

CMC

FROM LEFT: MANNIE FRESH; LIL' WAYNE; JUVENILE; BABY; TURK



NO MONEY

CHANGES EVERYTHING



CAN THE CASH MONEY CLIQUE RIP THE SPOTLIGHT OFF THEIR NO LIMIT COUNTERPARTS? BEFORE YOU ANSWER, READ THIS.

Linda Roth is standing over a chair in the lobby of the J.W. Marriott in Houston. Roth—45, in jeans, cotton shirt and coiffed hair—punctuates her phrases with pearly smiles, the kind you give to people when they aren't feeling well. She and her engineer husband are in town for a wedding. Everything is set; all she needs is something cool to take back home to her four kids, aged one to 17.

“Sign it. To Brendan.”

Teruis Gray, a.k.a. Juvenile, juggles a Cash Money Records promo poster on his lap, trying to find a smooth writing surface on his razor-creased plaid jumpsuit pants. He and the rest of the Cash Money crew have been chilling in the hotel lobby for a good half-hour, waiting to head off to an autograph signing session that's just one stop on a promo tour that will take them through the South.

Juvenile squints. “Y'all from where?”

“Connecticut. My kids all love Cash Money Records, Will Smith, Snoop Doggy, the Big Man...”

“You mean Notorious B.I.G.?”

“Yeah, him. I get the names mixed up. But they all love you guys. Whenever we put Juvenile's song on, my one-year-old starts just rocking and bouncing to the music.” She laughs.

Juvenile smiles. The Hot Boys' Lil' Wayne, seated on the opposing couch, chuckles and takes the poster from Juvenile.

No one present—Juvenile, Lil' Wayne or their sinewy road manager, Duck—should be surprised that white folks want their autographs. This is, after all, the year mainstream music, blindsided by hip-hop's overwhelming presence, stopped worrying and accepted musical miscegenation. After calling it out of its name (trip-hop, electronica, etc.), reheating it (Backstreet Boys doing New Edition 10 years later) and raiding its attic (all those nouveau swing kids perpetrating mid-century Afro-urban chic while laying claim to Ellington), pop culture finally learned to say “Black music” without stammering. New Orleans-based Cash Money, led by brothers and co-CEOs Ron “Suga Slim” and Brian “Baby” Williams, is poised to enter the conversation, courtesy of a \$30 million distribution deal with Universal and an underground following that seems to establish new outposts daily.

Still, the whole scenario causes a couple of furtive “what is this shit?” glances. We all know hip-hop has infiltrated the northern suburbs; that's old news. So is the burbs' acceptance of southern hip-hop. But southern underground? That's Memphis, Texas, Louisiana, Georgia. Connecticut? Oh, hell naw. Juvenile signs the poster and hands it back as Mr. Roth arrives back from check-in. Smiles and waves trail off as the couple heads to the elevator.

