

THE RACE ISSUE: EXPLORING AMERICA'S FEAR OF A BLACK PLANET

VIBE

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TWITTER

» VIBE Q:
TAMING
REV. AL
SHARPTON

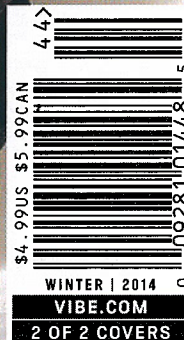
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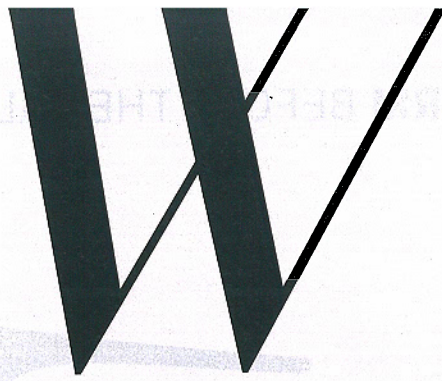
KEVIN
HART

HAS WHITE POWER*

» SO...
ARE YOU A
RACIST?



*FULL SPREAD INSIDE



WHEN KERRY WASHINGTON hosted *Saturday Night Live* in November, the first sketch touched on the lack of diversity in the SNL cast. Joke went like this: Kerry was going to have to play every female celebrity of color in the episode, from Oprah to Beyoncé. At the end of the sketch, Al Sharpton, current radio and TV host and former protégé of Jesse Jackson, stepped out onstage to chide the cast on its affirmative inaction.

Freeze tape!

A decade ago, comedian Tracy Morgan stood on that very SNL stage, with a stuffed shirt and pompadour wig, imitating the reverend, portraying him as some tacky character to be mocked and laughed at. George Jefferson, played by the late Sherman Hemsley, comes to mind. Sharpton, the very definition of a character, knows quite a bit about being the subject of satire (he's been innumerable impersonated on sketch comedy shows and lampooned by late-night talk show hosts). So how does a man with Al's dossier upgrade from comic foil to palatable voice of reason on an American entertainment institution like *Saturday Night Live*? And why is Sharpton inside NBC studios protesting the lack of black women instead of outside of 30 Rock with placards and picket signs?

Roll tape!

Suited up in a slim-cut gray pinstripe suit, Sharpton received a TRL-style "whooooohoooo!!!" from the SNL audience as he came to Kerry Washington's aid. He had to wait for the applause to die down so he could deliver the scene's punch line: "So what have we learned from this? Nothing. Live from New York. It's Saturday night!"

It's a new day. A new Al. The current incarnation of Al Sharpton is lighter, both physically and in his demeanor. His brand has been dramatically polished up and made over. Throughout his career he's been better known for his tracksuits, medallions, conked-out hairstyle and brash language than what he actually did for his protests (Yusuf Hawkins, Amadou Diallo, Trayvon Martin). Today, he's still in the trenches for civil rights. He's still controversial. He's still loud. The hair is a bit tamer, but it's still slicked back. He's still the go-to guy to chin-check racial injustice (i.e. the stop-and-frisk controversies) and he still has that unmistakable George Jefferson strut.

In order to be relevant for more than 30 years, things have to be fine-tuned. Sharpton dropped half his body size over a two-year period (he lives by a diet almost entirely devoid of animal products—an occasional small piece of fish is enjoyed on weekends—and hasn't had sugar in three years). The 59-year-old has a nightly news show, *Politics Nation*, on MSNBC; a thirty-something-year-old girlfriend who looks much younger; and works seven days a week, only joining his daughters on trips to Miami if able to still shoot his show while there.

During a whirlwind day of political rallies, production meetings and tapings of his TV show, Reverend Al Sharpton speaks with VIBE on his trajectory and how he's the same man, just a different activist.

VIBE: It seems like the very word "race" has become loaded. Like bringing up race in the age of Obama is unnecessary.

