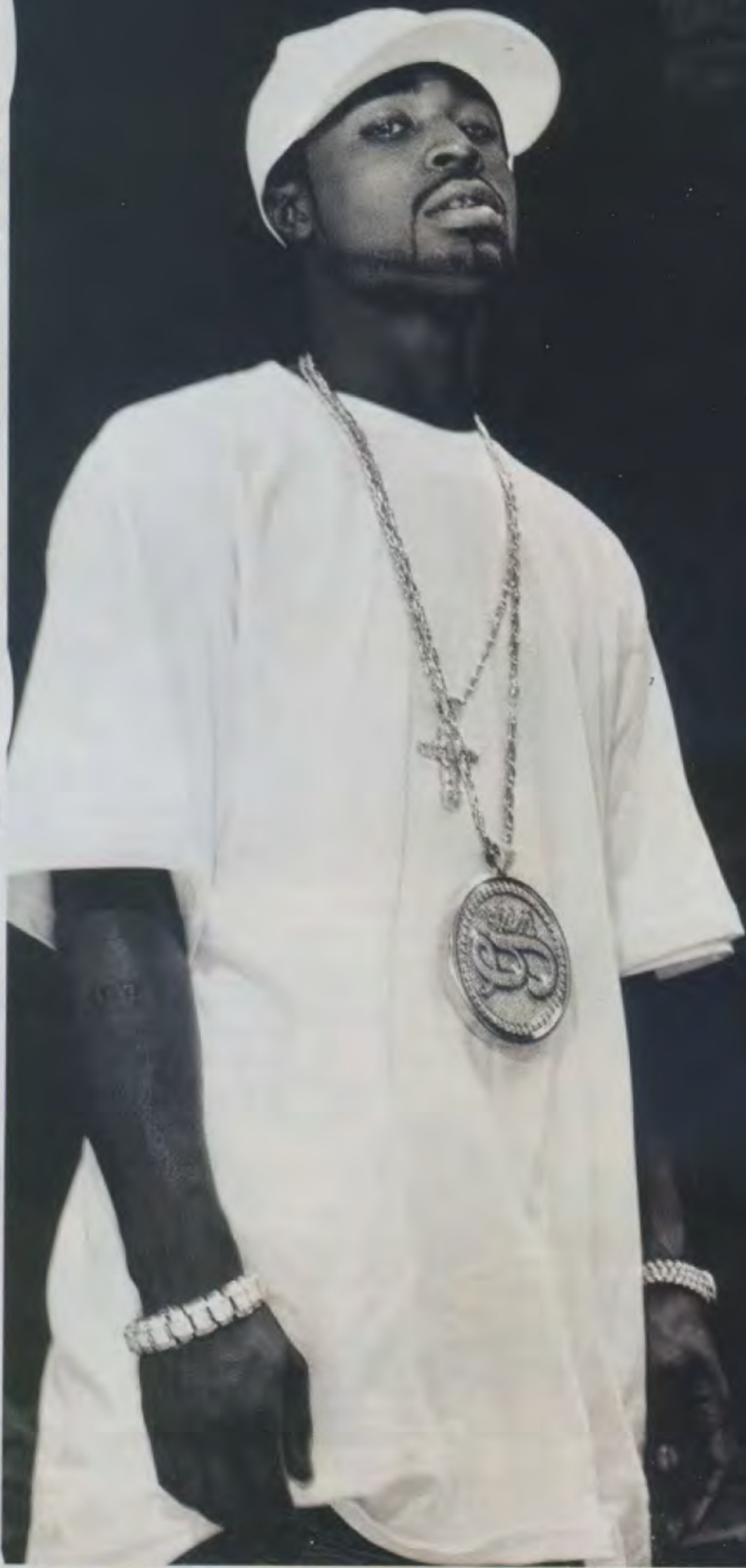


*only the*

**GRAND**




*50 Cent kicked in the door. Now it's up to him to take hip-hop's promised land. Forever grinding*



words **BONSU THOMPSON**  
images **JONATHAN MANNION**

**homies Lloyd Banks, Young Buck and Tony Yayo to follow him to G-UNIT is out to prove there's strength in numbers, muthaf#\*kas.**





**“How hard do you hustle?”**

It's February 27, 2003.

