

WOBIS JERMMANE HALL // MMGES ADAM WEISS
He's been patiently waiting to blow. Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the dMinITEx show. With more determination and cockiness than a young Cassius Clay, NYC's most respected lyricist is ready to join the ranks of hip-hop superstardom. It's no laughing matter.



adakiss has a crew of double-R workers in stitches. Don't worry, today's weapon of choice isn't a box cutter. Rather, it's 'Kiss' matter-of-fact sense of humor-an amalgamation of Muhammad Ali boast and Tony Soprano brawn-that's cutting up the room at Ruff Ryders' Powerhouse recording facility.
"Kiss..." he says in his raspy baritone. "My..." Pregnant pause. "Ass... That's going to be the name of my third album." The studio soldiers barrel over in exaggerated laughter, while raw tracks from 'Kiss' second solo album, Kiss Of Death-his best, most thoughtful body of work thus far-play beneath the gales. "All y' all niggas that tried to hate on the kid-kiss... my... ass!" Bopping across the room like a carb-loving George Jefferson, stroking his plump, baby-faced grill, he considers his declaration. "That's a million-dollar idea. I'm taking that one straight to lovine."

This stand-up routine is ostensibly sponta-neous-unscripted like Larry David's smash on Home Box Office. But as 'Kiss travels deeper into his skit, it proves far too detailed and precise to be completely ad-lib. Less freestyle, more prepped. Observe:

Kiss envisions Eminem producing the record's first single-an uptempo number, he says, the title track. He knows this is no mere pipe dream, because Eminem once told him that based on his skills-mean metaphors and a flow more on time than taxes-he "'should have blown already." Besides, 'Kiss reasons, "Em can't wait to tell everybody to kiss his ass anyway."

He has an overarching theme for the album in mind as well. This far-away third LP will speak to the working class who get slighted day in, day out-like a ghetto Office Space on wax. Your boss passed you up for a promotion? Listen to Kiss My Ass. The landlord won't lay off despite the fact you've been laid off? Listen to Kiss My Ass. The public refuses to recognize your gangsta? Well, fuck it, listen to Kiss My Ass.
"I get tired of people coming up to me talkin' about how nice I am," says 'Kiss, bemoaning the fact that the enthusiasm of the record-buying public has yet to match that of his peers. "I get tired of people like Em, B.I.G., Rakim-all the fuckin' great people [telling me I'm good]. I get so tired that it makes me
wanna quit... I been in the game since '94. It's 2004. I gotta dime in."

As 'Kiss' show-me-the-money short loses steam, the room goes quiet. The man who's yet to reach the million-sold mark slices the dead air and takes a bow. "Word. The name of the third album, after I blow like [Biggie did] on Life After Death, is Kiss... My... Ass."

5ave the frustrated rapper dia-tribe-there is, in fact, a glaring confidence exuded by 29 -year-old Jason Phillips. As far as MCs go, he is terminal, as in sick. Has been since the day he called hopeful rapper Kid Poetic his bitch and wished him Happy Valentine's Day to end his first battle at Yonkers' School Street Gym. He walks around with a superior swagger ("I could catch Alzheimer's disease and still not get fuckin' dropped"), and has no qualms about referring to himself as the driving force of his Ruff Ryders clan; he says he considered himself the straw that stirred the doubleR drink well before Earl "DMX" Simmons headed for the Hollywood Hills.
"I've been waiting to be looked at as the leader for the longest," says 'Kiss, whose trio the Lox signed on to co-CEOs Darrin "Dee" and Joáquin "Waah" Dean's already successful stable in 1999. "I felt like I was the leader when DMX and them was still here,"

There are no pauses for effect after this bold assertion. Nor is there a nervous twitch, smirk, shoulder shrug or cowardly cop-out explanation. All there is, in typical Jadakiss fashion, is a matter-of-fact ending. "But you gotta treat everything like school. Freshman, sophomore, junior, senior... now it's my turn."
from content. He won't tell you that his 2001 solo debut Kiss Tha Game Goodbye was high on punch lines but low on poignancy. He won't admit that the album fell short of his standards. But he doesn't have to; subconsciously his excuses do it for him. "I like that album," he starts, "You know, for my first time coming out, I had fun making it, anyway, but there was a lot of bullshit involved."

