

Rapper's Delight

In his first film, *Smokin' Aces*, Common burns up the big screen

He might be all peace and love when it comes to writing lyrics, but Common is ready to flip the script and bring the drama. The 34-year-old Chicago-born Grammy winner is starring in some pretty dark roles in *Smokin' Aces* (in theaters January 26) and *American Gangster*, with Denzel Washington and Russell Crowe, coming this fall. Common rang ESSENCE from his Brooklyn digs to talk movies, kids and why he'll always be down to rock the mic.

ESSENCE: You're playing an assassin in *Smokin' Aces* and a heroin dealer in *American Gangster*. What gives?

COMMON: Acting allows you to break away from your own limitations. Everyone knows me as this conscious artist, so I thought it would be good to step out of my regular routine.

ESSENCE: Tell us about being in a big ensemble cast.

COMMON: I'm grateful to be a part of the project because Jeremy Piven [HBO's *Entourage*] is real talented, and then adding the spice of Alicia Keys and Taraji Henson is incredible. Taraji's just a remarkable actress, you know?

ESSENCE: Now that you're scoring movie credits, will you still kick a rhyme or two?

COMMON: Music is in my soul. [His new album, *Finding Forever*, comes out in March.] When hip-hop was new, we weren't used to seeing artists in their thirties, but it's happening now. I look at music the way a jazz musician does: If you love it and it's in you, I think you can rap as long as you want.

ESSENCE: You have a 9-year-old daughter, Omoye. Do the two of you discuss music?

COMMON: I don't hide things from her, but I try to explain that some of the music isn't lifting up women. When I ask if she likes a song, she might say, "I like the beat, but the lyrics aren't saying anything." She's a wise little lady who pays attention and knows when something is garbage—that makes me proud. —REGINA R. ROBERTSON



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