



David "Serengeti" Cohn's other alter ego, Kenny Dennis.  
PHOTO BY KELLY MICHAEL ANDERSON

## 'Under the underground'

### Chicago emcee Serengeti is as much performance artist as rapper

#### Identifying hip-hop artists as

"underground" doesn't make as much sense as it used to, not since music-streaming platforms have

by  
Howard Hardee

**Preview:**  
Serengeti performs Sunday, Feb. 17, 6 p.m., with Redfield Clipper, Similar Alien, Esquire Ali, Gale, Uncle Pill and Worldcoast. Cost: \$7

**1078 Gallery**  
1710 Park Ave.  
433-1043  
1078gallery.org

made even the most obscure rappers easily accessible—provided that you know who they are in the first place. That is unless it's an artist like Serengeti, a truly underground MC in the sense that he has recorded dozens of full-length albums and EPs since 2003, but most of them remain difficult—or in some cases,

impossible—to find.

The Chicago-based artist has never been big on self-promotion, and only recently found out that people can "just upload songs and stuff" to Spotify.

"This whole time I've just been making music, not really concerned with branding and all of that," he said. "But as time passes, I think maybe that's not the way to go. Maybe I do need to step it up a bit. ... If you don't do it, you just stay in the netherworld, under the underground."

Ahead of his performance at 1078 Gallery on Sunday (Feb. 17),

Serengeti (real name David Cohn) told the CN&R he started rapping strictly for himself, "in lieu of therapy" for lifelong depression. "I was like, 'I'll write my way out of these feelings.'" But that changed when he "put out that one song that people actually liked." He's referring to 2006 single "Dennehy" off an album of the same title, now considered a classic example of underground rap out of the upper Midwest. Catch the Chicago references in his flow: "I'll buy a little lager like I ate a piece of Big Red/ Grow a mustache the size of Mike Ditka's forehead."

Not only did the song gain Serengeti an audience, it was the world's introduction to the white, middle-class, middle-aged character of Cohn's creation, Kenny Dennis. A true alter ego, Dennis was the opposite of Cohn in every way; he rocked a comically oversized mustache and drank O'Doul's because he actually liked the taste. And perhaps most significantly, he didn't struggle with feelings of anxiety and self doubt, but rather was "somebody who had a lot of friends and got invited to the barbecue."

"I had the opportunity to rap from somebody else's perspective and live in someone else's brain," he said. "This whole world sort of appeared in front of me. People liked the 'Dennehy' song, but then [I] was like, 'Why does this guy

rap?' I kept asking all these questions, and I just filled it in."

In fact, Cohn has filled in Dennis' backstory across nine Serengeti albums, diving deep into the imaginary man's psyche to understand his every motivation. And after spending so much time in someone else's shoes, the lines between his alter ego and true self gradually dissolved. He often falls into the character when he's with his friends, walking down the street alone, or standing outside of a party, frozen from anxiety.

"If I'm questioning myself, Kenny will come in and set it straight," he said. "He'll be like, 'No, just open the door and go in.' ... His voice pops in my head when I get indecision, like, 'OK, Dave, just calm it down.'"

Cohn stopped performing as Dennis last year because he believes the story is complete, but now he's working with a visual artist to create a graphic novel following Dennis' narrative arc from start to finish. In the meantime, he's posting old songs and EPs on Spotify and Bandcamp, giving many listeners their first opportunity to hear the most obscure parts of his enormous catalog. Though he figures it's well past time to emerge from the netherworld, he still feels weird about promoting himself because he's not a brand, but a person—OK, maybe two people sharing a mustache. □

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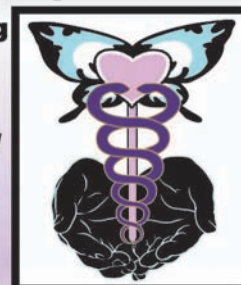
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