





I'M BREAL WHAT ARE YOU?

HE'S THE KING OF THE SOUTH TIP-TOP OF THE RAP
GAME. BUT IS HE HAPPY? DOES HE WANT TO RETIRE?
EVERY EVENING, HE HAS A BY-HIMSELF MEETING.
BUT STILL, **T.I.** IS OF
TWO MINDS.

Words Thomas Galianopoulos
Images Jonathan Mannion



T.I. IS IN TOTAL CONTROL

of the crowd situation. Outside the Giant Foods supermarket, where \$19.99 can get you any five packages of meat, the 26-year-old rapper and actor and entrepreneur remains calm despite the growing mob. He's in his old neighborhood, Bankhead, and he knows how to deal with such things.

"I'm happy to see all of you," he says with outstretched arms. "I appreciate all the love."

He shakes hands, signs autographs and slaps five with one teenager who gleefully yelps, "I'm never washing my hands again."

T.I. is here at this dilapidated strip mall—three of the four seats in front of the Coin Laundry are broken—on this Saturday afternoon to pose for a photo shoot. It's not what he'd like to be doing. After all, last night was the 30th birthday party for Grand Hustle co-CEO Jason Geter. It was at the Body Tap, "one of the hottest strip clubs in Atlanta," and T.I. was out until 5 a.m. But, hey, this is work, and he's a professional.

A stylist hands him a navy blue military button-up. He pops the tag, throws it on the pavement and changes shirts. Teenage girls squeal. Grown women snap pics with their camera phones. Little kids mimic his poses right down to the cocky scowl. And one burly knucklehead can't shut up about how he likes Lil Wayne better. Even this guy's impressed, though. (Homie actually said, "He aight. He aight, though." It was like a live-action Mad Rapper skit.) Everyone is impressed.

"He looks like he's a pretty down-to-earth person," says Tricia Austin, who was driving down Donald Lee Hollowell Parkway, noticed the crowd, and pulled over. "He's hard, but without being disrespectfully hard. And his last CD was really good. He's a pretty good actor too."

After the shoot, T.I. speeds off in his black 2006 Mercedes Benz SLR McLaren, the one he

last drove right before Super Bowl weekend.

This is exactly what you would expect from T.I.

T.I.P. is in total control of the crowd situation. Outside of a low-key pit BBQ spot, where \$5.50 can get you two ribs, two chicken wings, two slices of wheat bread, a grape soda and a bottle of water, the 26-year-old former drug dealer seems a little agitated by the growing mob. However, he's in his old neighborhood, Bankhead, and he knows how to deal with these things.

"Ay." T.I.P. motions to his crew, ignoring the scrum of fans waiting for him. "Let's go." He contemplates socializing, but there are too many people to accommodate.

T.I.P. is in this dilapidated strip mall—all the seats at the BBQ spot are lawn chairs—on this Saturday evening to do an interview. It's not what he'd like to be doing. After all, last night, he was out at a strip club until 5 a.m. So he's nursing a Heineken as he hops into his red 1969 Chevrolet Camaro "Rally Sport" drop, the one he last drove the day Grand Hustle shot Young Dro's "Shoulder Lean" video.

Mothers plead with him to sign autographs. Little kids look like someone just stomped their pet puppy. And one guy, whose tank top barely conceals his huge gut, is really mad. "I ain't waiting here no more," he shouts, rounding up his family. "I ain't waiting. I said, let's go."

A particularly angry mom who's been consoling a particularly disappointed kid starts giving T.I.P. a particularly hard time. From the driver's seat of the Camaro, he tries to explain: He just finished an interview. He's running late to a photo shoot. It's his fourth of the day. She interrupts him, punctuating her sentences with her index finger. And then

T.I.P. has had enough.

"Ay, ay, ay, listen," he snaps. "You got to give your ears the same chance that you give your mouth!"

With that, T.I.P. speeds off, the open Heineken still in his hand. He's not wearing a seat belt.

This is exactly what you would expect from T.I.P.