Bullshit meaning politics, and dollars and cents. As 'Kiss tells it, back in '99, on the tail end of their "Let the Lox Go" campaign-an attempt to get the trio off Sean "Puffy" Combs' Bad Boy Entertainment roster-Ruff Ryders shelled out $\$ 3,000,000$ to provide 'Kiss, Styles and Sheek their 40 acres. In addition. according to Kiss, Puff added a clause in the release contracts stating that he was to receive $\$ 300,000$ off of 'Kiss' first solo LP. [Bad Boy representatives did not respond to XXL's attempts to confirm these numbers, but a quick check of the album's credits reveals that Puff retains publishing rights to every song.] Good business on the part of the man 'Kiss refers to as a "paper gangster," but it dealt a damaging blow to the Kiss Tha Game Goodbye budget.

What's more, for the recording of the album, 'Kiss changed his surroundings. Rather than rely on the dank Yonkers atmosphere that had pervaded the creation of the two Lox group albums, he rented a mansion (formerly owned by AI Capone, nonetheless) on Miami's posh Palm Island and "lived it up." There were palm trees, a guest house, a pool. The New China Chinese restaurant and McDonald's were replaced with "chefs and butters, just fuckin' up the budget," 'Kiss summarizes.


It is indeed 'Kiss' turn to be fulfilled: to remind the world why Notorious B.I.G. pulled him aside and humbly requested-pending Lox partners Sheek and Styles' blessingthey do songs together. Musically speaking, 'Kiss, who flatly admits he's never put forth maximum effort in a soundproof booth, is far

But three years can change many things-focus, relationships, business. 'Kiss has indeed graduated, but he'll be the first to tell you that matriculation is a bitch. Your musical focus has sharpened since we last spoke three years ago. Has anything in particular caused this?

Last year, somebody stole almost $\$ 100,000$ in cash from me. Not at one time, but at two different times. One wop and then another wop. I never found it, so that's just like a murder that's waiting to happen... I'm ready to throw it all away.

## Do you have any suspects?

I never really stopped investigating it, but | had to fall back off it to try and stay focused and make the album and maintain my sanity. I think about it a lot. And that just made me be like, I gotta see who's who. Maybe it's my fault for slacking, but that just turned me around. That pulled the rage out of me and made me wanna channel it into some other shit. So I figure the best thing to do is just spill it on the album.
How devastating was that blow financially? One hundred thousand cash is $\$ 100,000$ cash no matter who you are. Whoever you are, it's gonna hurt. You gonna feel it. I mean, I ain't stay in the house for weeks or
none of that and just go crazy, but l'm gonna hurt somebody.

raised an only child in Yonkers, NY, 'Kiss developed some selfish characteristics. He was pampered. He'd have the new Air Jordans as soon as they came out, he remembers, and he spent summers away at camp in Pennsylvania (where fellow campers dubbed the well-fed youngster "Cheeseburger"). His mother, Debbie Phillips, walked him to school on the first day of classes up until 11 th grade.
"He was really very spoiled," says Mrs. Phillips, who worked as a teacher at a residential children's home in Yonkers. "I know | had everything to do with that. Despite the fact that it was very difficult at times, we always seemed to find a way. I wanted to make my son happy."

The selfishness, though, eventually gave way to the unwavering one-for-all mantra that



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saw her with the double-R first.") While 'Kiss has had lengthy conversations about scripts and the complexities of acting with both of them, he has never spoken to either about the passing of the Ruff Ryders baton. He and $X$
may never have that conversation, as their relationship has historically run hot and cold. "Me and X used to have a lot of ups and downs," says 'Kiss. "We would be cool sometimes and sometimes we wouldn't really be
fucking with each other." Pressed on the origins of their disagreements, 'Kiss chalks it up to "he-say, she-say shit."
"'Kiss and X are both from Yonkers," theorizes Ryders' in-the-streets CEO Dee. "So
they were probably dealing with stuff that had nothing to do with music. They've known each other for years, way before I knew them, so there was probably a grudge being held that they had to grow out of as men."

Ironically, 'Kiss and X squashed beef this spring at the Roy Jones-Antonio Tarver fight in Las Vegas. "We kicked it and sat down on some grown-man shit and just put everything aside. We just hopped on the G4, went to Phoenix for three days-'cause he has a crib in the desert-and kicked it. Chillin', riding four-wheelers. I still ain't talk to him about me being the king, or having the R on my back, 'cause I don't know how people feel. Egos always play a part."