Exactly three weeks since 50 Cent's debut album *Get Rich Or Die Tryin'* first took hip-hop hostage, and only a couple of hours after the beefed-up crack-dealer-turned-MTV-star left a Delco Center crowd of several thousand in rap-fueled hysteria.

The show's over, but 50's own excitement is just beginning. Backstage, chopping it up with the headliner of the tour he just sweated for, 50 listens, takes in some advice.

“I think you got it right now,” says Master P. “I think you're gonna sell 10 million records.” The New Orleans rap don pauses, puts on his game face. “But I sold 75 million records in my career. How hard do you hustle?”

Before 50 can reply with one of his smirk-wrapped retorts, P makes sure his words are understood: “I see you hustlin', but *how hard* do you hustle?”



**Fast forward.** October 4, 2003. Amsterdam, The Netherlands, Europe's version of post-Pandora paradise. A city where the water fountains in the public parks might as well dispense alcoholic beverages; where marijuana-stocked "coffeeshops" are more popular than McDonald's; and home to the world-famous Red Light District, where blocks and blocks of glass-door storefronts reveal hundreds of real-life mannequins ready and willing to be your own personal sex genie. For a price, of course. But it's all legal. This, the planet's number-one-ranked Sin City, is today's stop on G-Unit's European tour.

On a rainy Saturday night, 50 and a 10-man crew—mostly comprised of longtime homies from his Jamaica, Queens neighborhood—visit one of Amsterdam's elite social

**“THE NIGGAS THAT I GREW UP LISTENING TO DISAPPOINT ME NOW. It's to the point where I'm like, 'Man, f#\*k how long I've been in the game—y'all niggas just been in here bulls#\*ttin'.'”**—LLOYD BANKS

spots, Supperclub. Despite the establishment's infamous at-least-two-weeks-in-advance reservation policy, G-Unit, along with a sprinkling of Interscope Records and Violator Management personnel, mosey into the cozy, all-white dining room and make themselves comfortable on the rows of plush mattresses that line the east and west walls (think Miami's Club Bed). With his beaming white socks on

full display (no shoes allowed on the bed), 50 appears comfortable in such surroundings.

“These are the places I can come,” says the former menace to society, stretching out into full lounge mode. “And people won't bother me. Because they're used to seeing [famous] people all the time.”

Thirty-six hundred miles from New York City, as he discusses the crazy rap life he lives

GROOMING: LITE DA BARBER. STYLING: TIFFANY HASBOURNE/BRAT PRODUCTIONS. OPENING SPREAD: T-SHIRTS AND HATS BY G-UNIT CLOTHING, JEANS BY AZZURE DENIM AND INDIGO RED. PREVIOUS SPREAD: SWEATSUITS BY AZZURE. THIS PAGE: T-SHIRT BY G-UNIT CLOTHING. HAT BY UNCLE SAM'S ARMY SURPLUS.

# G-UNIT

today, a dual-sided truth becomes apparent: 50 Cent may not be as powerful as he thinks. ("I control everything," he says nonchalantly. "Everything that happens is because of me.") But he's more powerful than you think.

In 2003, Nas' old "Whose world is this?" would've been a dumb question. Selling over six million copies in a down market, *Get Rich Or Die Tryin'* dominated the charts like no other album. In May, 50 had eight songs in regular rotation on radio and/or MTV (six were from *Get Rich...*). Capitalizing on marketing skills honed during his years as a street hustler—and starting, really, in 2002, with his independently-released mixtapes—50 offered his fans more than just his own charismatic stardom. He gave them a brand, G-Unit, that they can take part in, sign up for, pledge allegiance to. (Think Wu-Tang in the mid-'90s, or Master P's



No Limit soldiers.) Then he used himself as the lead promoter. To say the least, it worked: rap's Mr. Monopoly claims to have grossed \$40 million in 2003. "Those accomplishments seem minor now," he says, shrugging it off just as quickly. "'Cause I already switched over [to a higher financial class]. I'm looking to do at least a hundred million next year."