AL SHARPTON: Contrary to what some might want you to believe, we do not have equality. We are still doubly unemployed; we are still incarcerated at higher rates. But then again, for the first time in American history and in my lifetime, black kids believe they can be president.

But is the typical young black kid actually closer to becoming president than they were a generation ago?

It's feasible, but it's not necessarily closer. We still have a lot of work to do.

Considering how historic that election was, particularly in terms of race, was it initially difficult to bring the president to task on issues?

If you supported Obama and work with Obama's administration, you still have to hold them accountable. At the same time, we can't undermine him and feed him to the Tea Party or the far right.

Early on, didn't you say in an interview that you were not going to be overly critical of the president?

No. I never said that. Lesley Stahl on *60 Minutes* asked me if I would be as critical of him as I have been of other presidents. There was an issue of whether or not he was going to raise a "black agenda," and some in the community wanted to know what his agenda would be. But why would he have an agenda on race? He's the president. We're supposed to bring him our agenda like every other group. Did he have a gay and lesbian agenda? Did he have a women's agenda? That's not his job.

But you have been critical of the president.

Of course! I disagreed with him on Guantanamo Bay. I disagree with him on Afghanistan, and I think we should be out of there right away. I disagree with him on drones. Why is your being critical of Obama such a touchy subject? Is it because the community feels ownership?

That's part of it. We're in the fifth year and some people are still hollering about the black community having access to Obama. I'm out here dealing with "Stop and Frisk" and "Shop and Frisk," and Trayvon Martin. What are you doing? Why is your only issue Obama?

And why do you think they feel that way?

Because a lot of them wanted to be anointed by Obama as the inside guy.

When the president spoke at the convention for the National Action Network and you ended up on newspaper covers with him, that looked like you were being anointed as the inside guy.

No, I wouldn't call it an anointment...

Hard to say it's not...

STORM BEFORE THE CALM

OVER THE YEARS, SOME HAVE CALLED THE GOOD REVEREND UNGODLY NAMES. TODAY, HE'S SEEN BY MANY AS OBAMA'S CHOSEN ONE. ONE THING HE AIN'T, THOUGH, IS YOUR DADDY'S **AL SHARPTON**

BY ALIYA S. KING PHOTOGRAPHS
BY ERIN PATRICE O'BRIEN

Let me put it to you this way. If I was president of the United States and had a guy that supported me, who is on television every single night and on the radio each day... I would make sure we were connected. That's just good politics.

And it's not like you're a stranger to meeting with presidents...

George Bush met with me. So what's the big deal? I don't work for Obama. I don't have a presidential appointment. I wasn't anointed. I just happened to be the only black person with an evening show on cable; I'm one of only four blacks with a syndicated radio show; and the National Action Network is one of three or four major civil rights groups in the country. With that kind of reach, you're going to be heard. That's just a fact.

Now your legacy will be different than you might have imagined 20 years ago. Give an example of the changes you've made.

Twenty years ago, if I would have gone to Sanford, Fla., for the Trayvon Martin case, I would've gone on camera and called that sheriff every name I could. That's not how I handle things today. I went down there and said nothing but this situation needs to be addressed in a court of law. That's it.

Does it work better?

Of course it does. You gain more people by keeping the issue in front than having people say, "Who is this man in the tracksuit calling this man a racist pig?" The responsibility is to try to get the major issue out front. I didn't always do that. Oprah interviewed me and she told me straight up: I often agreed with you, but the way you went about it? I could not go there with you.

How else have you changed?

I haven't changed what I'm doing. The times have changed. Now when people say they're

profiling in Barneys and Macy's, people know it happens. But in the '90s, when we said they were profiling black men on the New Jersey Turnpike, they told us we were making it up. Now everybody knows this is reality.

Speaking of Barneys, there was a lot of vitriol directed toward Jay Z because of his contract with Barneys. Twenty years ago, don't you think that you would've been in the forefront, calling for him to walk away from the deal?

