

interview **Bonsu Thompson**
images **Michael Lavine**

SWITCH

He can no longer use the name he helped to create. But

DAME DASH

isn't mad or bitter—the cocky cakeaholic
is just focused on surviving in the
music business without one of the rap game's finest
by his side. It's DDMG, you bastards!





Put your hands in the air.

On each hand, align your fingers so there's no space between them. Then stretch your thumbs as far away from your index fingers as possible. Connect the two resulting right angles at the thumbs and fingertips. You have just formed The Diamond, the symbol of the ultimate expression of street-corner acumen graduated to big business: The Roc, the rap-music dynasty, Roc-A-Fella Records. For 10 years, while cofounder Jay-Z became arguably the greatest MC of all-time, his partners, Damon Dash and Kareem "Biggs" Burke, made sure the platinum rhymes turned into platinum cards.

In 1997, Jay, Dame and Biggs entered into a joint venture with Def Jam, selling the corporate giant half of their company for \$1.5 million. Summer after summer, the hits kept coming, with bags of cash following closely behind. "Diamonds are forever" seemed a fitting motto. But in 2002, murmurs started surfacing of a rift between the principals. While Jay was out of the country on vacation, Dame anointed Cam'ron, an old Harlem running mate, Roc-A-Fella VP. When Jay returned, he vetoed the move. In 2003, Jay signed a sneaker deal with Reebok—in apparent competition with the Roc's own Rocawear clothing line—and retired from rapping. There were disputes at Roc-A-Fella over signings and staffing. Talk of a split got so intense, Dame made a movie, *Death of a Dynasty*, spoofing the situation.

Still, it shocked the world this past January when Jay accepted Island Def Jam head L.A. Reid's offer to become president of the label that made rap famous. Reid bought out the rest of Roc-A-Fella and handed it completely over to Jay. Along with the name, the rapper-turned-suit inherited top-seller Kanye West, Memphis Bleek and the Young Gunz. The famously loud-mouthed Dame was left out in the cold.

But Dame's still hot. In fact, he's emerging bigger than ever. He still runs the hugely lucrative Rocawear. He just bought the Pro-Keds sneaker line. He's established himself in Hollywood, executive producing critically acclaimed films like *Paid in Full* (2002) and last year's *The Woodsman*, and he's recently made forays into the world of boxing. Meanwhile, in the music biz, he's pulled off an unprecedented coup. Having formed the Damon Dash Music Group (DDMG), with Biggs still at his side, he negotiated a separate joint venture with Reid, one that gives him the power to grant artists of his choosing label deals. Under DDMG will be Beanie Sigel ("and," according to Dame, "whoever he says State Property is"); RZA, who will produce the posthumous ODB album in the Wu-Tang name; Nore's Militainment; M.O.P.; Blackhand Records; and producer Seven Aurelius' Dream Factory.

Haters will hate, doubters will doubt—that's what they do. After all, if you separate your handmade Roc-A-Fella diamond, all you'll have are two L's. But don't expect Dame Dash to be fazed. As *XXL* learned when we caught up with him recently at his executive offices in Times Square, with or without you know who, he remains the same ol' Dame—bold, brash and talking fast. And losing is not in his vocabulary.

**"FOR REAL:
I DON'T UNDERSTAND
WHAT'S GOING ON WITH JAY. TO
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I NEVER UNDERSTOOD IT.
ME AND THIS NIGGA NEVER
HAD AN ARGUMENT, EVER!
NOT ONE."**

What was your initial reaction to Jay's keeping the Roc-A-Fella name?

I was shocked at the Roc-A-Fella shit. Shocked. I'm sure in his heart it sits well, but it didn't make sense to me. I was like, "It's aight to go do your own thing, but I don't agree with the fact that they offered you the name to keep." And he was like, "They bought it, they could do what they want with it." And I was like, "Aight," and just left it at that. Like, You wanna be away from the Roc-A-Fella rap, that's cool. I asked him, "How you gonna take the name?" He said, "Because they offered it to me."

And that's cool?

You gotta ask him. Then he was like, "You can get the name if you give me..." Like he was negotiating with us. I never negotiated with my friends.

Jay was gonna sell the name back to you?

