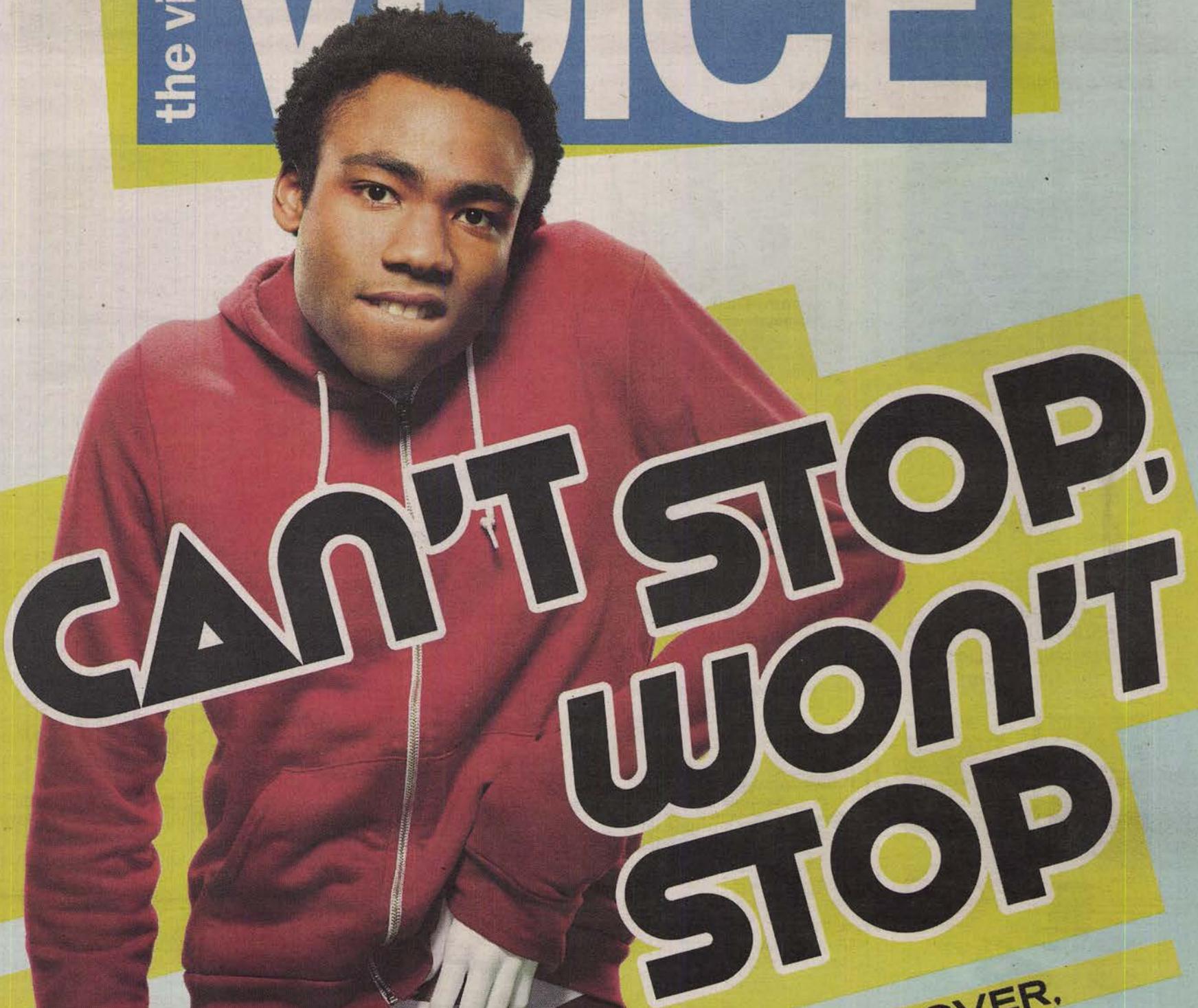


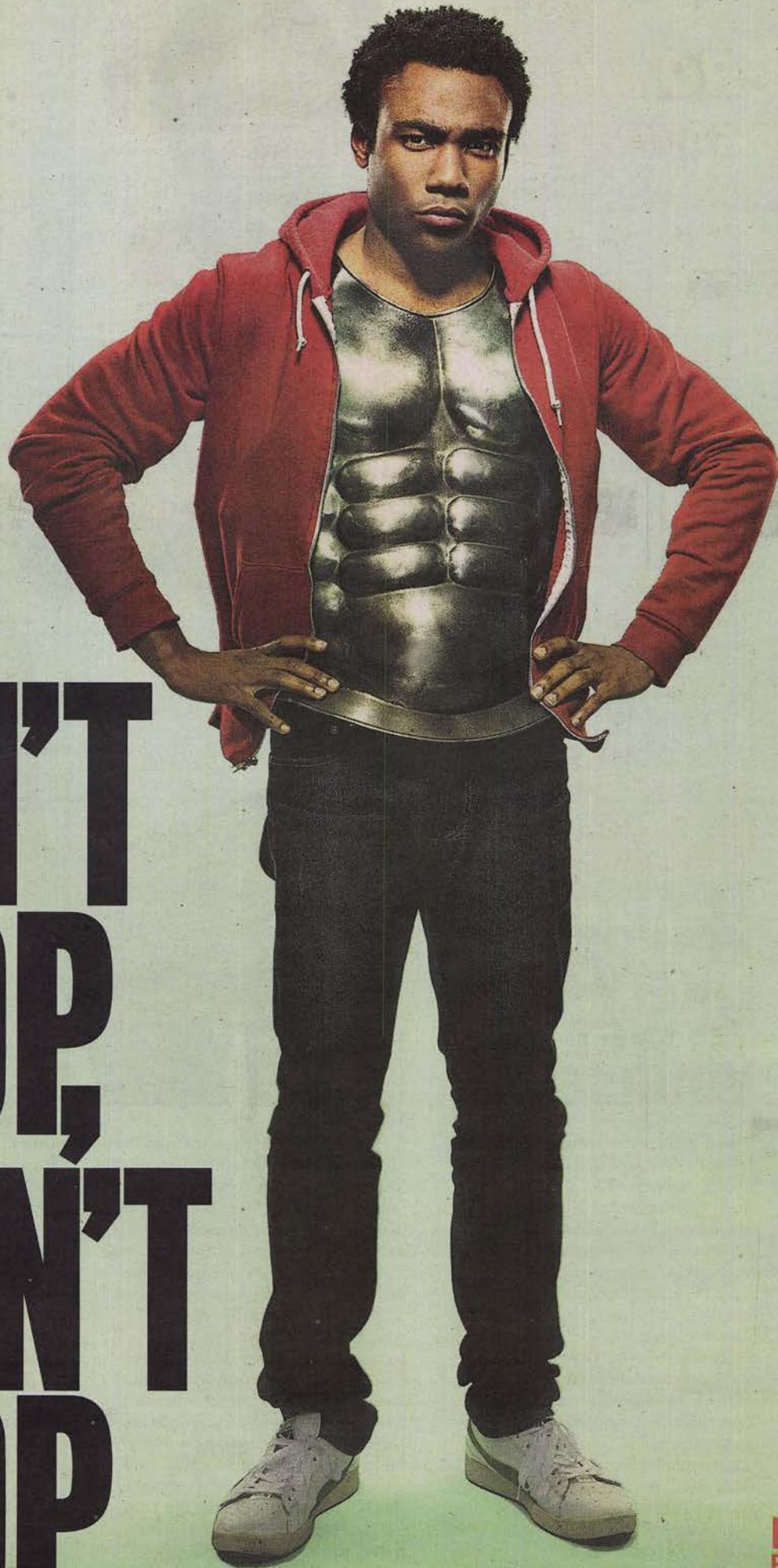
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VOICE



DONALD GLOVER,
A/K/A CHILDISH GAMBINO,
is on a collision course
WITH STARDOM
BY BILL JENSEN

**CAN'T
STOP,
WON'T
STOP**



**DONALD
GLOVER,**
A/K/A
CHILDISH
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IS ON A
COLLISION
COURSE
WITH
STARDOM

By **BILL JENSEN**

Photographed by Chad Griffith
Hair and makeup styling by Valissa Yoe

► Can't Stop, Won't Stop *continued*

Red sweatshirt hood pulled tightly over his head, brown leather jacket wrapped tightly around his torso, fresh whiskey sour sweating in his hand, Donald Glover peels his way through the packed crowd in the upstairs lounge at the Lower East Side bar Planos to the area where a lifelike panda, peering from behind a giraffe, pig, and monkey in a display window above the stairs, is staring at him.

The previous night, the 27-year-old recorded his first hour-long comedy special, *Weirdo*, at two sold-out shows at the 500-capacity Union Square Theatre. He flew his family in to watch. His younger brother, Stephen, Tweeted after the performance from the bar: "Watching two women fight over my brother, LOL." Glover didn't go home with either of them—he went home instead with a woman he calls "the Holy Grail," the one he tried and failed to get the entire time he lived in New York, before bolting to Hollywood two years ago.

"Why now?" Glover asks no one in particular, turning his back on the panda—its eerie eyes staring like some sort of harbinger of ill times—and gazing into the mass of bodies writhing in the center of the room, speaking as if to the Holy Grail herself. "What changed that you're making out with me now?"