The man born Clifford Harris Jr. is conflicted. Doesn't matter that his alter ego, T.I., was the top-selling rap artist of 2006. There are little battles—wars, actually—raging in his head. All his life he was "little bad-ass Tip," he says, a drug-dealing hooligan who was nice with his hands and even nicer on the microphone. But now, after that skill set (the rapping, not the scrapping) made him a millionaire, he's T.I. when he's on the clock. That's the mature, level-headed musical artist who has released three million-selling albums—the one responsible, as much as anyone, for Atlantic Records' prominent position in the rap game. That's the mogul, the co-CEO of Grand Hustle Records—an Atlantic subsidiary home to Young Dro and DJ Drama—the one who brought resurgent New Orleans star B.G. into the fold. That's the budding actor who opened a low-budget niche film, Chris Robinson's *ATL*, to \$11.5 million—the one who got advice from co-star Denzel Washington on the set of this fall's *American Gangster*. "Don't act," the two-time Academy Award winner told him, "just be."

He's also a businessman, the owner of a construction company (New Finish), a nightclub (Club Crucial), a car shop (Elite Auto) and a clothing line, Akoo (A King of Oneself), which he describes as "upscale urban fashion" designed to "pick up where Ralph Lauren and Sean John left off."

It's a lot to deal with. Especially when the "real" Clifford Harris Jr. doesn't get credit for his part in all the success. "I couldn't... Umm..." He pauses. "T.I. couldn't have been out here calling himself no king of the South if it wasn't for the groundwork we put down before the rest of the world knew who T.I. was." So this summer, he's doing what a conflicted artist should: releasing his demons on record. The Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde dilemma

"I WANT TO PROVE THAT I AM BEYOND COMPETITION."

will be explored on his fifth album, *T.I. vs. T.I.P.*

Problem is, he's been there, done that. The song "T.I. vs. T.I.P.," from 2003's *Trap Muzik*, captured the split-personality back-and-forth in a concise 3 minutes and 54 seconds. "You need to think 'bout your actions," T.I. rapped. T.I.P. responded like he would: "Nigga, fuck you!" By the end of the song, though, the two had come to an understanding. Is there anything else to add?

"So much has happened since that song," he says. "T.I. has a certain take or stance on what has happened in our life and our career since *Trap Muzik*. T.I. really feels like T.I.P. jeopardizes everybody's livelihood because of his quick temper. T.I.P. feels T.I. cherishes that luxury shit too much and if you don't stand for something, you'll fall for anything. They both got valid points."

There are other reasons T.I. is releasing *T.I. vs. T.I.P.* "I definitely wanted a challenge," he says. "I feel like this is a point in my career where I had to raise the standards and show people why I should be separated from the rest. It's like, you sell 500,000 the first week. Cool, Jay can sell that. 50 can do that. You say, I'm a hot rapper. Aight. Weezy is a hot rapper. You say women like him. Well, women like Weezy. You say you got street credibility. Okay, well, Jeezy got street credibility. I'm acting. Andre 3000 acts. Ludacris acts."

"I want to set myself aside from everyone. I want to prove that I am beyond competition. In order for me to do that, I have to do something that can't nobody else do but me—and this is that."

T.I. has previously described the project to press as a "musical" or an "opera." Today, he says, "It's one long story rap." Basically, it's a concept album. There's an intro, followed by a set of T.I.P. songs, another intro, a set of T.I. tracks and then a few cuts featuring both voices.

Just in case the narrative goes over listeners' heads, T.I. is including a DVD, which he

GRAND HUSTLE RAPPER A.K.: *T.I. is not T.I.P. Tip is the guy we know from the hood. He got all the hot girls ready to do something freaky and always something illegal in his pocket, whether it's a pistol or drugs. T.I. is just the mature man.*

GRAND HUSTLE PARTNER JASON GETER: *When he's around us, no one calls him T.I. If you call him T.I., it's a business thing.*

ATLANTIC RECORDS PRESIDENT JULIE GREENWALD: *He is always the most wonderful Southern gentleman when [we talk]. We joke that, one day, he's going to come into my office with a bat and be T.I.P., but so far, knock on wood, all of my experiences have been good experiences.*

MOTHER, VIOLETA MORGAN: *I know he has a business side, a fun side. He has a serious side, and he loves his kids.*