If we gave him the masters for *Reasonable Doubt*, he'd let us keep Roc-A-Fella. At first I was like, Aight. But Biggs was like, "Nah. That's not right." You gotta call it the way you see it. I'm not gonna judge it.

I'm assuming you're leaving it for the public to judge?

I'm quite sure if you ask him, there's a way to

make that [sound] right. I'm curious to see what his answer would be. But what he told me was, "Yo, shit took its course. They offered it to me."

How does that happen? I mean, did things get twisted personally or with business?

For real: I don't understand what's going on with Jay. To this day, don't understand it. I never understood it. Me and this nigga never had an argument, ever! Not one. We never had no animosity, nothing. I just never got it.

Wow. When was the last time y'all spoke?

Today. I mean, we still got business together. Like, I went to his birthday party. He came to my daughter's birthday... I mean, you really have to ask Jay about the way he feels about what he's doing. I'm doing what I always was doing: fighting for my artists, trying to acquire businesses and making money. I'm the same Dame Dash I was 10 years ago. One thing muthafuckas will always say is that I'm consistent. I've always liked myself, so it ain't nothing for me to change really.

For those who don't understand, explain exactly what the Damon Dash Music Group is.

I've been running a label for the last 12 years. And I'm the kind of guy that likes to have some kind of progression, some kind of evolution, set a precedent for the culture. I was like, If I'm going to continue to be in the music business—and it being probably the least profitable venture that I'm involved in—I could do something that made a little bit of a difference. So I figured I would give label deals instead of giving regular record deals. Another reason for that is, when you own a label, you have to be very hands-on, from the creative part to the marketing to the business. And I'm doing so many different things, it would be hard for me to focus on a label the way I did at Roc-A-Fella. So I figured I could empower people that had their own movements and just kind of use the muscle that I have to get them where they need to go... Like, M.O.P., I love that they never sacrificed any of the integrity of their music to fit the format of radio or television, but they have this whole underground following. So, I felt like they are responsible enough to be at the forefront of their own movement. Then, Nore is at the forefront of the reggaeton movement in America. I felt like he should be the one to capitalize off it... I would love to just get a check. Like L.A. Reid—when he fucks with me, all he gotta do is make sure I'm funded. And that's it. I'm bringing him the music, the visuals, everything. All I really need is for him to make sure my shit gets serviced [to radio]. But other than that, it's easy.

Did you have a relationship with L.A. prior to working out the deal for DDMG?

I mean, L.A. was like the only one in that building that was really supportive of me. A lot of people are scared of me; they don't like the



You're really working Beanie Sigel's latest album, *The B. Coming*, while he finishes his prison sentence. But you're taking an unconventional approach. Did y'all plan on using film and TV to promote the music? We knew he was going to be gone, so we shot seven videos for him. We did three TV shows for him, and a movie. So hopefully, we have enough representation for him until he gets out. He just won't be able to do no promo tours or radio runs, but we've got a lot of press. I think we're prepared.

You've always taken a hands-on approach with your artists. Do you feel betrayed when artists that you've fought for choose a different side?

I mean, I never wanted to be in a situation where you choose sides. Everyone gets to play their hand. Like, you could never think that Bleek's not going with Jay. That would be like saying Cam's not gonna roll with me. I didn't actually feel a way about any of them. You gotta remember, Kanye ain't from where we from. We embraced him, but I don't expect him to live by the same ideals that I live by.

But you had more of a hand in his success than Jay did.

That tells you a little bit about the individual, really. But I'm never going to be mad about the way someone is naturally. Like, I ain't gonna tell him the difference between right and wrong; he's supposed to know. To a

fact that if things aren't going the way they should, I'm going to check 'em. And L.A. wasn't scared of that; he saw the genius. He also was in a position [at LaFace Records, with Babyface] where his partner was an artist and he was the brains, so he had compassion for the way things went.

You and L.A. seem so opposite in style—him coming from an R&B background. But you speak very highly of him.

I just respect the fact that he was put in a very weird situation. Corporately, I know he was told to back Jay. He strategized and was able to have his cake and eat it, too. He was still able to have Jay-Z, give him the [title] president of Def Jam, and Roc-A-Fella, but also maintain me—and make the two [parties] comfortable with the situation. He getting money both ways. He gonna benefit from both of our geniuses. He didn't get petty and pick sides.