What changed is that Donald Glover is blowing up.

Donald Glover, the black hipster from Stone Mountain, Georgia, who landed a gig writing for *30 Rock* while still an R.A. at NYU. Donald Glover, the former Jehovah's Witness who penned some of Tracy Morgan's most classic lines as idiot savant Tracy Jordan, only to leave his Emmy-winning writing job for California and quickly snag the role of Troy Barnes, the clueless jock, on the NBC show *Community*. Donald Glover, the asthmatic nerd who remixed Sufjan Stevens's *Illinois* album into a dreamy, chill hip-hop record and whose latest rap EP, released under the moniker Childish Gambino, has been downloaded 150,000 times. Donald Glover, the guy whose viral videos as the part of Derrick Comedy team have been watched 200 million times and counting.

This week, Glover embarks on the first large-scale mash-up of all of his abilities in the "I Am Donald" tour—a live show for the ADD generation that combines hip-hop, comedy, and viral sketch video. He will tour 23 cities in 33 days, including stops at the Bowery Ballroom on May

IN EVEN THE SMALLEST ROLES, GLOVER'S STAR POWER IS EVIDENT. BUT IT'S THE SKETCHES IN WHICH HE TAKES THE LEAD THAT YOU'RE LIKELY TO WET YOURSELF.

10 and Williamsburg Music Hall on May 14—both shows sold out in three hours.

Ten years ago, "I Am Donald" could never have happened. Handlers and brand managers *may* have allowed a guy who played a lovable character on a popular mainstream network TV show to perform hardcore, dirty-mouth stand-up, and even dirtier emo-rap—but they would have insisted he do it all on a separate stage. But the transparency and immediacy of the Web makes it possible for Glover to avoid cutting his talent into tiny pieces for his different audiences. In a sense, he has spun the TV-personality paradigm on its head—his persona is what people see on the Web, and the TV show is merely an extension.

"Because of Twitter, people don't go to my shows expecting Troy to rap," says Glover, a reference to problems other performers have encountered, like Andy Kaufman facing crowds that only wanted

him to be his Latka character from *Taxi*.

When Glover randomly Tweeted that he wanted to audition for the role of Spider-Man in the Marc Webb reboot of the franchise, the Twitterverse began a campaign to make it so. Even if it was just PC diplomacy, both creator Stan Lee and *Ultimate Spider-Man* writer Brian Michael Bendis said they approved. Alas, he didn't audition, and the role went to Andrew Garfield. It was probably for the best—because even though he claims he needs just three hours of sleep a night, Glover is running at break-neck speed, criss-crossing the country fueled by ambition and whiskey and girls, heading toward a moving target that is flashing either "Next Big Thing" or "Next Tragic Hero"—all depending on how the next year plays out.

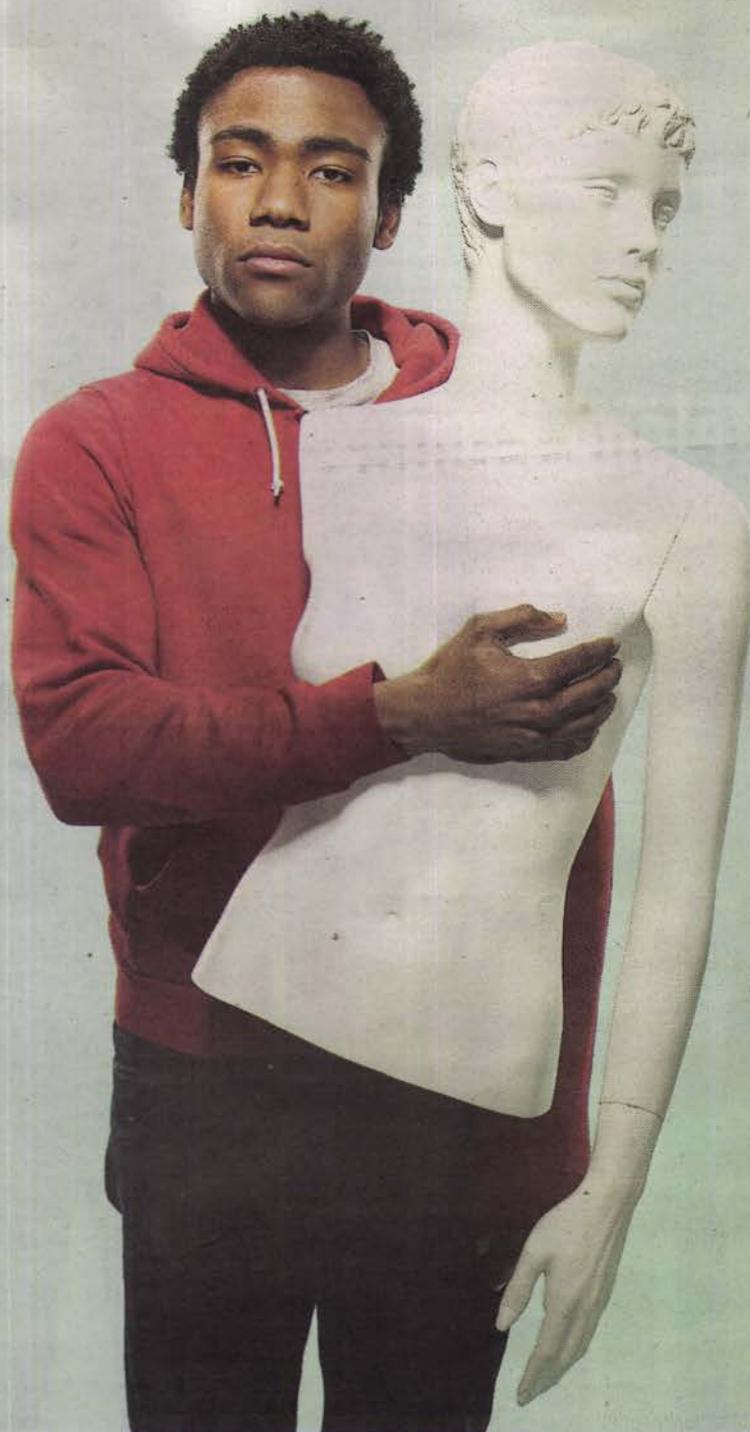
It's nearly midnight at Planos. When he made his way through the bar downstairs, he received countless hugs from