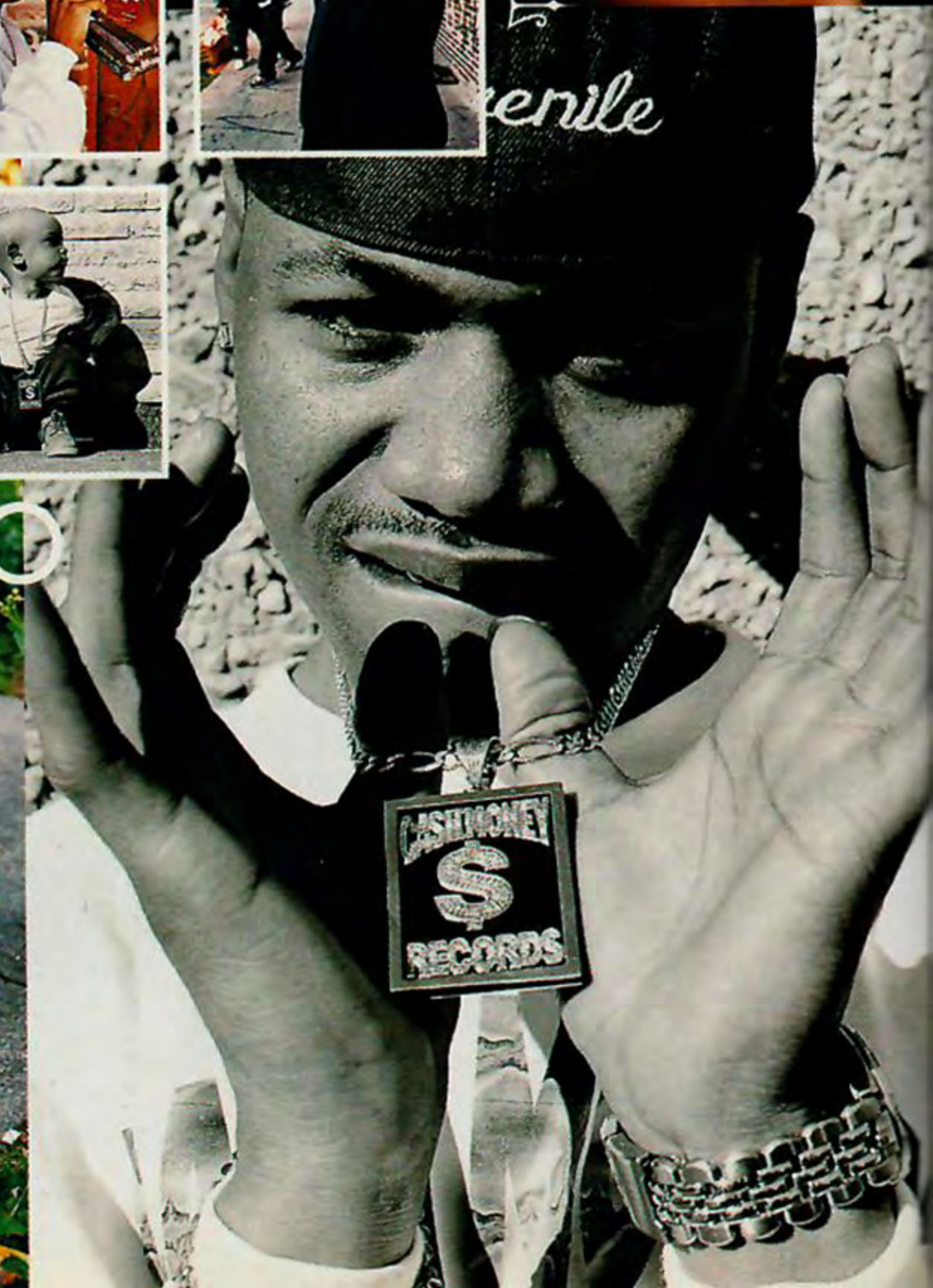
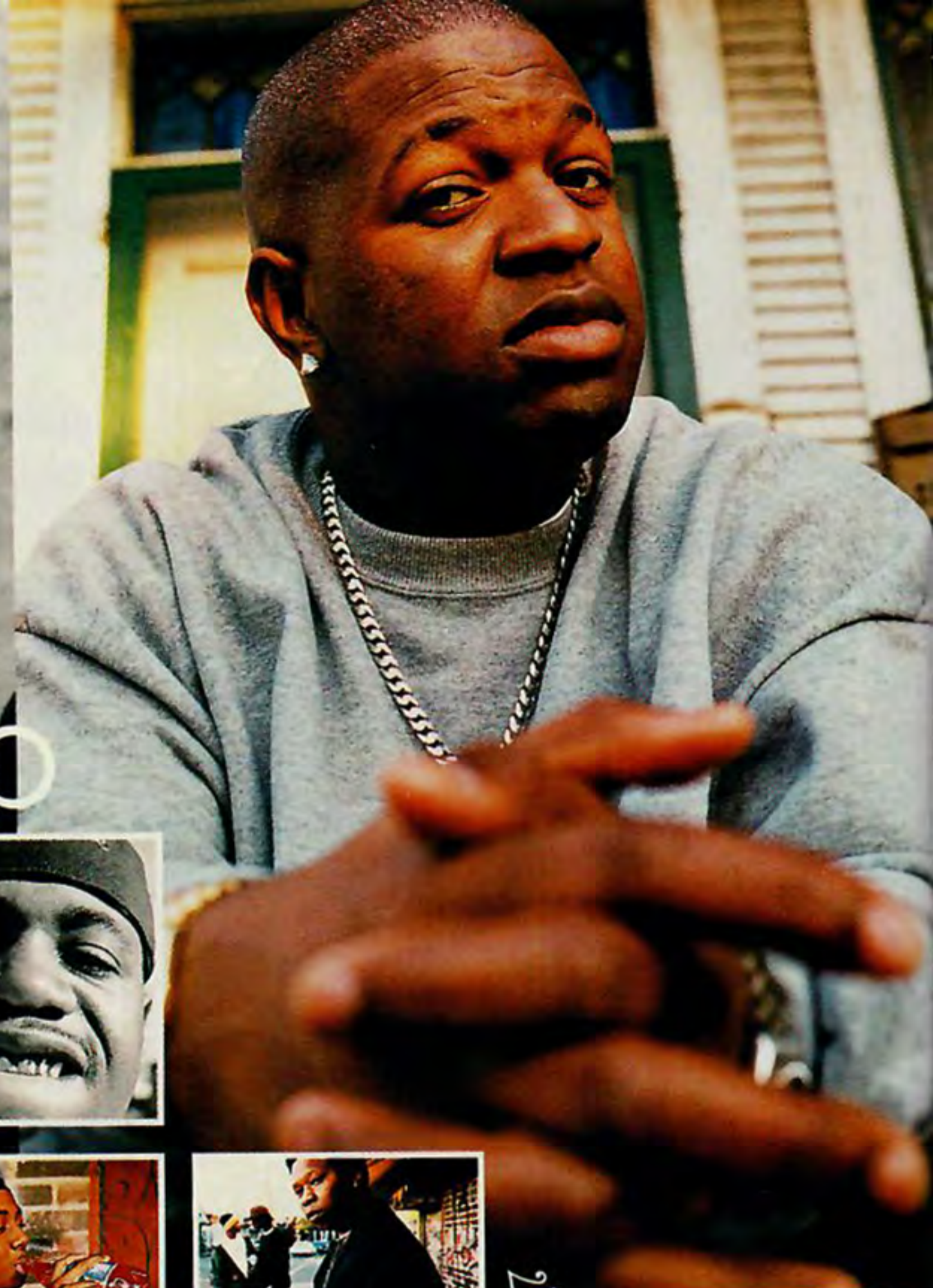
Juvenile strokes his chin, pondering the significance of the episode. “Huh. Maybe we need to start going to Connecticut.”