He made sure that I got treated with respect. He made sure that I had a proper deal set up. He even made sure that I got to consult other artists on Def Jam. Even when Cam'ron was feeling uncomfortable, L.A. was a man of his word and just let him go. And I'm quite sure a lot of people weren't happy about that decision, but he did it anyway and I respect that.

Is Cam officially under the Damon Dash Music Group umbrella?

I mean, whatever Cam does, I'm always going to be a part of it, because he's like my little brother. Wherever we set up his deal, I would always consider him a major part of whatever it is that I'm doing. That's just how family is.

“Y'ALL GOTTA DO THE MATH. HE FELT THAT IT WAS TIME FOR HIM TO GO AHEAD AND DO HIS OWN THING, AND HE TOOK THE NAME. I THINK BREAKING UP AND MAKING PEOPLE CHOOSE SIDES, THAT'S CORNY.”

Being that you're his mentor, and he's turned your guidance into his own movement, why not make it a top priority to have him under DDMG?

I mean, it's Cam's movement. And I think he's done enough where he should get 100 percent credit for it. When things weren't right at Roc-A-Fella, and we weren't putting out the Diplomat mixtapes, and taking too long to put out Juelz's records, he went with Koch and made sure that the right people got empowered. Same shit he did for Jimmy Jones. He's worked hard. I can't take no credit for that. All I could do is assist, maybe connect the dots.

Now, you were the one at Roc-A-Fella championing Kanye the most. You got people at Def Jam to wake up to him. Why is he staying at Def Jam and not with you?

I don't know. You gotta ask Kanye.

You never discussed this with Kanye?

I gave him the option. I mean, I know I signed him, but he chose to do that. I can't knock him.

degree, it's a blessing that you could actually see where somebody stands. Beanie Sigel, Cam'ron, Biggs and damn near everybody else that I decided to affiliate myself with, I affiliated myself with them for those reasons—'cause I felt they were thorough. We have a code of honor and we live by that.

Has Jay broken that code of honor?

I ain't gonna speak on that; y'all gotta do the math. He felt that it was time for him to go ahead and do his own thing, and he took the name. I think breaking up and making people choose sides, that's corny. I'm not saying he's corny. But I remember when we used to hear about other people breaking up, and we'd be like, "That's corny. How could niggas do that?" And it's like, Damn, we ended up being just like everybody else.

You directed a movie a couple years ago, *Death of a Dynasty*, about the fictional breakup of Roc-A-Fella. Does that feel prophetic in hindsight?



DAME DASH

"FOR THOSE WHO HAVE NO HONOR OR INTEGRITY, I'M LIKE KRYPTONITE, I'M LIKE CANCER. PEOPLE THAT TRY TO ACT SMARTER THAN THEY ARE... I'M THE GUY TO TELL YOU THE TRUTH. AND A LOT OF TIMES IT HAPPENS IN FRONT OF PEOPLE, AND THEY FEEL A WAY BEHIND THAT."

I mean, I saw that... You could call me Dionne Warwick or whatever, I had ESP... I started to see that things were going to be different about three or four years ago. And I found that to be a little bit amusing, so I documented a movie about it.

What was the first sign that Jay was losing interest in the Roc-A-Fella y'all created?

He really wasn't on any of our artists' singles. He just was doing his own thing. I never looked at it like a bad thing. It was just like, everyone else was perceiving it to be more than it was. And that's what I found amusing. Like, they was in the papers saying that we had beef. Them saying we had a beef so much that I had to ask him, "Yo, you mad at me about something?" We never had no personal problems; we ain't had no business problems. I'm talking about we never had no arguments, we never had a almost fist fight, nothing.

Him being on singles obviously helps the overall business. Y'all didn't address this issue as CEOs?

I mean, we would speak on it. But Jay moves when he wants to move; that's just how he always was. It would be better if he would get on a nigga's single, but he just never wanted to, so I was like, Cool. I always thought that he was kind of leaning towards doing his own thing. I just figured he didn't want to break the check down three ways no more.

For a while now, you and Jay have been surrounding yourselves with different people. Jay had a staff separate from Roc-A-Fella—his own people, many of whom you don't get along with. Didn't that contribute to the company's demise?

