

How big can G-Unit get?

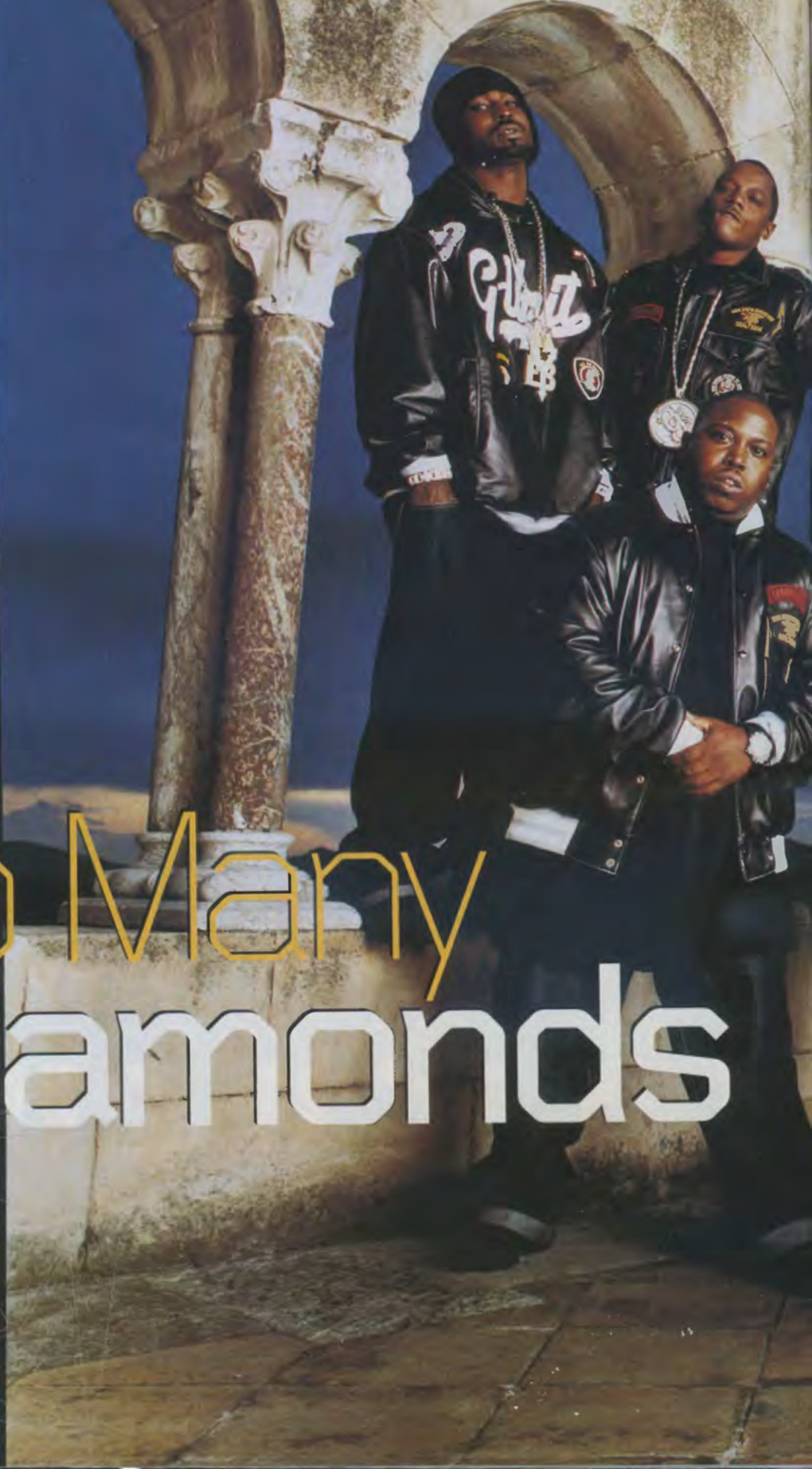
Last summer, 50 Cent went out and rounded up a bunch of ringers and brought them into a stable already full to the point of bursting.

As **MOBB DEEP**, **M.O.P.**, and **MA\$E** join **50 AND CO.**

on a full-fledged European invasion—storming studios and stages and a castle in southern France—it's hard to keep all the names straight, never mind the personalities, the schedules, the paperwork... *Mon Dieu*, the logistics of building an empire!

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So Many Diamonds







50

Cent sits on a grand, plush circular settee in the grand, plush lobby of the Hotel Hermitage in Monte Carlo,

France. He is, for the most part, alone. There's a G-Unit hanger-on sitting a couple of feet away, chatting him up to pass the time. Hotel staff, ever discreet, leaves him be. A couple of guests walk by, oblivious to the star in their midst. He is clad in denim shorts; a black Champion sweatshirt, hood pulled up over his head; and black Reeboks.

