looks at Suri blankly, as if unaware of the pink Hindu temple on the corner.

"I'm not supposed to eat meat," Suri tells the waiter. "But after temple I come and get dumplings. I'm addicted."

The musician takes a seat in the empty dumpling house, which appears to have been placed on Kissena Boulevard by vindictive gods toward the singular purpose of tempting Himanshu Suri. He wolfs down his soup dumplings, failing the test anew.

Suri needs to head home to Long Island, but first wishes to meet friends in Williamsburg, and begins piloting the Lexus back to Brooklyn. The sun has set — and with it, seemingly, the musician's spirits. Eat Pray Thug has been in the can for well over a year, and he feels uneasy reliving bygone woes. Toward the end of Das Racist, he had been suffering panic attacks, at times in the moments leading up to performances. "Sometimes," he says softly, "it's tough to get on that stage."

Suri is all talked out, his voice assuming a gravelly tone, like Bruce Vilanch but for the occasional "yo." "Every time I leave my house I get nervous," he says. "I have legitimately really bad anxiety. And I'm afraid of medication." A couple of days later, in his endless Twitter stream, he will claim: "I wrote an album about 9/11 and breaking up w my ex and recovery from dependency and now I have to do interviews about it. No more. Done." Before long, however, his feed will be boasting of all the glowing press the album is picking up. Although he may claim allegiance with rappers and Indian artists, the figures Suri resembles most may be Lady Gaga and Lena Dunham — fellow New York natives of his generation, all with their anxiety issues and social-media confessionals, posh schooling and oddly tight parental ties. September 11th shrouds the lot of them.

The rapper rolls down his windows to smoke a cigarette, allowing frigid air to flood the car. "A lot of people expect me to be some funny fucking guy, but that's not what this album is," he says. "If you read those high school articles about me, it's always about how my mom didn't want to let me out after September 11th because she was worried I'd get killed by people who thought I was Muslim. I keep thinking about this in terms of the way black parents felt after Michael Brown. How many parents have to have that conversation with their children?"

The car shoots off the highway, winding through Williamsburg. "I've cried a lot this year," he continues. "Maybe you're not supposed to say that, but how are you not supposed to cry when all these things are going on? It really upsets me, man." Suri pauses, verklempt, swallowing his tears. "It really upsets me! That's not why my parents came here."

The Lexus turns onto Bedford Avenue. It is early on a Saturday night, and the neighborhood is gearing up for its usual festivities. Finished with his cigarette, Suri rolls up the window. Throughout the day, Hot 97 has kept pulse in the background at a gentle urban purr. Now "Fuck Up Some Commas," the Future song, comes on the radio, and the musician abruptly raises the volume. The deep bass resonates ominously, the sound of trouble. Suri turns the volume up again, and then again, as pedestrians survey his car. "Fit it, critic, get it, hit it!" Suri raps alongside Future. The musician raises the volume a final time, as if testing the limits of his parents' car stereo. The Lexus is now, officially, the menace of the block.

As if alone in the city, he raps along with the radio, louder and more frantically. "Let's fuck up some commas!" Suri yells to the night. "Give no fucks, yeah, we don't give no fucks."