Though he has the compact build of a former athlete (which he is), Brian's caesar cut is flecked with gray. If he let it grow out, he would look at least a decade past his 25 years. He's the “grinder” in the partnership—the one who works the street and “makes sure all our shit is tight,” he says.

Twenty-nine year-old Ron stands a rubbery 6-foot-8, the decision maker in the partnership. His moves and gestures are deliberate,



words *Tony Green* *Stix* *Jonathan Mannion*



his demeanor an almost detached level of cool. Right now, he sits in the seat Juvenile has recently vacated and waves a fan-sized hand, discounting one of the southern scene's juiciest rumors.

Here's how it goes: When Cash Money began considering offers for major label distribution, one of their highest profile suitors was Priority Records. Priority, everybody knows, distributes the majority of Master P's No Limit material. Word has it that P threatened to jump ship if Priority inked No Limit's in-state rivals.

Artists on both labels have New Orleans indie-label ties. Cash Money producer Mannie Fresh knows Mia X from way back, and Cash Money's UNLV got into a dis fest with Mystikal back when he was on the underground Big Boy label—something to do with Mystikal having been a high school cheerleader. But that's all par for the course in southern hip-hop. Besides, P spent a lot of the early 90's in California and for a while seemed to be more interested in trying out for the NBA than flexing on his rivals. This is why Ron discounts the conspiracy/beef theory.

