



# The Self-Help Sage of Snapchat

How **DJ Khaled** built an empire serving chicken soup for the millennial soul

BY SAM LANSKY

IF YOU ARE LUCKY, AT SOME POINT IN YOUR LIFE YOU WILL have the opportunity to witness a master at work—Bill Clinton wooing a crowd, LeBron James dunking, Yo-Yo Ma at the cello. DJ Khaled, 40, has Snapchat, the fast-growing social-messaging app. Khaled sends out missives—sometimes dozens—daily, locking his gaze into the front-facing camera of his iPhone and murmuring to his acolytes, who number in the millions. In these short bursts of footage, he provides a mix of confession and sermon. Right now he’s filming himself while his beard is being blow-dried by a barber. “Fresh cut,” he says into his phone, referring to the new haircut. He hits Send. Over the next 24 hours, the clip will be viewed by as many as 6 million fans.

Fame is ephemeral, but you’re supposed to get at least 15 minutes. Snapchat videos top out at 10 seconds and self-destruct after a day, disappearing from the user’s publicly viewable feed, or “story.” That hasn’t stopped Khaled from using

*DJ Khaled, photographed in Miami, has transitioned from hip-hop star to viral guru*



the platform to fashion his image. His videos blend aspiration with inspiration and usually consist of an uplifting message paired with a carefully curated glimpse into the flashy life of a self-made millionaire. They are frequently dotted with aphorisms of excess and self-help, a mashup of Horatio Alger and Tony Robbins.

Like many celebrities, Khaled has a substantial following on Instagram (3.3 million followers) and Twitter (2.8 million). But it is Snapchat that has proved to be his most potent outlet. According to tracking firm comScore, 45% of Snapchat users are 18 to 24 years old, compared with 19% for Twitter and 16% on Facebook. And Khaled's affirmations of self-reliance and perseverance seem tailor-made for millennials, who according to Pew surveys are more optimistic about their economic outlook and the country's prospects than Gen X-ers and baby boomers. Pop stars have long cast themselves as auteurs, entrepreneurs and moguls. Khaled is turning himself into something new: a sage for the social-media era.

**BORN KHALED MOHAMED KHALED** in New Orleans to Palestinian parents, Khaled grew up Muslim. "I've been raised with an amazing family," he says. "My mother and father raised me perfect." That consisted, he adds, of being taught the value of hard work. "Family makes sure that you move forward in the right path, and it's all about blessings, and it's all about giving thanks." Though his faith is a part of his life, he's generally apolitical. Asked about Islamophobia in the U.S., he preaches, "It's all love. It's always love. That's what I represent. I represent love, peace, greatness, blessings and wins. Love is the answer, and that's all I know."

Khaled cut his teeth as a DJ, eventually landing his own radio show on Miami's WEDR station before releasing his debut album in 2006, which launched his career as a recording artist but did not lead to overnight stardom. For years, Khaled was best known for his collaborations with hip-hop heavy hitters like Kanye West, Lil Wayne and Drake. "He knows how to put together his songs and how to incorporate people in order to give fans exactly what they want," says rapper

Ludacris, who has worked with Khaled several times.

Even then his themes seemed set, at least judging by the titles of his singles over the past decade: "We Takin' Over," "Out Here Grindin'," "Go Hard" and "All I Do Is Win," a thumping anthem of self-adulation that President Obama has used at rallies. But to date, Khaled has notched only one Top 10 single.

Then came Snapchat. First released in 2011, the app distinguishes itself from other social-media platforms by the ephemerality of its messages. "Snaps"—photos or short videos—disappear after just a few seconds, which made it popular among teenagers, including some who used it to send racy selfies and others for whom it served simply as a visual status update. In 2013, Snapchat introduced a personal-feed feature called Stories that allows users to compile a stream of photos and videos that can be viewed for 24 hours, a kind of short-lived personal diary. Clicking on a story of a friend or celebrity allows you to see, in chronological order, what he or she has been up to over the course of the day.

Khaled first started gaining attention for his Snapchat feed in 2015. Some celebrities just document their lives—so viewers can see the world through their eyes—but Khaled tends to break the fourth wall and address viewers directly. He dispenses wisdom and inspirational platitudes that are either complete nonsense or moderately profound. For the uninitiated, it can often be hard to tell what he's talking about. But generally, his core tenets are self-confidence, following your dreams and working hard, which he describes as "keys to success." He often

says "major key" or "major key alert" or simply uses the key emoji in a text overlay to note that he's about to share one of these.

He has his straw men too, frequently dismissing a vague "they," which refers to haters, detractors and other negative people. When he says, "They don't want you to win, so you better win more," he's encouraging his viewers to stay focused and ignore anyone who might distract them on their journey to success. "Bless up!" in Khaled's parlance is an exclamation of blessings—both a recognition of his own and his wish that his followers achieve more. All of this philosophizing happens in the context of his supposed wealth, whether he's on a Jet Ski cruising around Miami or having his feet buffed by a hotel pedicurist. (*Forbes* estimates that Khaled earned \$7 million in 2014.)

Social media has only amplified his core beliefs, Khaled says. "Even before Snapchat, you go back into my career from Day One or interview people that knew me for 25 years, they're going to tell you I've been DJ Khaled my whole life," he says. "I've been telling the keys." Khaled's collaborators in the music business say that has been the case for years. "Even when I first met him, he felt like the leader of the Miami music scene," says L.A. Reid, CEO of Epic Records, who has known Khaled for a decade. "He was a very passionate guy, maybe the most giving guy I've ever met."