Those weren't his people. I hired all of them. They became his people after I fired them. I fired all of them. I mean, that's what was kind of weird... When you work with people, you grow close to them, but if they not doing right by your business, then you gotta do what you gotta do. That's a businessman's job. But then what they would do is go to him and he would hire them... I guess we went about things different. To me, if my man got a beef with you, then you got a beef with me. He doesn't look at things like that. Or maybe he does, but not as it related to me. If somebody

got something bad to say about Biggs, then they can't even say nothing to me or any one of my peoples. That's how I look at things.

Roc-A-Fella had more than one artist, but these people that I fired only cared about Jay. And I'm like, "Yo, I got 10 other artists here that need to get taken care of." A lot of the artists were complaining like, "They not paying attention to my project." And I noticed it. Like, they would be at Jay's video shoot but nobody else's. Or if Jay had a show, they was all at his show—A&Rs DJing and shit. I be like, "You can't do that—just go work for Jay. 'Cause it makes me look crazy to my other artists." I believe in treating all my artists equal.

You get a bad rap for being the dude who screams on people and throws champagne on video chicks. What would you say to people who think Dame Dash really is an asshole?

I don't sweat that. Perception don't really mean that much to me. I am the way I am for my family. When you fighting against me you usually lose, because I ain't gonna fight for nothing that's wrong. So, I usually win, and that person usually ends up being humbled or embarrassed. For those who have no honor or integrity, I'm like kryptonite, I'm like cancer. People that try to act smarter than they are, try to act tougher than they are, or act like they got more money than they got—I'm the guy to tell you the truth. And a lot of times it happens in front of people, and they feel a way behind that. I've embarrassed a lot of people. For that, I'm quite sure people have spread things about me. But the bottom line is, from Jay-Z on, not one of my artists could say one bad thing about me or say that I've jerked them. For example Memphis Bleek, when he first came to me, his contracts were so terrible I was like, "I'm not signing you until you fix your contracts." So I went and got the kid a lawyer, an accountant and the whole nine. Like, that's what I do for my artists. I've always tried to put my artists, or anyone that I'm affiliated with, in a position to get money. I've accepted that the majority of the world is full of bitch-ass niggas, but for those that aren't bitch-ass niggas, I'll embrace you. I'll empower you. I'll be loyal to you as long as you do the same for me. ♠

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"AIN'T NOTHING PERSONAL,
BUSINESS IS BUSINESS.
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I'M NOT A TOP PRIORITY,
AND I KNOW WHEN
I AM A TOP PRIORITY,
AND I JUST DIDN'T FEEL
LIKE A PRIORITY IN
THAT BUILDING."



SO MUCH MORE

He only raps 'cause he's nice, but don't get it twisted:

CAM'RON

is all about furthering his career. The Uptown hustler, a.k.a. hip-hop's hottest free agent, breaks down the reasons he left Roc-A-Fella. Harlem, stand up!

interview **Bonsu Thompson**
image **Michael Lavine**

It's a scene right out of any classic mob flick.

Except today, seated in the barber's chair with a cape draped under his chin while awaiting his cover shoot with longtime friend and mentor Dame Dash, Cam'ron plays Joe Pesci. On the right side of the Diplomat Records CEO's mouth, in place of the *Godfather* cigar, a blunt steams with that sweet, sticky purple stuff. On the left, Cam's signature "are you kidding me, B?" grimace spews big-business bragadocio. "Warner Bros. is gonna have to give me a comfort number," he shoots regarding the signing bonus that will accompany whatever offer the WB grants Cam for his next solo album.

See, once Jay-Z inherited the presidency of Def Jam last January, Cam requested his walking papers. When L.A. Reid made his wish come true, Cam became rap's biggest free agent. But besides being precious stock as an MC, today Cameron "Cam'ron" Giles stands as one of hip-hop's most diversified businessmen.

After joining his buddy Dame's Roc-A-Fella family and earning his first platinum plaque for *Come Home With Me*, which was pillared by the single of his career, "Oh Boy," and successor, "Hey Ma," Cam decided to build his own movement. Armed with a thorough crew (Dip Set), a label (Diplomat Records) and colorful artists (Juelz Santana, J.R. Writer, Hell Rell and co-CEO Jim Jones), Killa Cam set out to do what Roc-A-Fella achieved: create a dynasty.