male fans. Most knew him from the television series, others knew him from the viral videos. A select few know his raps. A lot of people know him from Twitter, which he checks constantly on his iPhone throughout the night.

Glover checks his Twitter again. There are way too many bros under the tight ceiling of Planos' second floor. He asks Twitter—"In NYC, where should I go right now to drink?"

After getting numerous responses of "My bed," from lady followers, he migrates down the street to Darkroom, where a follower promises "saucy bitches."

Glover leads his family caravan down Ludlow into the blackness that is the Darkroom. His brother comments on how damn cold it is. Glover enters the room and immediately realizes—*this* is where all the women on the Lower East Side have been hiding. It's a long way from Stone Mountain. ►



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Can't Stop, Won't Stop *continued*

A suburb of Atlanta, Stone Mountain sits in the shadow of a large relief sculpture of Jefferson Davis, Robert E. Lee, and Stonewall Jackson carved in the side of the mountain of the same name. It is the place where the Ku Klux Klan was rebooted in 1915—and Martin Luther King references it in his 1963 “I Have a Dream” speech.

There was a television in the Glover household, but the kids, being raised Jehovah's Witness, were not allowed to watch it. So Glover would take his Talkboy, record the audio of episodes of *The Simpsons*, wait until bedtime, and listen to them as he lay in his bed. (He would later write a spec script for *The Simpsons* in which Homer is arrested for stealing a single song off the Internet and taken to court by the RIAA, where he must face his victims, Hall & Oates.)

then used his performing as a way to escape Georgia to New York for school.

“NYU is like a Jurassic 5 concert—there are supposed to be black people there, but there aren't,” Glover says in his stand-up. Studying dramatic writing in the hopes of being a playwright, he began performing in sketch comedy troop Hammerkatz, where he met current writing partners DC Pierson and Dominic Dierkes. The three split off to start Derrick Comedy with director Dan Eckman.

The sketches of Derrick are teeming with frat-boy, racial, and homoerotic humor. But underneath the dick and fart jokes is a sincerity that makes them work.

In even the smallest roles in the sketches, Glover's star power is evident. But it's the ones in which he takes the lead that you're likely to wet yourself, such as the student-film-as-revenge epic “Girls Are Not to Be Trusted” and the most popular Derrick sketch, “Bro Rape: A Newline Investigative Report,” a *Dateline*

WHILE GLOVER IS OFTEN CITED AS A DRIVING FORCE BEHIND A LOT OF TRACY MORGAN'S BEST LINES, HIS FIRST JOKE TO MAKE IT ON 30 ROCK WAS A PUNCHLINE FOR KENNETH, THE WHITE HAYSEED NBC PAGE.

His parents, mother Beverly and postal-worker father Donald Sr.—contrary to what you might read on the Internet, Glover is not the son of *Lethal Weapon* actor Danny Glover—were also foster parents, which meant a steady stream of kids entered Glover's home.