"I don't know how true that was," said Ron, as the lobby traffic mills behind him. "I just saw it as a simple business decision, not wanting to have two labels from the same area. But I respect what No Limit is doing. We're just trying to handle our own business."

Actually, the only comparison that you can really make between the two labels is the different takes they have on the Louisiana hip-hop flavor. Cash Money is the latest in a long list of southern regional powerhouses. So no one, least of all Ron and Brian, expects to get a whole lot of play out of the "indie label makes good" angle. These days, you gotta bring something new to the table, some character. Three 6 Mafia's Prophet Posse has its hellraising, gangster-Cenobite image. No Limit has its hip-hop soldier/survivalist thing going.

The Cash Money crew? Well, they're a bunch of brothers who never really left the 'hood. Their Metairie offices are more than 90 minutes closer to New Orleans than No Limit's Baton Rouge headquarters.

And they are taking that neighborhood flavor to the stage, adding a different image and slanguage ("Ha" follows every statement). Most of all, a different attitude.

"If you a street nigga, you know what is happenin' in the street," says Brian, whose teen years included a drug-related stint in jail when he was 17. "And we are street niggas."

Undilutedly so. The Big Tymers, for example—Mannie



business. All the trials and tribulations you go through. [It's] murder. And then after you go through all of it, the reward is niggas trying to take you out. We're lucky. We are one of the few labels to come out of New Orleans that has been able to establish anything."

The Williams brothers started their company in 1991, during the formative years of New Orleans' underground bounce scene. Their interest in the rap game dates back to the dawn of the decade, when they checked out a Tim Smooth show in Opelousas [La.]. "We saw the crowd raving and ranting and reacting to what was going on," says Ron, "and we figured, 'We need to get into this.'"

Eventually, they lined up one of the strongest indie rosters in the south. They had UNLV (Uptown Niggas Living Violent), whose material still rings up impressive numbers through Louisiana, Memphis and Texas. They also had Miss Tee, Kilo G. and Pimp Daddy, the music's star who most credit for the sing-songy delivery used by many modern bounce artists. The company moved nearly 100,000 units each year between 1991 and '95. But the wilded-out N.O. environment kept tugging them

backwards. Pimp Daddy was murdered in 1991. And by 1995, UNLV was coming apart at the seams. Despite having some of the hottest regional releases—"Uptown Fo Life" and "Mac Melph Callio" (a reference to New Orleans' Magnolia, Melphamine and Calliope projects)—the group was turning into a problem.

"They didn't want to do right," says Ron. "Not showing up for autograph signings, not showing up for sessions, not wanting to do promotional shows. They were good artists, so I can't say nothing bad about them. But they had some problems between themselves."

So, one day in 1996, he and Brian decided to clean house. BG was the only artist who survived. Producer Mannie Fresh remembers him as someone who was always in the studio an hour early to work on tracks, always serious about making sure his shit was tight.

And they picked up another bounce star, Juvenile, who had penned lyrics for DJ Jimi's best-selling 1991 album, *It's Jimi*. In fact, the regional hit "Bounce for the Juvenile" off Jimi's release gave the genre its name.

Everybody else went. Part of their decision was business. Career-minded Crescent City hip-hoppers are a rare item. Most indie artists' plans extend no farther than the profits from their next album (many of UNLV's problems came to a head after the group was

"That's our whole thing: neighborhood superstars. Money be changin' people, but it hasn't changed us, and it never will. If \$30 million don't change you, then \$300 million won't." —Brian Williams

Fresh and Brian—don't even try to rap half the time. "We just talk shit," says Baby. And 1998's dopest new flow belonged to Juvenile, whose Crescent City slanguage-freighted gem "Ha" [from his album *400 Degreez*] had heads on the street trying to duplicate his crazy-ass, backwards tape-sounding rap style.

That's why, staring pop success in the face, Suga Slim and Baby ain't blinked yet. You get the impression that they expected all of this to happen eventually. The distribution deal, the press junkets. The price of success, however, is physical wear and tear. Not just from being on the road for months at a time, but from the act of being an indie record mogul. Both brothers come across as folks who have put a lot of miles on their bodies. And their minds.