It doesn't seem that outlandish. 50's horizons keep expanding. The G-Unit sneaker, made by Reebok, is set for imminent launch, joining G-Unit clothing in department stores nationwide. Plus upcoming G-Unit vitamins, movies, books... As the female voice on 50's voicemail message says, "The list goes on and on."

As any Business 101 class will make clear, diversification is key. But there's no branch of G-Unit more important to 50 than his artists: Lloyd Banks, Tony Yayo and Young Buck (all signed to G-Unit Records, of course). And it's only right. The Gorilla Unit isn't your typical rapper's entourage; they're the reason that 50 is the superstar he is today. Every chapter in the 50 Cent story has had them inked.

**"I GOTTA CERTIFY  
WHATEVER I DO.  
SO WALKING, TALKING,  
EATING, SLEEPING,  
S#\*TTING, WHATEVER—  
THIS IS THE DIRTY SOUTH  
TO THE BONE GRISTLE.**

*And that's what makes me  
stand out immediately  
throughout the click.*"—YOUNG BUCK



**Lloyd Banks is** currently higher than your light bill. It's 10 o'clock, and the gang has fled the Supperclub in search of some decent food (not an easy thing to find in Amsterdam). After relocating to the city's version of an "Italian Restaurant," the marijuana-blitzed 21-year-old isn't satisfied. His eyes are on the Pizza Hut across the street. Slyly getting an Interscope staffer's attention, the baby of the crew lets his desires be known. Ten minutes later, a pizza box is delivered to the table.

ALL CLOTHING BY G-UNIT

Banks (born Christopher Lloyd) knows what he wants. Beyond his years lyrically, the self-proclaimed "Boy Wonder" has been steadily showered with hood praise for his stellar mixtape appearances. "The niggas that I grew up listening to disappoint me now," he says. "It's to the point where I'm like, 'Man, fuck how long I've been in the game—y'all niggas just been in here bullshittin'.'"

Post-pizza, sitting at the head of the *Last Supper*-long dinner table, Banks looks about ready to nod off into the empty box. On his right, however, Young Buck is just getting started. Ignoring a cold saucer of noodles, the 22-year-old MC talks excitedly about the night's next stop, the Green House coffeeshop. His voice, along with a sculpted sideburns-to-goatee and a grill full

**As most folks** know, due to the popular "Free Yayo" T-shirt campaign, there's a G-Unit member missing from this trip. Twenty-five-year-old Marvin Bernard, better known as Tony Yayo, has been incarcerated since New Year's Eve for weapons charges and prior warrants. He's serving his time at Monterey Shock Incarceration Correctional Facility, the same upstate New York program 50 endured in place of his three-to-nine. So the man who put in so much guts on the front end—through the crack days and 50's 2000 shooting, to the mixtape hustle and the studio fight with Murder Inc.—has missed the majority of the glory. And nobody misses him more than his boys.

"Yayo," says Banks, puffing on a billy-club-sized joint (for real) within the velvety confines of the coffeeshop. "He kind of, like,

**"Before Yayo got locked up, he was my motivation. Like, we not the smartest in the world. All of us left high school.**

of gold teeth, makes it evident that the newest addition to G-Unit ain't from Queens. Formerly affiliated with Cash Money Records and Juvenile's crew UTP, David "Young Buck" Brown was born and raised down South—Nashville, Tennessee, to be exact.

"50 got my attention back when he did 'How To Rob,'" he says. "Where I'm from in the South, you don't get accepted for nothing you saying if you're really not about that."