Glover says he was happy growing up, but always had a fear that something would go wrong—that something bad would happen around the next corner. “I was the type of kid—I felt like I was always being blamed for things that weren't my fault. So I always wanted things to go smoothly. And growing up in the South, people didn't like me because I was black. And it took on this thing: I'm gonna be me so much, and be sooo likeable, that I will change their minds. And I know now that that's impossible. But I had to try.”

The kids who would come through his front door had often been through a lot already in their lives. When his parents brought home a child who had been molested, they had to explain to Glover that the boy needed a lot more attention. As a kid, Glover remembers asking himself, “What about me?”

So he would do anything to get his parents' attention—puppet shows, plays, skateboarding.

For a while, he was the only black kid in his school. A black kid who liked the Muppets and Korn. A good student but a disruption in class, he migrated to the DeKalb School of the Arts, where he starred in plays like *42nd Street* and *Pippen*, and

send-up involving Natty Ice—drinking, Jack Johnson—listening male predators.

And then there's “Jerry,” in which Glover plays a high school student who tries to fart but accidentally shits his pants in class, then spends the rest of the sketch trying to pass it off a million different ways while bawling his eyes out. It's ridiculous and over-the-top, but there is a believability and earnestness in Glover's performance that makes you care for him. At that point, we are all that kid. And it's a microcosm of Glover's range—wild and heartfelt... with poop.

Glover landed in New York a virgin who had never tasted alcohol. His first drink took place in a dorm room at NYU's Brittany Hall as a sophomore. He sat in the corner of a room full of people, his hoodie pulled over his head, debating the whole night whether to take a swig or not. When he finally did, he thought for sure he might die—the fears that nagged him while growing up ruling over a lot of what he did.

In his junior year, he lost his virginity—to another R.A. in his dorm. Never having been in any kind of intimate relationship before, he was unsure of what to do when the deed was done. Was he going to have to marry this girl? But she told him, “No, it was just fun. It doesn't mean anything.” “Doesn't mean anything?” Glover thought to himself. “Oh, OK.”

It was then that the Childish

Gambino was born.

He had been mixing beats since freshman year with a ripped version of Fruity Loops, but now he began rapping over them with rhymes about girls and love. The name "Childish Gambino" popped up on a Wu-Tang Clan name-generator site, so he kept it and put the first tracks on tape.

He can go from a suck-a-dick verse ("When rappers start rappin' over indie shit/Just remember I was first to hit this shit") to a child just trying to fit in ("I coulda been a tragedy/That's why these fake niggas who call me 'pussy' are 'mad' at me/Cause they ain't have the smarts or the heart/Ain't you read the fuckin' book, *Things Fall Apart*?) to a wailing, hopeless, and hurting romantic ("I don't wanna be alone/Cause you know/Somewhere inside/I cannot find/The feeling I got from you").

It's a bit schizophrenic—but much like how Glover doesn't separate his TV persona from his Web persona, he doesn't care to compartmentalize. For this, he has his detractors. Satirical cultural critic Hipster Runoff teased him by wondering if the "blipster" is too eager to "make it as a buzz band" (in a review of a *Voice* review). The *AV Club* picked apart his album *Culdesac* as "a collection of good ideas that still need to be finessed into a strong statement," attacking the wild range of emotions and personality from song to song. But that's exactly the point. "Fuck Rap Cool," the hashtag Glover often adds to his Tweets, is the one tattoo to be etched on him at this stage in his career.

In his raps, he makes frequent mention of his manhood. His propensity for thick women, particularly of Asian descent, is well-documented, and on one track he gives a shout-out to e.e. cummings—you can fill in the rest. But in between, he's rapping about alienation, trying to fit in, getting girls to like him. Nerdy emo with a fro. Name-dropping Greedo and Inspector Gadget one minute, then laying something like, "Whiskey-sippin'/Wanna drink the whole bottle/But these smart middle-class black kids need a role model" the next.

"So many black kids Tweeted me about that line," says Glover. "This is the first time in history we are able to talk about alienation and nerd things. Black kids do like white stuff. Arcade Fire were at the top of iTunes—it ain't all white people listening to them." He represents a new archetype of entertainer—a black nerd who can like white stuff. Not a black nerd in the over-the-top Steve Urkel or Dwayne Wayne sense, but a regular black guy who likes the same stuff white people like—but just happens to be more talented than you.

The black middle-class kid is a real thing. Earlier that night, before heading to Pianos, around the table of Boka Bon Chon with his two biological siblings, brother Stephen and sister Brienne, and high school friend Lauren, the conversation turns to race—who can say the N-word and who can't. "He was voiced by a black dude," he wonders out loud. "So is it OK for Darth Vader to say the N-word?" He quickly Tweets the question out to the world.