Maybe. But if I had been, I wouldn't have been just telling Jay Z to walk away. I would've been protesting every designer who had their merchandise in the store. The young man bought a Ferragamo belt. Why aren't we telling them to stop working with Barneys as well? The young woman bought a Céline bag. Why aren't we telling Céline to stop working with Barneys?

How do you feel about how Jay handled the situation?

I had a meeting with the chairman of the board of Barneys. Jay Z sent his reps. We're creating a council, and he will be sitting on the council. I honestly feel like he handled it right. I think some of the criticism was misguided. Jay Z was there for his foundation. We haven't proven either case yet and we want him to walk away, which means he will be sued. Why are we expecting him to do that?

Today, hip-hop artists get their feet held to the fire by their audience and by corporate America. When you become an owner, you have to act like one.

Sean Combs has launched his own station, the first in the hip-hop generation to do so. Would you consider him a good example of how to handle this responsibility?

I sat Puffy down right in this office and I told him, "Now you're an owner. You're not just

a rapper. No one is going to give you an FCC license if you're in the club cracking folks over the head with Ciroc bottles."

Your presence in the civil rights movement parallels hip-hop in many ways...

When I started becoming known, Public Enemy and Run-DMC were popular. That's where I got the tracksuits from! People would say why is he wearing a tracksuit? That's how we dressed!

Did you see the hip-hop generation becoming what it has? Could you have predicted the success of someone like Russell Simmons?

I could not have predicted that Russell would have been Russell. I could not have predicted a lot of this; a lot of people would never have predicted that I would be where I am. I remember when Quincy [Jones] and Keith Clinkscapes first started discussing VIBE. It looked great, but I wasn't sure it would last. **What do you feel are the most pressing issues for the black community?**

We have to change laws.

Give me three.

The Voting Right Act. We have to get a new VRA in Congress. Then we have to deal with the whole issue of mass incarceration; we have to deal with disparity in sentencing. Then we have to deal with employment. We still haven't challenged the private sector on fairness of employment.

You're a workaholic. Do you ever have down time?

Downtime? I watch movies while I'm on the treadmill.

That's not really downtime.

This is who I am. This is what I do.

Do you ever think about retirement?

I might slow down a bit at some point.

No you won't.

Yeah I know. But it sounds good.

You have been single for several years and recently started dating. When you started dating again after your divorce, what did you want in a woman?

I only knew what I didn't want; someone who didn't understand me and my work.

And your girlfriend understands?

Absolutely.

Does it help that she's younger than you?


Maybe. Some of my friends, I saw them dating 20-year-olds in the middle of a midlife crisis. I tried that, too; and then I said, "No. This is stupid." Thirty or 35? Maybe. Twenty-year-olds? No.

With all due respect, Reverend Al... Thirty-five is not exactly...

