

“You can do whatever the f\*\*k you want to do in this world. I know because I’m a living witness”... It’s November 21st and August Alsina stands center stage, commanding a sellout crowd at LA’s Staples Center. The 22-year-old New Orleans native is supporting veteran R&B superstar Usher on the ‘The UR Experience’ tour. This is the stuff of dreams. That said, those dreams seemed mere fantasy not that long ago.

From a young age, August’s life has been intertwined with the perils of drugs. Both his father and stepfather battled crack addictions, forcing August’s mother to move the family to Houston in search of a fresh start. Alas, H-Town offered no alleviation. August endured a home life plagued by drugs, violence, and struggle. At just 14, he got word from New Orleans that his father, August Sr., lost his battle with substance abuse.

Adrift without a male role model, August found solace in music. He was inspired to sing after watching Lauren Hill’s rendition of “His Eyes on a Sparrow” in ‘Sister Act 2.’ His newfound hobby quickly became his escape, and he took to YouTube to share his talent. His video covers of works by Musiq Soulchild, Lyfe Jennings, and others generated millions of views and planted the seed that music could become more than avocation. But August’s troubled youth reared its ugly head again when his best friend was shot dead in the streets of Houston. As quickly as August appeared on the YouTube scene, he vanished.

Tensions mounted on the homefront, until August’s mother banished him from the house. Merely 16 years old, he returned to New Orleans. He enrolled in high school and looked to get his life back on track. But without a stable living situation or money in his pocket, August turned to the very streets that had caused his family so much grief. He sold drugs as a means of survival. Some nights, he’d lay his head inside the corner store. August had no one to turn to for help, as his older brother Mel was hustling in the streets alongside him. That arrangement was tragically short-lived: On August 31st 2010, Melvin LaBranch III was gunned down in New Orleans East in what would become another unsolved murder in one of America’s most violent cities.

“I never expected them [the police] to find his killer,” August explains matter-of-factly. “People die everyday in the streets of New Orleans. Unfortunately, death has become a way of life.” But August vowed to avoid becoming another statistic. He used his brother’s premature death as inspiration to use music as his means out of the ghetto.

August’s talents eventually attracted the notice of management and production company NNTME MuCo, in particular his now-manager, Noontime. Under Noontime’s auspices, August moved to Atlanta in 2011 and began carving his own musical path. His life experiences, no matter how brutal, would serve as his storyline. In April 2012, August released his debut mixtape, “The Product,” to immediate fanfare. May 2013 marked the second installment in ‘The Product’ series—this time teaming up with DJ Drama and his Gangsta Grillz brand. The tape featured Alsina’s breakout single “I Luv This Shit,” produced by Knucklehead and featuring ATL’s own Trinidad Jame\$.

His buzz building, August received major plaudits from MTV when he was named one of 2013’s Fab 5—its annual list of hip-hop artists to watch. August remains the only singer to ever merit this honor. The MTV nod translated into viral visibility, as his independent video “Downtown”

ft. Kidd Kidd generated nearly 8 million views. The autobiographical song would become the title track for Alsina's first official NNTME/Def Jam release, an 8-song EP entitled *Downtown: Life Under the Gun*. Alongside the aforementioned collabs with Jame\$ and Kidd, the EP features NOLA veteran Curren\$y and Atlanta's Rich Homie Quan. Says August of the EP: "It allows you to walk through my hood with me and see where I'm from."

Radio stations caught wind of "I Luv This Shit", propelling the provincial anthem to the stratosphere. In October 2013, the single leapfrogged songs from Drake, Jay-Z, and J. Cole to become the #1 record on the Billboard Mainstream R&B/Hip-Hop Chart—a feat that had not been accomplished by an R&B debut single in 4 years. Fueling an already blazing fire, August brought together what XXL Magazine termed an "epic trio" when he recruited superstars Chris Brown and Trey Songz for the "I Luv This Shit" Remix. That trio came together on stage at the 2014 BET Awards for an epic remix performance. To date, the single has sold more than 1,000,000 copies and been certified Platinum by the RIAA.

In the wake of that groundswell, August released his debut album, fittingly titled *Testimony*, in April 2014. He dedicated the album to Mel's memory; fittingly, the project dropped on what would have been Mel's 28th birthday, April 15th. *Testimony* sold 67,000 units in its first week, making it the #1 debut album, #1 R&B album, and #2 overall album on the Billboard Top 200. Described by The New York Times as a "striking album," *Testimony* includes autobiographical singles "Make It Home" featuring Jeezy and the Rick Ross-assisted "Benediction." The latter includes strikingly candid lyrics such as: "I pray that my step-pops stay off of that crack pipe, so Mama can sleep nights." Clearly, August Alsina has an authentic story to tell, and the courage to tell it.

Indeed, August brought his compelling tale directly to audiences when he headlined his first national tour, *Testimony Live*, which sold out in 18 consecutive cities. Unfortunately, the tour ended abruptly in New York City on September 15th; August, exhausted and dehydrated, collapsed and fell off stage. After 10 days being treated in the hospital for seizures, and a 6-week layoff to recover, August returned to the big stage with whom he calls "The OG", Usher.

Also in 2014, August graced the cover of XXL Magazine as part of its annual Freshman Class—the first singer to claim the honor typically reserved for hip-hop emcees. But there's no incongruity according to Alsina: "Hip-Hop is your story, your struggle, where you come from. Don't shortchange me because I sing. I represent hip-hop just like the rappers do, if not more."

Not only does the 22-year-old represent hip-hop, he represents for his brother, for New Orleans, and ultimately, for the struggle, or as he's coined it... #StrugLife. August Alsina is living proof that the past needn't dictate the future and life's hardships can spark eventual success. Five years removed from homelessness, August received 4 nominations at this year's BET Awards and took home 2 trophies, one for Best New Artist, the other for the prestigious Viewers Choice Award, wherein he beat out A-listers Beyonce, Drake, and Pharrell. An emotional Alsina accepted his awards saying, "This award is not for me, it's for the people, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart."

August Alsina already made 2014 his year. So what does he have planned for an encore in 2015? He answers with certainty: “5 years ago I never saw myself here, so it’s hard to say where I’ll be in the future, but I know one thing, I’ll be wherever God wants me to be.” After what he’s endured, no one had better doubt August Alsina.