"During the whole *Spider-Man* thing, the only thing that ever hurt my feel-

ings was this one comment. The guy said, 'Look, I love you. I think you're great. But let's be honest: There are no black kids like Peter Parker,'" he says, shaking his head. "There are!"

And Glover will let us all in on a little secret: His first taste of rap wasn't NWA. Or Run-D.M.C. Or even Eminem. No, his first taste of rap was guys like Fred Durst.

"They say there's no place in hip-hop if you're in the suburbs," he says. "Kanye is a suburban kid. The struggle is finding your place."

While in his senior year at NYU, Glover got an e-mail from David Miner with the message

"I heard you write." Miner had gotten his name from Tina Fey, who got it from Amy Poehler, who got it from his teacher at Upright Citizens Brigade.

They asked him for some writing samples. He sent the spec script he wrote for *The Simpsons*, along with one for *Everybody Hates Chris*, along with some sketches he had written.

Miner and *30 Rock* co-creator Fey liked them. Not yet having graduated from NYU, he was now a writer on *30 Rock*.

While Glover is often cited as a driving force behind a lot of Tracy Morgan's best lines, his first joke to make it on the show was a punchline for Kenneth, the white hayseed NBC page—whom he says he actually most identifies with, if anything because of the fact that both (fictional white clueless guy and real black nerdy guy) hail from the same town: Stone Mountain, Georgia.

Eager to perform as well as write, Glover started doing stand-up. In the beginning, he took advice from Tracy Morgan: "Talk about penises—dudes loves that." And later, advice from Chris Rock: "What the hell was that!?! It looked like you went onstage and said 'dick' for 45 minutes."

Meanwhile, he continued to mix beats and rap and, with his Derrick partners, produced and starred in the *Encyclopedia Brown* send-up indie film *Mystery Team*. But he wanted more. In 2008, he auditioned to play Obama as a cast member on *Saturday Night Live*, but didn't get the part. At the end of the third season of *30 Rock*, he told Fey he wanted out. She gave him her blessing, and he left the most stable and secure thing he had, packed up the Derrick team in a two-car caravan, and headed to L.A., moving to Beverly Hills Adjacent, in an apartment building that also housed a brothel and a dentist's office.

Then he got a call from *Community*. The character of Troy was actually written for a white guy, but he made it his own. Troy was also originally supposed to be paired up on the show with Chevy Chase's character, Pierce, but it was clear early on that Glover's Troy would enjoy a heated bromance with Danny Pudi's film-school geek, Abed.

"It was pretty immediate," says Pudi of the connection as he watches Glover's band set up for a show on the cracked concrete outdoor patio of Austin's

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▶ Can't Stop, Won't Stop *continued*

Red 7 bar. "Both characters do things at 150 percent," from bonding over *Kick-puncher* to building a dorm-wide blanket fort. Pudi has come down to Austin to party and hang with his friend and watch him perform. The line to get into the club on 7th Street stretches down the block, a diverse mix of b-boys and hipsters and normal-looking folk excited to see the guy from *Community*.

Glover appears from backstage wearing a vintage-looking red Coca-Cola T-shirt, tight jeans, and green-and-white Adidas. He is going solo tonight—his writing partner Pierson is back in L.A.—but I ask him if Pierson ever sealed the deal with a cute chick he was talking up before the Woodies a few nights ago.

"Which chick?" he asks, confused.

"The cute blond chick he was rapping to," I answer.

"Oh, that one," Glover says loudly with a smile. "No, I hooked up with that chick."

"But DC was killing it!" I say incuriously.

"I know DC was killing it!" he retorts, and then says sincerely and unapologetically: "But I have money."

He's not saying it to be a dick—that was just the dynamic. "We started talking about money, and she was like, 'So you think money is evil?' and I'm like, 'Money isn't evil.' But I could see dollar signs in her eyes."

"So does she keep texting you?" I ask.

"Nah," says he with a bigger smile. "I asked for her number first. I always ask for their number first. They see you put it into the phone and they're like, 'OK, he's doing it,' but..." his big smile turns into a sheepish grin. "Yeah, I'm a little girl-crazy." ("He's a silent assassin that way," Pudi remarks later about his sitcom partner's prowess.)

Glover, talking in a tone between a hush and a whisper as he tries to save his voice, goes back to his MacBook on the side of the stage to work on arrangements for the show.