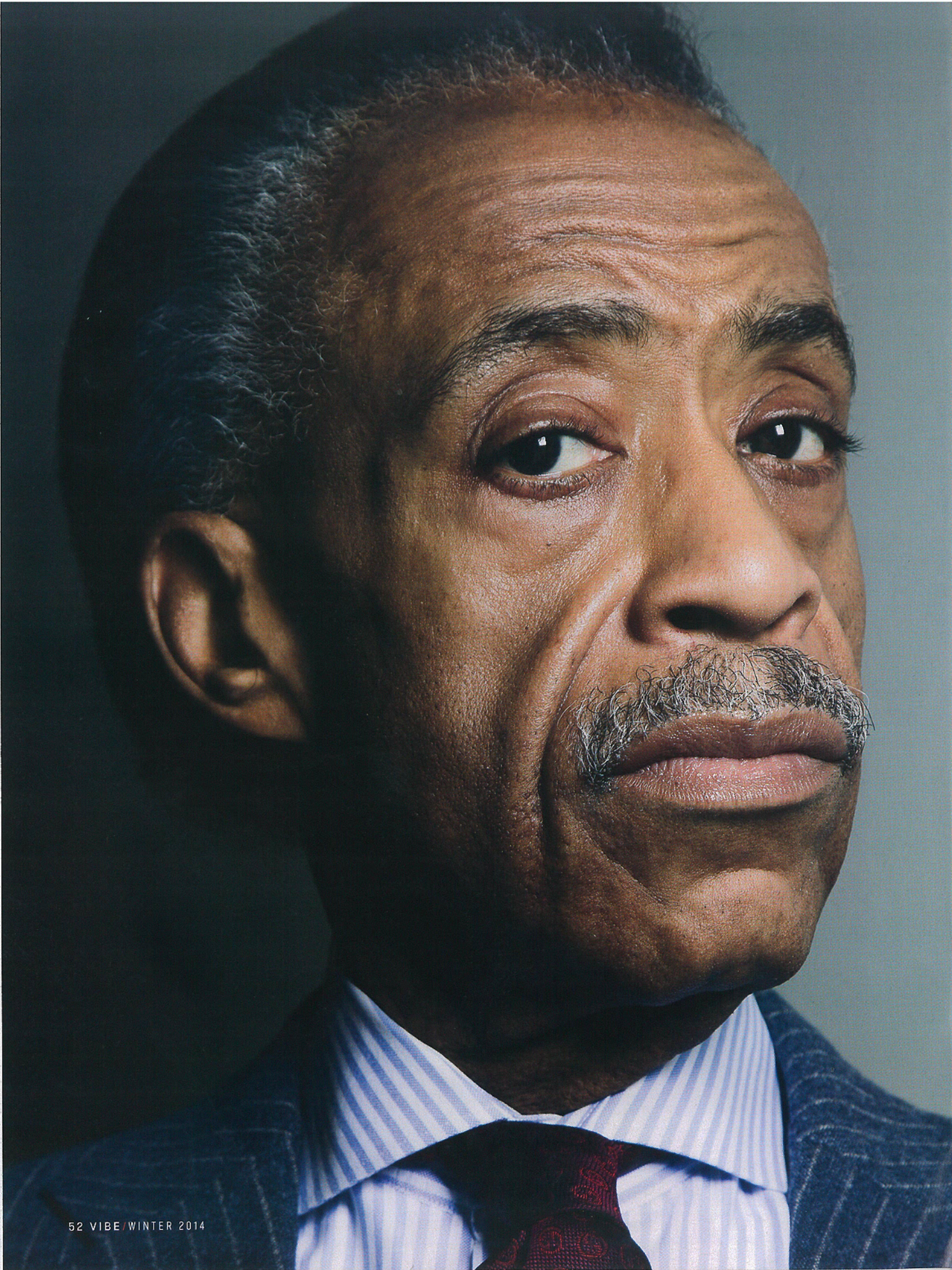
Yeah. I know...

That's young.

Very young. But they've lived a little longer.

Just enough. 





BLAST PG.11

RACE

The N-word gets color commentary; How to auto-correct your (maybe) racist mistakes; Black Twitter's stand-out characters