According to 50, Buck's entry into G-Unit was the result of some rap-world funny business. Early last year, with the squad anointed by Shady/Aftermath, and Banks building a catalog of quotable punch lines longer than a giraffe's neck, G-Unit was clearly becoming the hottest property in the game.

"[While Buck was still with Juvenile] he played a record for me and it was dope," says 50. "I wanted to say something to him, but I didn't want to be disrespectful to Juvenile. I think that's disrespectful, to invite someone into your house and make propositions. But later on, I found out that Juvenile had [propositioned] Banks. Because I heard it, and it wasn't from Banks, I had an attitude. Banks was supposed to tell me right away. So I said, 'Yo, son, you wanna go with Juvenile? I'll let you go right now.'"

To prove he wasn't playing, 50 dialed up his lawyer, in front of Banks, and instructed him to immediately draw up release papers for his young MC. Of course, Banks let it be known that there was no confusion as to whose team he wanted to play for. And 50, feeling less need to respect Juvie's territory, called Young Buck and invited him up to New York.

[Refusing direct comment, and through a spokesperson, Juvenile says that's not how it went down.]

**BUT YAYO, WHEN HE RHYMES, HE'S THE SMARTEST NIGGA. 'CAUSE THE THINGS HE SAY, I BE LIKE, 'NIGGA, DO YOU WATCH THE HISTORY CHANNEL OR SOME S#\*T?'"** —LLOYD BANKS

put me in the position where I'm at. Like, 'Son, this is what's going to pop, fuck with us.'

"Honestly," he continues, "before Yayo got locked up, he was my motivation. Like, we not the smartest in the world. All of us left high school. But Yayo, when he rhymes, he's the smartest nigga. 'Cause the things he say, I be like, 'Nigga, do you watch The History Channel or some shit? You out on the block with us, how the hell did you know that?'"

By all accounts, Yayo is handling his bid fine. (50 says he's looking at a release in December, a few weeks after G-Unit's album *Beg For Mercy* is scheduled to drop.) And you know, brushes with the law are nothing new to anyone in G-Unit.

Banks was born in Baltimore, while his pops, a consistent criminal, was on the run. His family moved to Southside when he turned six. Since senior spent most of junior's childhood either on the lam or in the pen, there wasn't a lot of opportunity for bonding. When he was able to carve out some quality time, it wasn't always so quality—pops didn't exactly show his firstborn the finer things in life. "I seen my first [murder] when I was 10 years old," Banks says solemnly. "In front of my eyes, nigga got shot three times in the head. That was one of my father's closest friends."

While Banks was catching his first sight of burners and blood, Buck was in Nashville,



selling crack to his old man. "I probably sold my first pieces of crack to my father," says an emotionless Buck, having hustled since age 13. "That's because I would rather see myself selling it to him and getting the money, than watching one of my friends selling it to him and getting the money."

Needless to say, Buck's relationship with his father has been, in his own words, "fucked up" for years. Recently, though, the situation got even worse. "Just before I turned 22," he says, shaking his head, "my mama had little snickers like, 'I don't know if he's really your father.' I'm a dark-complexioned dude, and the guy who says he's my father isn't. But [as we go through] the process of trying to see if he's my father, he's seeing all the success. And the first thing that come out his mouth is, 'Let me hold something.' I don't even accept his phone calls right now. He's leaving crazy messages and everything."

**After the Green** House, where the Unit sampled almost every entree on the menu (everyone except 50, that is—no intoxicating smoke or drink for the muscle-packed rapper), it's off to work. G-Unit are in for an all-night lockdown in one of Amsterdam's top studios. While Banks works on a couple of solo cuts in another room, and Buck sharpens a guest verse, G-Unit's official DJ, Whoo

# G-UNIT



always expected the latter group to be filled with angry rappers and industry executives, he never expected any of his own G-Unit to join up. Seems as if a few of the Gorillas from the old neighborhood have gone astray, bad-mouthing their former crime boss, in private and in publications, for not taking care of them financially.