He has told his entourage that *now* is the time to strike. When most performers usually wrap a TV show, they take a holiday. But he is charging ahead. The week of SXSW, he wedged a Chicago performance on Friday in between the Wednesday's mtvU Woodie Awards, Thursday's unexpected cameo at the *Voice*/Wu-Tang show at the Austin Music Hall, and Saturday's show at Red 7. Then he's going to do another gig in Texas, one in a church in Atlanta, up to New York for the Comedy Central taping, then Virginia, back to Texas, up to Arkansas. Nonstop. Why the rush?

"Funny you should ask, because we were just talking about that," says Glover's manager, Greg Walter, as we eye Glover talking to the band on the stage. "For the past three months, I have not been calling him saying, 'Take this job.' I am usually calling him saying, 'Don't take this job—you need rest.' I get worried because he doesn't sleep enough. I tell him to slow down, and he says, 'You know what, I'm 26, 27—I can do it now.'"

Pudi, who looks decidedly healthy and rested in a military cap and fresh

face, walks up to the side of the stage. Glover sees him and flashes a smile.

"Are you alive?" Pudi yells, leaning his body across the stage.

Glover, still resting his voice, holds up his pointer and thumb, pinched with little space in between.

Just barely.

The previous week had been one of the biggest in Glover's career.

On Tuesday, March 8, he released the new Childish Gambino EP. Over the next four days, he was on the set of *Community* as they tried to finish shooting the second season before the weekend. He wove press

interviews about Childish Gambino in between takes, and after each day's wrap went back to his studio to remix some more songs and put them on the Web. At night, he was preparing for the Comedy Central special as well as working on slides for the "I Am Donald" tour. He spent eight hours on Saturday, March 12, covered in orange paint for the last day of shooting for *Community*. (They are revisiting a paintball theme.) 5-Hour Energy. Whiskey. Remixing. Girls. Bits and beats flowing through his head that needed to be captured on his iPhone. Writing a new song for the Woodies. Sunday was a *Community* goodbye get-together followed by performing at his regular Sunday-night comedy show, *Shitty Jobs*.

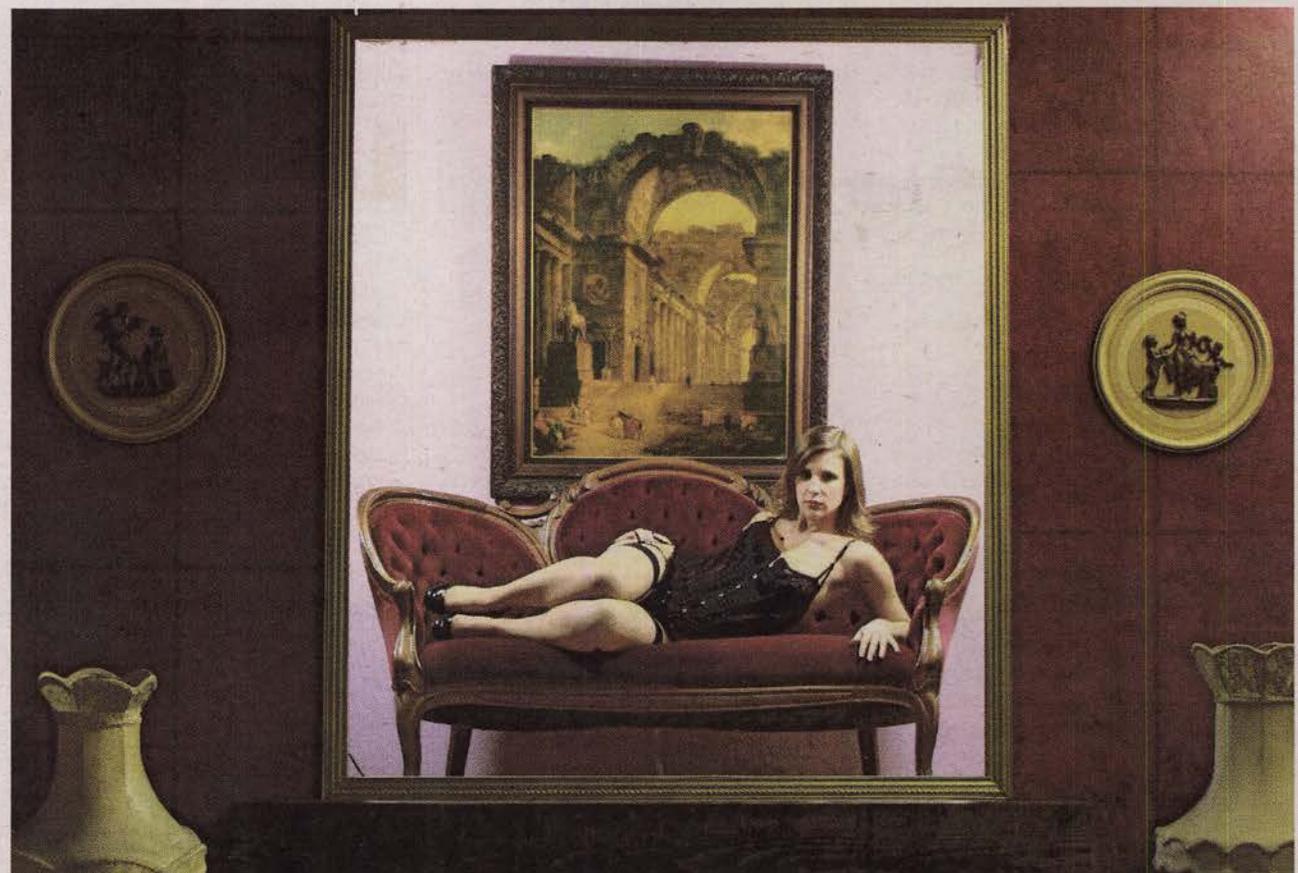
Three hours of sleep over the previous 48, Glover finally found his bed at 5 a.m. on Monday morning for some semblance of a proper rest.