BUSINESS CLASS

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MUSIC

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SEX

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NEXT PG.35

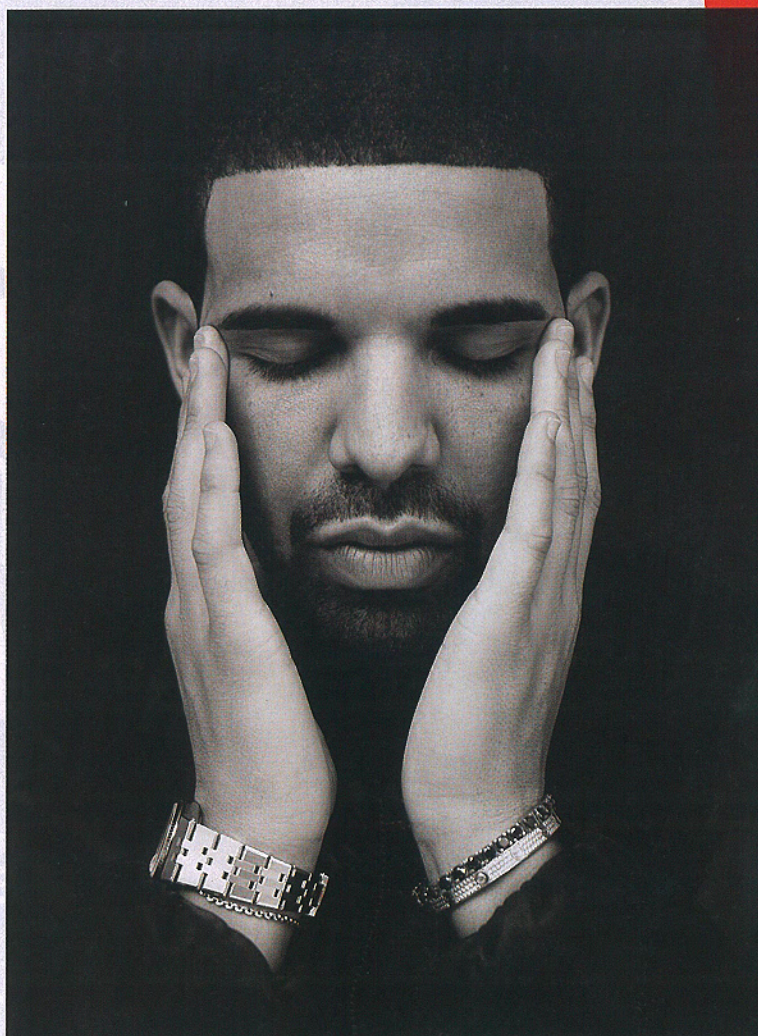
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20? PG.95

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PROPS PG.96

Nelson Mandela

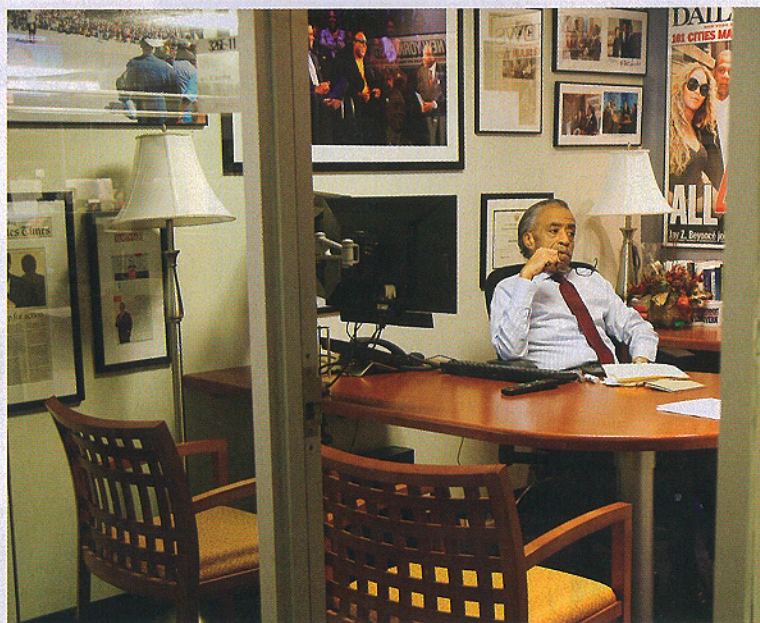


56 KILLING THEM SOFTLY

Drake's emo manifesto *Nothing Was the Same* successfully bridged the gap between softies and hard-core rap heads, not only achieving 2013's top album but also his personal best. Toronto's poster child breaks down the creative process behind his third LP, and whether that good kid from Compton comes close.

52 VIBE Q: STORM BEFORE THE CALM

Al Sharpton stands firm as the reverend who cried racism. In this comprehensive Q&A, one of our loudest voices of reason discusses legacy and why he's toned down his approach.



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