**I GET A TASTE** of this in Khaled's bungalow at the Beverly Hills Hotel, which has been staged with the typical accoutrements of a hip-hop superstar. There are 11 bottles of Cîroc, an upscale vodka part-owned by rapper Sean Combs, spaced perfectly on the mantle above a flickering fireplace. Four citrus-cedarwood candles are burning. Two iPhones are on the desk in front of Khaled. There's a cigar in an ashtray on the coffee table. MSNBC is blaring on the television—the only outlier in a stage setting straight out of a rap video.

"Five minutes," Khaled says, shuffling into his sandals (which read *WE THE BEST*, the name of his record label) and disappearing into an adjacent bedroom. When he returns 30 minutes later, he's ready to talk. In the meantime, he's posted to Snapchat twice more.

**Khaled has made a home for himself in the pockets of millions of millennials**

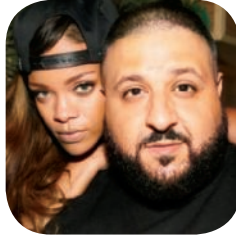
Khaled's approach to video may be more lo-fi than that of artists like Beyoncé, but he says it allows viewers to feel more connected. The spectacle is profitable too. Unlike on Instagram and Twitter, where posts often carry hashtags like #ad and #spon to denote that a celebrity was paid for an endorsement, on Snapchat it's harder to tell what's for-profit and what's not. Khaled's snaps frequently direct viewers to the merchandise—hoodies and T-shirts emblazoned with his signature slogans—available at his We the Best online store.

How popular is he? Snapchat doesn't make data publicly available on the viewership of users' stories, but recently he's averaged 6 million viewers per snap, mostly millennials. That's more than the millennial viewership of *The Big Bang Theory*—the most watched show on television.

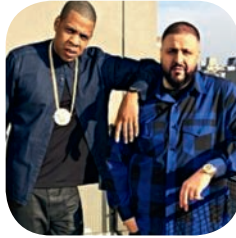
This has turned Khaled into an avatar for Snapchat's new brand of fame, landing him on the covers of *Bloomberg Businessweek* and *AdWeek*. He uses this reach to pull other celebrities into his orbit. Kim Kardashian West made a cameo in one of Khaled's videos earlier this year. "Kim," he whispered to her, "they don't want you to wear the Saint Laurent fur. They don't want you to break the app store"—a reference to her hit game for iPhones. "They don't want you to be the biggest boss in the game. So what we gon' do is, we gon' win more." He's appeared on *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* to dispense advice to Jeb Bush's flailing presidential campaign, and he attended this year's White House Correspondents' Dinner as Arianna Huffington's date.

Naturally, Khaled has parlayed this role into new ventures. It helped him, for example, get booked as the opening act for Beyoncé's Formation world tour, which kicked off on April 27 in Miami. He says he's prepping new music; his last album, 2015's *I Changed a Lot*, topped out at No. 12 on the album chart. Yet his music feels increasingly secondary to the protean performance-art project of his Snapchat story. His contemporaries may own more of the airwaves, but Khaled has made a home for himself in the pockets of millions of millennials by taking generation #blessed to church a dozen times a day.

## Khaled's social-media diary



He says he's eager to work with his pal Rihanna



Jay Z recently signed on to manage his career



Kim Kardashian West made a cameo in one of his snaps



With Arianna Huffington at the White House Correspondents' Dinner

**THERE'S A LONG HISTORY** of motivational mouthpieces delivering palatably packaged messages of positivity and encouragement, from Andrew Carnegie to Upworthy.com. In the 1990s, the blockbuster book series *Chicken Soup for the Soul* provided, in its many iterations, stories of inspiration and uplift, while the 2006 film (and the subsequently published book) *The Secret* introduced Americans to the law of attraction—the idea that you can manifest desired outcomes merely through positive thinking.

So it is tempting to dismiss Khaled's relentless optimism as calculated performance. But like the most successful mass gurus, he seems to believe in his own teaching. He does not go off message. And his belief system is vague enough that it can be applied to anything.

Khaled says this worldview is hard-won. "I started from the bottom. Life's like an elevator: up, down, up, down," he says. "I remember when I used to sleep in my car. I remember when they took my car away. I remember when I got evicted out of my apartment. I remember having to do a little jail time because of my driver's license. I'm not a criminal, but just normal, regular driver's-license stuff." (As a young man Khaled was arrested for driving with a suspended driver's license; he consequently spent a month in jail.) "All that was an experience for me to be greater, saying to myself, 'You know what, I don't want to go through that no more.'"

After a breath he continues, as though at a pulpit: "I don't want to sleep in my car. I don't want to not be able to eat filet mignon. Khaled didn't just become DJ Khaled. Khaled used to work at Shoney's as a busboy. Khaled used to do a lot of stuff before I could sit here in a bungalow. What I did was make sure I maintained to keep climbing the mountaintop."

Whether the fickle nature of social-media platforms—Snapchat's longevity is by no means assured—could hurt Khaled doesn't seem to factor. "I want to let people know, like, 'Yo, there's sunshine on the other side. Don't stop. Don't give up. Never surrender. Never fold. Keep pushing. Go hard.'"

The soliloquy wears me down. Eventually, I give in and let myself feel a little bit uplifted. After all, I know it'll disappear in a few seconds. □



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