"I was holding everything down for that man, protecting him, by his side..." said former G-Unit member Smurf of 50 in a recent issue of *The Source*. "Now this nigga done blew up, he's sittin' on seven million and I gotta ask my man to let me hold some money for Pampers."

50's take is that some of his old hood fellas couldn't keep their eyes on the prize. Even after he hit it big, he says, certain soldiers refused to cease and desist their street activity—creating situations that sucked his energy, and his pockets (lawyer fees are a bitch). "They're convinced that they're so necessary that they could do whatever they want," 50 says. "Until you've seen enough of the bullshit, and tell them to get the fuck away from you. I had a guy around me, think he did everything. He thought he did it, for real. I've been on the front line the entire time. So there's no nigga [in G-Unit] that's more valuable than me."

50, who swears no one on his staff makes less than \$60,000 a year, has learned from the follies of rap history. He's determined to surround himself with only the necessary, only the productive. "I don't have a MC Hammer crew," he says. Most important, it can never be forgotten: G-Unit is not a democracy. At the end of the day, he's the boss. "We got a family situation, but they follow directions. If you don't follow directions, you go. 'Cause I can't afford to lose."

***"I got an aura around me that won't leave and I'm alright with it. I think people look at me and think, 'That's what a young Black male is.'"***

Kid, sets up shop in studio B. He's recording his radio show, G-Unit Radio, to be broadcast tomorrow night on New York's Hot 97.

Today's topic of discussion is (surprise!) "beef." After G-Unit second-stringers like High and Pretty Sha (not to be confused with producer Sha Money XL) say their piece about being on the most gangsta and most hated team in hip-hop, 50 enters the booth to do his part. "If they really wanted to find me they should have no problem," he says, the familiar evil smile spreading across his face. "All my shows are listed on MTV. Where they looking?"

It's no accident. As fly as he may be, America's favorite gangsta rapper makes sure he stays in some sort of shit. While most entertainers might cringe at the potential image problems that could come with being constantly trailed by "hip-hop cops" or being

**[ I REPRESENT ] THE MENTALITY IN THE HOOD, AND I'M HONORED TO BE THE VOICE OF THAT.** —50 CENT

pinned as the poster boy for rap violence, 50 basks in bad press.

"I got an aura around me that won't leave and I'm alright with it," he says. "I think people look at me and think, 'That's what a young Black male is.' [I represent] the mentality in the hood, and I'm honored to be the voice of that."

"I'm willing to accept anything that comes from this point on," says 50. "Because I know if my judgment is leading me to success, anything that comes from that is God's plan."

The bigger 50 Cent's fan base gets, the bigger the club of haters. And while he has

**The birds are** chirping at the rising sun. It's 7:30 a.m. and the studio session has just ended. Everyone's exhausted, but everybody's happy. Happy because 50 is happy. In many ways, in the G-Unit "family situation," 50's the father that his boys never had.

"I think they watch me," says 50. "And they start working as hard as they see me working."

The posse piles into a van that'll whisk them back to the 'telly for some much-needed sleep. Settled in for the ride, most of the guys are already closing their eyes, leaning their heads against the windows. 50's still up,

ALL CLOTHING BY G-UNIT.



**"I don't have a MC Hammer crew... We got a family situation, but they follow directions. IF YOU DON'T FOLLOW DIRECTIONS, YOU GO. 'CAUSE I CAN'T AFFORD TO LOSE."** —50 CENT

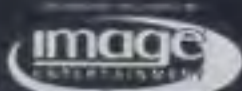
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though, still thinking, still formulating.

"Let me test your knowledge, James," he shoots at Violator's vice president of marketing and promotion, James Cruz, from the backseat. "How many records do I have to ship to sell a million my first week?"

"Ummm..." Cruz quickly calculates and dispenses: "One point six."

50 leans into an Interscope publicist crunched next to him and mumbles: "Okay, I need to ship two million, then."