"We come from the New Orleans underground," Ron says, talking in hushed, hoarse tones. "That is the hardest place to establish a

released. One member landed in jail, another reportedly is in a sanitarium, a third is dead).

But Cash Money was due for a musical change too. Bounce had turned into a dead end, Ron says. Eventually, he said, they reached a half-bounce, half-rap style—aided by Fresh's production wizardry.

There was resistance, naturally, from folks who "wanted to sit around and mark what other people were doing, the ones who were scared to do something new," says Ron. But eventually, the fresh start began to yield results. BG's *Chopper City*, the first disc that featured Fresh's live instrument-augmented approach, moved 100,000 units. Juvenile's relentlessly funky *Solja Rags* moved 200,000 on the underground tip in 1997. The Hot Boys' debut, *Get It How You Live*, moved 400,000 and rose to the top quarter of the *Billboard* charts after its release in the late part of 1997.



slim

SUCCESS
Staring pop success in the face, Suga Slim and Baby ain't blinked yet.

Eventually, they started to attract major label interest from companies like Atlantic and Tommy Boy. "But everybody," says Brian, "had this attitude like, 'You don't know what you're doing on a major level.' They think like, 'Yeah, what you did before was fine, but we'll take it from here.' Now, the way I look at it, if we didn't know what we were doing, you wouldn't be here talking to us. We had put all this time and effort into building this company, and we weren't about to let anybody take over anything. Now, Universal? They didn't show us nothing but love."

You gotta love Fresh. First of all, you have to give it up to his work ethic. He is the Cash Money production crew, holding things down against football team-sized stables. He'll get some outside folks to flesh things out—a bassline here, some keyboard stabs there. But basically, the whole thing is him.

Second of all, he's down to earth. What you see is what you get. Short, stocky, narrow-eyed, he's chilling in boxers and a T-shirt in his Marriott hotel room, talking about groupies with his suitemates. His conversation is like his production style: all straight lines and fat-free phraseology. Other knob twisters scour the vinyl stores looking for new rhythms—that, or they just raid their big sis's record collection. Fresh makes beats out of anything he can find. Like a mayonnaise jar—he did that on BG's "Playin' and Laughin'."

"I'll take everything I own and put Fresh up against any other nigga," says Ron. "He can give you this southern shit and then change that muthafucka up to somethin' completely different. I remember when we were in New York, watching people react when they first heard 'Ha'. They couldn't understand it, because they hadn't heard anything like it before."

Fresh (Mannie Byron) has been around the hip-hop game for nearly a decade, starting in the DJ business when he was just 13. Growing up in the city's Seventh Ward, he picked up a lot from his father, Mannie Sr., a DJ and musician. Eventually, he wound up working a lot of the

"Keep going forward."

NAME: Linzell "PREDATOR" Vaughn
 Ruckers Basketball Player
 CITY: NYC
 ROLE MODELS: Magic, Bird, Jordan

same clubs his pop did: The Rolex Club, Whispers, the Big Easy. But first he had to cut his teeth on the house party circuit. "I've been to just about every house in New Orleans," Fresh says. That's where he developed his fondness for live instruments.

"I always used to go to pawn shops and find old Moogs and Prophets and Oberheims," he says. "And I just learned to play them by fooling around. So when I went to gigs I would bring my 808 and a keyboard. If there was a hot song out, instead of just spinning it, I would flip it my own way."

After doing his local DJ stint, he went to California "with an 808 and a suitcase full of records." There he hooked up with various production folks, in various orbits, like 2Pac's. After that, Fresh did assorted studio gigs, "programming beats for whoever," he says. Later, he hooked up with Too \$hort and Spice-1, working as part of their road show, then returned home and started constructing bounce beats. His first Cash Money production was UNLV's "Sixth and Barone" in 1992.

"I had always known Brian and them since coming up," Fresh says. "So after a while, when I realized that there wasn't any paper in what I was doing, I just walked away from it and started doing their thing."

