



PHOTO BY TODD COOPER

HEART & SOUL

One thing is for certain of **Bilal**: the neo-soul artist is surely on a journey of self-made greatness.

Bilal says his story began in Philadelphia, where his funk-loving father constantly took him to various jazz clubs around the city. These outings were where Bilal's lifelong love of music blossomed.

When the time came to pursue higher education, he eagerly attended New York's School for Jazz and Contemporary Music. There, Bilal (born Bilal Sayeed Oliver) dove into creating his own songs. He tied together both his childhood and formal exposure to jazz to create a hot and heavy recipe of sounds influenced by Prince, Stevie Wonder and anything '70s.

His approach to making music is flamboyant, risky and incredibly experimental — and exactly what the music industry was looking for when he showed up. By the ripe age of 19 in 2001, he released his first album, *1st Born Second*, with Interscope Records. Dr. Dre and J Dilla were just some of the powerful names behind the scenes of Bilal's debut.

With his success came plenty of financial rewards, which he blew through like most teenagers with a newly

found key to an upper-class lifestyle. After a tornado of financial turbulence and a terminated deal with Interscope, Bilal put almost a decade-long halt to creating any full-length albums of his own.

His hiatus was far from a hibernation, however, as he continued to collaborate with music royalty like Beyoncé, Jay-Z, Kendrick Lamar and Kimbra. Through collaboration, he explains, musicians not only create "really good music" but they achieve oneness. "We make this universal language that everyone can understand," he says.

Bilal came back strong in 2010, using the knowledge from his career hardships and collaborations to approach music in a new way — one with very few rules and zero corporate labels.

Now, when he enters the studio, Bilal steps into a new mindset in order to create fresh content that keeps the inspiration flowing.

"I change my name when I go to record an album," he says. "Every album, it's like there's a different guy producing it, but it's really me. Sometimes I call myself Pillow and

sometimes I call myself Sirius. Seriously."

This, he explains, is the luxury of creating freely — and sometimes oddly — under independent labels.

Bilal's recent albums have received lavish praise from the R&B community. He dropped his second full-length album, *Airtight's Revenge*, in 2010, and his third, *A Love Surreal*, by 2013.

Two years later, he released *In Another Life*, an intricate album that pushes the boundaries on traditional structures of soul and R&B. Not to mention that he recorded the album solely on refurbished studio equipment dated no later than 1968 in order to recreate a truly vintage experience.

Come enjoy some warped white noise, uncanny frequencies and a whole lot of soul with Bilal 9 pm Tuesday, Apr. 18, at Hi-Fi Music Hall; \$20 adv., \$25 door, 21 and over.

Bilal, along with Shy Girls and Laura Ivancie, will also perform at the Soul'd Out Festival in Portland at Revolution Hall on Thursday, April 20. Doors open 7 pm, music at 8 pm. All-ages, \$20 advance at revolutionhall.com. — *Kelsey Anne Rankin*

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