FRIEND, COLUMBIA RECORDS EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT OF A&R KAWAN PRATHER: *Every other conversation is with the other person. It just depends on what's going on that day. When he's acting an ass, it's T.I.P. T.I. is the guy having a conversation with a journalist from Esquire. That's a gift you get from growing up in the hood. The people who survive are the people who know how to adapt.*

Growing up in Bankhead, Harris had no choice but to adapt to his surroundings. It's a rural, run-down neighborhood still showing scars from Reaganomics. The big supermarket, the Giant Foods, sells Rap Snacks, "Lil' Romeo's Bar-B-Quing With My Honey"—flavored potato chips, but lacks most brand-name groceries.

He started dealing drugs as a preteen. His

"EMOTIONALLY, A N#GGA IS F&#KED UP SOMETIMES."

suggests consumers view before playing the album. The lyrics will be printed in the CD booklet, too—T.I.'s verses in one color, and T.I.P.'s in another. But even though he's going out of his way to provide such *Cliff's Notes*, T.I. has confidence in his audience. "Any fan of mine got to know the difference," he says. "Ain't no way you can follow my career and not sometime ask yourself, 'How can the same guy who does this turn around and get caught out there doing that?'"

Certainly, his friends, family and colleagues have no problem distinguishing T.I. from T.I.P.

uncles, both noted neighborhood hustlers, were not happy. "That was something that I was totally against," says Quentin Morgan, 41, who served 10 years in prison for conspiracy to distribute. Today, Quentin runs New Finish. "I had a confrontation with the guys that were trying to get him into it. But Tip did what he wanted to do." He entered the trap. And it was even more dangerous than what his uncles experienced in the '80s.

"It was much more violent. Much, much more," says another uncle, Derrick Dowell, who



IN LAUNDRY

DRY CLEANING

WASHING

RA

SS



now manages Club Crucial. "In my day, if you were out in the streets doing your hustle, the only person you had to look out for was the police. But in his time, it was everybody. You had to look out for the females, the robbers and the police. It was dog eat dog."

Harris was quick-tempered and suffered from rage issues—problematic personality traits in any environment, but downright dangerous in Bankhead. A.K. remembers an incident from when his friend was still in his teens. "During Freaknik 1998, someone pistol-whipped his girlfriend and told her, 'I'll kill you and your punk-ass boyfriend.' Tip got a hold of an [AK-47], and we go looking for the guy. They ambushed us, jumped out of the bushes, and shot at us. Luckily, everyone survived."

His way out of the trap was music.

His grandfather, Robert Morgan Jr., remembers a gifted toddler reading news-

"and T.I. was like, 'I'm good. I have my own.' And he had a Black & Mild. He didn't see any difference between his Black & Mild and Will's Cohiba. Because, he was like, 'I'm as fly with the Black & Mild as you are with the Cohiba.'"

Seven years later, T.I. has a comparable appeal. He doesn't really consider himself a pop star ("Semi," he says when the term is suggested. "T.I. maybe, but not T.I.P.") and bristles at the idea that career moves—like guest-starring on the now-canceled teen soap *The O.C.* or appearing in fashion spreads for *GQ* magazine or hanging with Dale Earnhardt Jr. in a Chevrolet commercial—risk alienating his core. "I do what I do," he says. "People like me, and I try to give them as much as possible. I know what I want to be introduced to people as, and I try to stay to that as much as possible. We can find a common ground."

grabs his empty bottle and flings it into the recycling bin. He then goes behind the bar, grabs two more Heinekens and violently flips off the caps.

How are things going?

"What you mean?"

You doing alright?

"Absolutely. I'm breathing, walking and talking, man. The Lord blessed me to see a new day. I'm good, man. I'm healthy. Emotionally, a nigga is fucked up sometimes. You know, I've been through a lot, bruh, and the main thing I learned—and that's what makes this rap shit so simple to me—it ain't nothing that they can take me through that I ain't been through. I buried my father. I buried my partners, several of my partners. I buried my cousins. I buried my daughter." His voice trembles. He's on the verge of tears.

"You know, I've been through a whole lot."