Today, Cam's mantra stands even stronger: It's more than just music. Following in Dame's footsteps, he's ventured into the liquor business and fashion world. Cam's Sizzurp, a purple blend of fruit juice and cognac, is the fastest-growing cognac in the country. And his courageous adoption of the color pink two years ago has turned school-yard snickers into pie-faces, making him a major catalyst in it becoming the unisex shade for 2005 fashion.

While it seems that Cam's life has been the portrait of lucrative business and rock-star imagery of late, the music has not followed suit. His last LP, *Purple Haze*, was practically ignored by Def Jam despite being adored by mainstream media and, to date, has yet to achieve 500,000 in sales.

Today the Diplomats' curator still has intact his Def Jam contract for Juelz Santana's next record, as well as a distribution deal with Koch Records for any other Diplomat Records releases (ex., *Diplomatic Immunity 2*). As for his solo career, the Pink purveyor is sittin' pretty.

With deals on the table from at least three separate major labels, treading in the \$2 million range (for just one album!), the former bosom buddy of Mase and ghost writer for Lil' Kim appears to have the world in his hands—and it ain't just Harlem.

Freshly lined up, Cam exits the barber's chair, never losing his gangsta stride. With a devilishly arrogant smirk, he quips, "This year, I'm 'bout to make a lot of people mad, man."

Out of all of Dame's peoples, you seem to have the biggest movement with Dip Set. Are you separating yourself, or are you going to be a part of the Damon Dash Music Group?

Nah, I got my own thing. Diplomats, you know what I'm saying? I'm not gonna renegotiate my deal with Def Jam. Juelz is staying over there, not myself. Jim, J.R. Writer and Hell Rell still got they thing at Koch. And me, I'm undecided. Dame is always gonna be my consultant, and he's gonna be 100 percent into all my projects. It's Diplomats, but Dame will be very much involved in marketing, promotions, everything.

Why were you so adamant about getting off Def Jam once Jay took over?

Basically, at the end of the day—ain't no real secret, I've been trying to tell Def Jam and every other label I've been at, "Yo, get behind the project."

And it's always like one or two artists that they'll put ahead of you. They don't have the faith. They always catch on too late. Then, after I wanna leave and get everything going, everybody's like, "Nah, I know what it is. We want to get it together. We wanna get the next single." I'm like, "You said that on the first single." Ain't nothing personal, business is business. But I know when I'm not a top priority, and I know when I am a top priority, and I just didn't feel like a priority in that building.

You didn't think bringing in a real rap dude like Jay would be better?

Jay is the CEO of Roc-A-Fella, and we been on there for three years. It ain't been like Jay been on any of the projects I've done before. I mean, he was on one ["Welcome to New York City," from *Come Home With Me*], but it wasn't like...

It was being pushed?

Exactly. I'm not knocking that—that's all good. But I'm saying, it wouldn't really make sense to stay there and act like we gonna do a lot of business if we never met to do business.

Word is there's always been a strain between y'all two. Where does that come from?

I mean, it's the media. People amp shit up. When I see Jay, he say, "What's up." I think he's one of the best rappers in the game to ever do it. But at the end of the day, it ain't no real beef. It's like, if I'm on your label for three years, we give each other five, that's our relationship. But then you get the next job. And you could be an artist, but now you're [supposed to be] *getting* artists. So it's like, Why I'ma holla now? You should've been holla'd. I'm not mad about that. It's just, I gotta know where people got that 100 percent support from jump.

You're highly respected as a rapper. Meanwhile, your contracts are as tight as your flow. You obviously work hard on the business side, huh?

Oh yeah. All my deals now, I build my brand up to where I don't have to have a regular artist deal. Like, all my deals are either joint ventures, P&D [press and distribute] deals or paid program deals, where I get two or three dollars from first records sold. The deal is not even no recoup or nothing. I'm the only dude that's about that. I got about three different [record deals] in New York. I'm about to have a joint venture at Def Jam [for Juelz]. I got a P&D deal at Koch [for Diplomats Records]. And wherever I go, mine will be the third deal. I don't know where yet. There's still a lot of options. A lot of people coming in with different money. ♠