

IDK – The Great Unknown

Photography – Lea Winkler
Styling – Savannah White



Ami Paris shirt, tie & overcoat, Dries Van Noten jeans, Nike trainers



Dior jacket & T-shirt



Calvin Klein tank top, Paul Smith jacket, Tommy Hilfiger trousers, Nike trainers



Sacai coat & trousers, Calvin Klein tank top,
Dries Van Noten cap, Nike trainers

Rapper and producer Jason Mills is an astute poet for our times. His seemingly simple moniker IDK, stands for 'ignorantly delivering knowledge', a paradox and play on words which is essential to understanding his charm. We spoke to him about rap, what it means to be Gen Z, and why artists, even those at the top of their game, have a responsibility to be challenged by their fans.

Interview by Gemma Lacey

Rap music used to have several key messages that were front and center: the hardships faced by young Black men, money, and a chance to flex their achievements, in modern times that conversation has evolved and we see artists like IDK bringing conversations about mental health to the fore and channeling a vibrant new message in this iconic medium. This shift to a more conscious form of communication is an exciting one, and one IDK is spearheading. "I think what I'm trying to articulate is that the things that matter can actually be cool. And what I mean by that is a lot of people don't really notice that the things that matter and things that are important like financial literacy, like vulnerability, mental health, they haven't really been associated with what's cool, in fact, the opposite is what's been associated with what's cool as a man. Not expressing your emotions and messing up your mental health in the processes is what we're taught is cool. Spending money on things that aren't appreciating assets or things that aren't tangible isn't important. I'm just trying to shift the narrative."

We discuss if this is a cultural thing – Gen Z are thought of as having more compassionate values than their millennial predecessors. IDK believes they're spearheading a wave of change, as he puts it, "I think with Gen Z it's about the new level of awareness where we're

getting into a new stage of evolution in society, that's allowing us to correct some of the problems that affected previous generations. So it's a human thing. It's almost the same thing as with snakes where they used to have arms and legs and after a while they evolved into not having them. Or with birds who, because of climate control, started to have longer beaks and longer necks so they can stay cooler. So I think that with us as human beings, it's less physical and more mental, societal, and our next level of evolution is understanding that the anxieties that are coming from the pressures of being a human being are starting to take a toll on our mental health and we're reacting to it in that way."

He tells me how important it is to him to do what he can to shift that, most recently via his project at Harvard University, the No Label Academy, a tuition-free music business seminar for BIPOC. An ambitious project he not only raised funds for and then taught but also created a community of mentors for students featuring the likes of Virgil Abloh to give students meaningful connections in the world to work with. His focus was to create access, opportunity and awareness for his students. He describes the impact of the course, "The first day there were a lot of tears, and a lot of emotions, heavy emotions that have been bottled up for years because I somehow was able to

get everybody to expose some of their deepest, darkest secrets, things they'd never talked to anyone about. To a group of people that they didn't know on the first day of class, on camera." That worked, he said because "it created confidence for everybody to overcome whatever that issue was, right? Something that I had to deal with. So I knew it would work". His commitment to creating opportunity is fervent too, "Every single person had an internship or interview with everyone from Logitech to Nike, to Warner Records and William Morris agency." What's impressive is how hands-on he was, from fundraising to creating a curriculum and signing up talent and brands to give advice and create internships and employment opportunities. I ask if this comes from being an artist and having a DIY mindset and he agrees but says it's more than that, "Most of the challenges were making sure that everyone was able to relax because people tend to panic. I don't work like that. I work the best when I'm not worried. It could be the craziest thing that we need to get done in 24 hours, and it'll get done with a smile on my face, chilling. I'm never worried. And that's a mindset that's not easy for everyone to understand so that's the most important part about that."

This laid-back attitude plays out across his creative process and we discuss how the inevitable

slowdown of the pandemic influenced his latest record. Though it's not as obvious as you might think, I ask if the introspective elements of the album were created through circumstance but he says, "No, I have one hell of an imagination, so it doesn't matter what's going on. I can tap into whatever I want whenever I want." Instead, the introspection is a product of where he's at, established enough as an artist to realise that creative work has inevitable highs and lows or as he puts it, "high risk, high reward", yet self-aware enough to understand that being an only child, he had to be imaginative. "Not having a brother and sister forces you to imagine, when you're by yourself as a kid, especially as a boy. I didn't have a lot of toys, so I had to literally just figure things out and entertain myself so yeah, I think that's the most important thing that shaped my vision."

We discuss his philosophy that he is in competition with himself and where that stems from, "It became a defense mechanism for my mental health. Because I'm trying to be in competition with someone in a sport that's not measured by how fast you got to the finish line or how many points you scored or physical ability. It's like a dog chasing its tail. You can't control anything. I learned not to put power into the things I couldn't control. That's a very important step to having a healthy balance in your life when it comes to mental health."

Outside of competition another common theme in his work is nostalgia, he references 90s cartoons like *Hey Arnold* and his show

for Apple Music, *Radio Clue*, aims to create an environment where exposure to music is tied to specific memories. "*Radio Clue*'s based on creating memory or triggering memory to music nostalgia. It's about creating nostalgia. That's basically what it is. So when you hear a song for the first time, it's like, 'I remember where I was when I heard that song that I love now.'"

It's this idea of music as a conduit for emotion and connection that sets him apart from his peers and also why he's such a compelling spokesman. I ask him about how he feels about the way certain artists of other generations use their platform to court controversy, politically or otherwise, and his response is thoughtful and compassionate, "I don't like to say any artist is using their platform in a negative or positive sense, because who are we to tell artists what they should do and shouldn't do. You make art, if you're doing it the right way, you're making art from the bottom of your heart and whatever you feel and there's going to be people that don't like it, just like there's going to be people that do." He believes that the honesty of communication is the most important thing, "In this world, all of us are guilty of saying things that aren't really acceptable, maybe amongst a large group of people. But they are acceptable amongst our really close friends. Or maybe not even acceptable, but it's an outlet for you to say what you really feel instead of bottling it up. Maybe you can learn from what you really feel, but that's what it is. It just so happens that as an artist, we are coming into this space to create

art and feel a certain way and have a conversation we need to have."

His perspective stays true to the values of the artist but he's far from believing they should be unaccountable, "What I feel is an artist should say whatever they feel, but when they are ridiculed by a group of people who feel offended, they have to understand that they do have a responsibility in that situation, and how you use that opportunity to understand. You get what I'm saying? I don't agree with, 'Oh, you said this thing and you're cancelled. You don't have another chance, you're a piece of shit, you're terrible, you're...' No, no, no, that should never be the case. Now, if they don't want to, I still think you even give them time to figure it out within themselves. And if they never want to... that's where the issue lies, right? But I think there's a balance on both sides. So I do think we have a responsibility. But I also think that because we're expressing how we feel and it may not be politically correct all the time, the listeners have a responsibility to educate."

I ask him if there's a message he'd like his audience to take away with them and his response is as moving and well considered as any of his lyrics, "With this record I wanted Black men to understand the importance of vulnerability and that it's okay to be vulnerable. I wanted Black women to understand how it feels to be a Black man that's struggling with vulnerability. And then I wanted the world to see both of those things." A beautiful vision from this Gen-Z poet looking to elevate rap, his community and all our imaginations.





Dior jacket, T-shirt, trousers & bag



Dries Van Noten suit, Nike trainers

Grooming: Stacy Gonzalez

Producer: Jimmy Nyeango

Lighting director: Roberto Kozek

Photographer's assistants: Justin Brooks, Kurt Lavastida