He woke up three hours later, stumbled into the bathroom of his new Silver Lake home, and started throwing up.

He didn't drink any whiskey the night before. It wasn't food poisoning, either. It was the pace. His work—from the clueless jock Troy on *Community* to the indie rapper Childish Gambino to his black-nerd stand-up—constantly needing to be fed, had just left his flesh in its wake.

"My body was just done," says Glover, safe in Austin. "My left arm was numb. I had to stop and sit down."

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► Can't Stop, Won't Stop *continued*

to his mother to his Gambino co-producer—wants him to slow down. He even raps about them telling him to slow down. But he's not having it.

"You don't get to where all my heroes were without giving up a part of who you are," he says. "Right now, I refuse to even have a dog. No girlfriend. I don't want anything tying me down. I want to be everywhere. I don't see a limit for me. I want to do everything. I never thought I was this type of person: Have a good time, not a long time. As a kid, I was always afraid of dying." But now, he's driving full-speed. Pushing himself. He crashes. He gets back up. Wash, rinse, repeat.

Onstage at Red 7, you can see some ill effects of the pace at which Glover is living. His voice cracks in certain places, which he acknowledges, giving the crowd a look of promise that it will get better. He refuses to use Auto-Tune—the product of his performing-arts background—and it just adds to the sincerity of his delivery. On the last song, his best song, "Not Going Back," he encapsulates all he wants to say.

*Couldn't see me as Spider-Man,
but now I'm spittin' venom
Now you payin' attention,
pick your fuckin' face up
When I wanna be a superhero,
I just wake up
Renaissance man with a Hollywood buzz
I refuse to go back to not likin' who I was*



'THIS IS THE FIRST TIME IN HISTORY WE ARE ABLE TO TALK ABOUT ALIENATION AND NERD THINGS. BLACK KIDS DO LIKE WHITE STUFF.'

He is currently writing two movies. He just signed on for a part in *The Hand Job*, and will have a cameo in the James Bobin/Jason Segel *Muppets* movie coming out this fall. These are all just Lego blocks of the nerd fortress Glover wants to construct.

"If one day, I can be a neo-Michael Jackson, I want that. I don't know if it is possible for someone to be that big anymore. But I want that."

And it's not as if he is looking for Elephant Man bones or backyard amusement parks. Money—even if it can land him cute girls he might have already gotten anyway—is not what's changed him. And it's not what he's after.

He's after power.
"Power is what allows you to do

whatever you want," he says, getting energized again. "If Will Smith wanted to play Hitler, they'd make that movie. That's power. I want to do a Nazi movie. I want Jay-Z and Eminem to rap on the same track with me. I'm in it for the power."

It's 3:45 at Darkroom. His brother and sister went home hours ago. But as the bar begins to shut down, Glover heads off into the night with a tiny Filipino girl on his arm. When he reaches the corner of 8th and Broadway, he peers across the street and sees something moving behind a window inside the Bank of America ATM lobby.

He squints to get a better look, and spots a two-backed monster crawling over itself. The girl propped up on the deposit-slip counter, her stiletto heels in the air, her partner thrusting. Glover immediately posts photos of the public sex from his iPhone, giving a play-by-play to the world.

He chronicles the entire tryst, makes a judgment call on its conclusion, and shoots one last photo of the two lovers hailing a cab.

"The most passionate thing I've ever seen!" he Tweets.

He puts the phone away and walks his new friend back to her place, where he drops her off with a kiss. The sun starting to rise, he heads south to the Bowery. He's got another gig in Virginia in just a few hours. He might be able to snag a couple hours of sleep.

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