50 wants to set a first-week sales record with *Beg For Mercy*, the first official release from G-Unit Records. Featuring sonic backdrops courtesy of Eminem, Denaun Porter, Hi-Tek, Nottz, Midi Mafia and of course the D.R.E., the album is engineered to highlight the talent that's been behind 50 since before the mania emerged. Lloyd Banks will finally get his solo light on a mainstream platform; Young Buck can show the world what a Gorilla from the South sounds like. They're both more than ready.

"Basically," says Buck, aware of his status as newest-comer. "I gotta certify whatever I do. So walking, talking, eating, sleeping, shitting, whatever—this is the dirty South to the bone gristle. And that's what makes me stand out immediately throughout the click. Once the world gets a feel of what I'm doing, that's gonna open their ear and make them pay attention to where I'm from. Tennessee been out there, doing they thing for a long time, trying to make it happen. I'm just one that made it out."

"When I first got in [the rap game]," says Banks. "I used to feel like, 'I'm ready.' And now I could honestly tell you, I wasn't. I really didn't have myself figured out as an artist yet."

"Remember how Biggie sounded on *Ready To Die*? 'I got seven Mac 11s...' His voice was a higher pitch. Because he was used to going in front of a crowd, so your voice gotta go up higher. Then when he came with *Life After Death*, his whole shit changed up: 'Today's agenda...' It was just his regular voice. That's kind of like what it was for me. In my earlier stages, my voice was higher. And then I realized that I wasn't really using my voice, so I took more advantage of it."

The lead G-Unit single, "Stunt 101," is already bubbling up *Billboard* charts at press time. But to make doubly sure that G-Unit soldiers are shining bright around their showcase, the business minds behind them are planning to flood the industry with guest appearances.

While Buck has records on cock with just

about every substantial rapper below the nation's capital—Lil Jon, Pastor Troy, Three 6 Mafia and Petey Pablo—Banks is preparing his baritone to take over the place where the rap and R&B worlds intersect. He's got current spots on Mary J. Blige, Joe and Mya songs, and future appearances with Alicia Keys, Brandy and Missy. Still, while 2004 is looking sweeter than Breyers, G-Unit ain't trying to count any unhatched eggs.

"Niggas be like, 'Yo,'" says Banks. "He's gonna blow—it's guaranteed, 'cause he's with 50.' Fuck that, that's an ignorant way of thinking. I don't depend on no man. The support is there one hundred percent, but I'm not depending on nobody."

50's depending on him, though. G-Unit is the 40-million-dollar man's principal investment. He's got big plans for his label, envisioning a 50 Cent era lasting long and lovely. The map for 2004: when the G-Unit LP starts to wane, sometime in the spring, Banks' solo album, tentatively titled *Money By Any Means*, will keep the fires burning. Once Banks has had his run, it'll be time for 50 to fight the sophomore jinx. That'll be followed, at the end of the year, by either Tony Yayo or Young Buck, whoever finishes first with satisfactory product.

**Sunday night.** 5,500 Amsterdam fans pack the dark, gymnasium-like Heineken Music Hall. Before the show, you wouldn't hear a lick of English from the crowd. But once 50, Lloyd Banks and Young Buck hit the stage, locals of both genders, various hues and an age range of 14 to 30 recite every syllable of 50 Cent's hits—from his commercial favorites to the mixtape material—continuously bowing one arm at the stage in accord.

It's a powerful scene, but for 50, just another piece of the plan. "I feel like a lot of people, even the people that I do business with, look at me like I'm in a hurry," he says backstage afterwards. (This time, 50 is the headlining act.) "No, I'm not in a hurry. It may not be cool for everybody to do things as fast as I'm doing them right now, but I'm a special situation. To do as much as possible—that's really what it's about for me. If they say it's impossible, I think it may be possible."

Master P's been getting his question answered ever since he asked it. And now that the rest of the team has arrived, 50 has no intentions of aborting his lengthy, wordless response. "Aw man," he says. "I'm f'nna show them how I really hustle now, baby." ♣