the locale is Los Angeles. The date is February 13. It's the NBA All-Star Weekend. Jadakiss has come here to have a sit-down with the big boss, his bosses' boss--Interscope president Jimmy lovine. Comfortably clad in a pair of gray sweats and a stretched wife-beater, ensconced in a stylishly modern suite at the Le Parc hotel, 'Kiss is floating like a pudgy butterfly, bobbing and weaving like a hip-hop bee. His fists pump and his chest heaves. No drama, though. He's been on a natural 72 hour high with no end of elevation in sight. Three days prior, 'Kiss was assured that his album would be a priority on Interscope's 2004 release schedule. Translation: Kiss Ot Death will get the full weight of a seemingly foolproof marketing machine behind it. CEO Dee certainly wasn't shocked. After all, this is an album that made him postpone plans for retirement. ("After the accident, I wasn't into the music," Dee says. "Jada gave me, like, this new life.") To understand the magnitude of this news, one should know this: Interscope, which houses hip-hop's most powerful franchise, Aftermath/Shady/G-Unit. was responsible for a full 21 percent of all rap album sales nationwide last year.

Says Eve, "I don't think Jada has ever been pushed enough to go commercial. They stuck to him just being the streets. But when Jimmy is on your side-and he is excited-it's a wrap." [Indeed, as XXL went to press, the album debuted atop the Billboard album charts, selling 246,000 copies its first week out.]

Says lovine: "He's rapping better than he's ever rapped. In this business, you either learn how to [show growth] or it will get you. He's come a long way personally, which is why the lyrics are so personal."
'Kiss trusts that lovine's declaration isn't just lip service. He has his personal cell number in his directory. He stays in touch.
"Jimmy said they're going to do the same thing [for my single] that they did with 'Nuthin' But A "G" Thing' from Dre and Snoop, as far as the rollout," 'Kiss says. His eyes are wide despite the cloud of chronic smoke that engulis him. "They told Ruff
'Kiss, if only for a moment, has finally moved out the hood.
"People wanna know about you," says Jada. "They don't wanna hear a bunch of bullshit and lies about the cars you got and punch lines. They wanna hear that to a certain extent, but they also wanna hear how you view what's going on in the world today; how do you view things from your standpoint. And

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Ryders that this was the best music they ever put out-including $X$."

Another grand statement-and surely a debatable one. But what cannot be questioned is the importance of Kiss Of Death's performance in the marketplace. The consensus among the Ruff Ryder clan is consistent: the fate of their label hangs in the balance.

Says longtime label A\&R Icepick, "Kiss Of Death is gonna determine how the consumer and the people feel about Ruff Ryders."

Styles, whose own second solo album is due soon, agrees: "I would say it's very important. Right now on Ruff Ryders, 'Kiss is the front man. Not only numbers-wise, but as far as putting out a certain caliber of music. [We hope it causes] a chain reaction."

There is an X -factor, a secret weapon, one up the sleeve-a song that might change the lyrical profile of the man once called Jay-Ski. More than likely, it is the catalyst for the allout Interscope support. lovine first heard it last December, in his last meeting of the year. Produced by Mobb Deep's Havoc, 'Kiss' latest showcase cut "Why" shows an MC with worldly concerns. For an artist long criticized as lacking in lyrical scope, evidence of an inquiring mind adds an unexpected element to his arsenal. Running the gamut from $9 / 11$ ("Why did Bush knock down the towers...") to California politics ("Why'd they let the Terminator win the election...") and Kobe Bryant's rape trial ("Why did Kobe have to hit that raw/Why he kiss that whore...").
that's what you gotta give them-without spilling all the beans and getting someone convicted or tried."
"I was like, Damn," says Havoc, of the sessions that resulted in "Why." "He went in and he didn't do the normal. He just went in there and got real worldly, like where everybody can feel it. It had me open. I was like, Damn, he sayin' Why this and Why that... Shit that sometimes we all ask."
"He's on his grown-man shit now," says Lox partner Sheek, who's been rapping with 'Kiss since the '80s. "More alert. He watches, he learns, he listens and he studies it. Before, he was talking about just the block, but he had to broaden his horizons and let niggas know that he's everywhere."

Jadakiss' album debuted at number one the day of this year's BET Awards. But he was not attendance - he was never invited, he says. In a perfect world, Kiss Of Death will vault Jadakiss into the rarified realm of household-name rappers-those who really are everywhere, the ones who regularly receive invites to the Grammys, the American Music Awards, the stage at the Super Bowl and Playboy Mansion parties. Yet Jadakiss will insist that, like B.I.G., Rakim and Eminem before him, he will be simultaneously celebrated for keeping it concrete. For Jadakiss, and for the sake of the Ruff Ryders, both sides of the dream must become a reality. It's the only way he's going to be able to tell the world to kiss his ass with a straight face.e