"I DON'T LIVE ON TV. I MAKE MY MONEY ON TV."

papers at the age of four and rapping soon after. "I was surprised," he says. "[I asked him,] 'How did you learn to read?' And he just smiled. That boy was a trip. He would try to rap around the neighborhood. He used to be in his room making noise. He would stop for a while and then start again. After a while, I left him alone. I'm glad I left him alone."

First known as "Tiny T" (he inherited the nickname of his paternal grandfather, "Tip"), Harris was wowing talent-show audiences before entering the first grade. His stepsister's husband worked at a radio station in Detroit and tried to get the youngster signed. He introduced him to R&B star Keith Sweat, snuck him into clubs to perform. "He was in *Black Entertainment* magazine," says his mother, Violeta Morgan. "He had done a photo shoot. There was this picture they used where he had a little cap and a little jean jacket, with his head tilted to the side. That was the picture on the cassette, but it didn't get anywhere."

T.I.'s music finally got into the right hands in 2000, when he met Kawan "KP" Prather. KP was a member of the rap group PA and doubled, at the time, as an A&R executive at Atlanta's LaFace Records. He convinced T.I. to stop hustling and took him out on the road. "At the time, he was in the presence of a lot of superstars," says KP. "OutKast, Usher, Pink. It never felt like he was in awe. He was always confident that he was here because he was on the same path as these guys."

He recalls one night in Miami, out to dinner with Will Smith, Jada Pinkett, Usher, Sister Souljah and others. "I remember Will asking him if he wanted a cigar," KP says,

At the photo shoot in front of Giant Foods, two women had this conversation: "Who was that light-skinned girl he was with?" "She's from that singing group." "Which one?" "Xscape." "I heard they were engaged." "Nah, they're not together anymore. I heard that he was with a Pussycat Doll." "Why would he be with a Pussycat Doll?"

Later that afternoon, over a Heineken at Club Crucial, the exchange is recounted.

"I heard about 30 percent truth," says T.I. with a nervous laugh. He reluctantly confirms that he is still engaged to Tameka "Tiny" Cottle, the mother of the youngest of his four kids, but this is clearly not a topic he enjoys talking about. The couple lost an unborn child in March, when Cottle suffered a miscarriage six months into pregnancy. "I don't even speak on my relationship," he says. They arrived together at the photo shoot in the morning, in matching red outfits. "Not because I have anything to hide, but it involves more than just me. I can't speak on a situation that I don't know how the other person involved feels about the situation."

T.I. usually maintains eye contact in conversation. But talking about Cottle, his gaze drifts elsewhere. "We been through a lot together. She done withstood the test of time, if you will. It's only so much you can ask for a woman to do before you say, 'She deserves it.' Shit, I can honestly say, shawty done did all of that. Then, it's all about me and my life. And my hectic, crazy, wild, chaotic, I guess you can say, tornado of a life."

Five minutes later, something seems wrong. During a lull in the conversation, T.I.

So this rap shit just seems so small to me sometimes. A lot of this shit these muthafuckas go back and forth about, it don't be worthy. It's kind of like why I don't even want to do this shit no more."

He expressed similar sentiments about retiring last May to the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*. That was after the murder of his best friend, Philant Johnson. He's since said that Phil came to him in a vision and told him to keep recording.

"It's so fake," he says. "Not even so fake. It's just, there are a bunch of fake-ass niggas in this shit. You look at cats talking about shit: 'I'm the hottest muthafucka out right now.' 'I'm the realest muthafucka out.' 'I'm the biggest gangster.' 'I done did this.' 'I done did that.'"

"Most of these cats have no idea what real life is. They live on TV. I don't live on TV. I make my money on TV. I got a crash course on reality."

Five hours and two photo shoots later, the interview's wrapping up, this time inside a private room. Tracks from the club's sound system shake the walls—Young Jeezy's "Go Getta" and Shop Boyz' "Party Like a Rockstar." But the star is sluggish, giving mostly one-sentence answers. There are no Heinekens in sight. And T.I. is struggling to stay in T.I. mode.

"How many more we have left?" he asks. He knocks out three last questions and then politely excuses himself. "I have to go home," he says. "I have to go home with my lady."

And this is exactly what you should expect from Clifford Harris Jr. Not acting, just being. ♠