"Niggas done left the street," booms Baby. "We fittin'a bring 'em back."

Baby is presiding over the dozen-member strong crew inside the cushy Cash Money tour bus. They're cruising along the freeway, and everybody is checking the video for the Big Tymers' "Big Ballin'." Too smooth to be gritty, too down-home to be slick, the clip is a jumble of block party images—bowls of crawfish, pit bulls, folks doing outdated dances. It's funky in a defiant way; its vision of round-the-way New Orleans is neither romantic nor condescending. And in the middle of it all are Mannie Fresh and Brian Williams—the Big Tymers—laying down their own nonchalant, un-stylized verbalisms.

"That's our whole thing: neighborhood superstars," Brian says. "Money be changin' people, but it hasn't changed us, and it never will. If \$30 million don't change you, then \$300 million won't."

The mall excursion starts off at Sam Goody's. A cluster of sun dresses, FUBU gear and other people's hair greets the crew as they make their way to the table that's been set up for the autograph session. Juvenile and Lil' Wayne break out the markers for their crop of teenaged fans. In the background, Ron hovers above the crowd, surveying the action, while other members of the entourage mack female admirers. That neighborhood superstars thing is in full effect—even though the neighborhood is Houston. These fellas are, as Brian says, really no different from their fans.

They're richer, of course. Wealth figures big in the Cash Money image. They may be "street niggas," but they are some paid-ass street niggas. The hip-hop purist would probably gag at the shameless flossing on the Big Tymers "How U Luv That." Jewelry, champagne, gold watches, medallions, automobiles. It's even all over Brian's answering machine: "Niggas been playin' with millions

since 1993," says the voice, "We fittin'a have billions. Neighborhood superstars with over a million dollars worth of cars."

"Black folks never really had nothing," says Ron. "And if they did, they got it the wrong way. And if they didn't get it the wrong way, there was always somebody trying to take it away—the police, friends, whoever. So now that we got it, we're going to flaunt it."

And they do. Ron has 15 autos, bearing familiar names: Mercedes-Benz, Lexus, Jaguar, Rolls Royce. Hang with the fellas back in home base, and it's a nonstop procession of automotive hardware. Hell, the inside of Brian's Land Cruiser is better equipped than their entire office-

TV, video player, stereo system. All kinda shit up in there. It's not like they don't deserve it, says Ron. It is, after all, their money, and you can't begrudge any reward to someone who has survived the rough-and-tumble New Orleans hip-hop scene, which reflects the dog-eat-dog mentality that runs through the various wards and projects.

The Williams brothers grew up in uptown's Third Ward area, and were introduced to the business world by their late father, Johnnie, who owned the Gladys Bar on Saratoga. "He let us know," says Ron, "that to deal with people, you never let anybody know your right hand or your left hand. That you had to watch people."

Ron explains that going from picking cotton to running a business took a lot of fortitude. Especially in a place where "ain't nothing but poverty." So all the flossing and shinin' isn't for the crossover audience, as it is in some other cases. It's for the folks you run into every day at the corner store or at the club.

"If you're on the outside looking in, you're some square sitting out in a building somewhere, and you ain't got no thug in you, you ain't gonna feel all the talking about having this and having that," Brian says. "But if you the average nigga on the block, you know that's what it's about."

But having things isn't all about material stuff. That is just a manifestation of that intangible quality: juice. Example: The night before our interview, the Rap-A-Lot clique crashed a club where the Cash Money folks were. A Luke Cage-looking bodyguard cleared a path through the crowd for them, the fellas strolled in flossin' and

everybody in the club stopped to watch them. It wasn't a negative scene, just people reestablishing their claim to superstar status. Ron tells the story, not with jealousy or even awe. He tells it like somebody making a point.

"I have a lot of respect for Rap-A-Lot," Ron says. "They don't ask you for their respect, they are going to take it from you. They made a way in rap way back when everybody was down on the south. Over at Cash Money, we are like vicious animals. It's like, 'Who is the hungriest?' and we're the gorillas." He leans back, a menacing grin across his face. "We ain't asking for nothing. Just taking it all." ♠