"RBK. Know what that stands for?" He points to the company's abbreviated logo on his shoe. "Rich Black Kid," he says, and his mouth parts into an epic smile. He has told this joke before, but it always works. His teeth are improbably white and wide. It's a shit-eating grin. It is completely sincere.

It's 6:45 p.m. Bus call for tonight's show in nearby Nice, in the south of France, isn't until 7. But this is how 50 Cent operates, so 20 minutes later, when his 40-man crew of fellow artists, assistants, handlers and security straggle into the lobby, no one expresses surprise. A couple of pounds are exchanged. A few nods and grunts.

50, no matter how far he has come, is still something of the boy from the neighborhood; only now he can take his neighborhood with him. Pulled together on relatively short notice—after coheadliner Eminem withdrew from plans for an extension of last summer's \$20-million-grossing Anger Management Tour—the Massacre Tour, G-Unit's monthlong spin through Europe, is something like a traveling thug-rap revue, a little piece of Queens, and beyond, for continental appraisal. There's Lloyd Banks and Young Buck, of course, long-standing and loyal affiliates (Tony Yayo, still on parole, isn't permitted to make the trip), and Olivia, who's been laying in wait to give G-Unit a woman's touch. And the veteran forces are now joined by a second line of attack—Mobb Deep and M.O.P., two groups not known for their easy allegiance, and Spider Loc, a surly Los Angeles Crip who stays hidden behind black sunglasses. In the hotel lobby waiting to board the buses, it's hard to tell old crew from new. 50 needles Banks about his diamond-encrusted Statue of Liberty pendant while Lil Fame looks on. Buck and Spider convene in a corner; just a few feet away, Havoc and Prodigy are sprawled on a couch.

Off in a corner, pecking away at the keyboard of the hotel's lobby computer, one of these crew members is not like the others. He looks toned, glowing even, with eyes that never seem to shut, even for a quick blink. He's watching everything, repeatedly glancing away from the screen before him to survey the scene. But when the group begins to file onto the buses, Pastor Mason Betha gets up

from his chair, slips on a big backpack, and falls into step with the rest.

Three years ago, 50 Cent was just another shooting victim with an assiduous mixtape hustle. One year later, "In Da Club"—a marvel of sonics, strategy and psychology—had catapulted him into a stratosphere of stardom once reserved solely for career artists. A year after that, he had introduced G-Unit, demonstrating that his success bought him not only fame, but power. And now, G-Unit is an army. No longer a collection of time-tested friends, it's now a wholesale enterprise, with different divisions, missions and loyalties that 50 has to manage. 50's a business, man.

One wonders, though, if he's overplaying his hand. G-Unit once delivered a consistent message. Now, where there once was one, there are many. Whether it's new ventures, new members, or new attitudes, 50's umbrella has had to grow ever wider to

accommodate. (Stretching the resources of his corporate sponsor, Interscope Records, at the same time.) But where other artists pretty themselves up to better negotiate the rarefied air their wealth allows them to access, there is nothing slick about 50 Cent. No pretense whatsoever.

He is, for lack of a better phrase, the poor man's rap mogul, almost determinedly blue collar in his demeanor. "I could give a fuck about it," he says, of being accepted by the old-guard aristocracy. "I can create my own lane. I find my value in other places. I don't want to be like, or dress like them. I don't want to eat at your banquets. I'm breaking the mold."

He says this, of course, while spending a brief, four-day sojourn in the south of France and Monaco. Monaco, a small principality on the southeast coast of France—where elegant homes ring the hills that overlook the arrestingly blue Mediterranean Sea—is the most densely populated country in the world.

"BY THE TIME I COME OUT, I'LL BE THE PRESIDENT OF G-UNIT RECORDS." —MA\$E



ALL CLOTHING BY G-UNIT CLOTHING

Monte Carlo—which is how the coastal areas of Monaco are referred to, even though the borders of the city and the country are the same—is a playground for Europe's wealthy classes, a combination of Madison Avenue, South Beach and the Las Vegas Strip.

But while he's here, despite the fact that he's fighting off a cold, 50 barely varies from his grueling work routine. Maybe it's a conscious rejection of his place and status—

ful for a lot longer than I've been successful, so I can still identify and relate to those feelings. It's been two years. All I can see is tour buses and airplanes and bitches in different cities, and I don't remember their names."

Run It back a decade, and the picture gets even blurrier. It was 1995, and Curtis Jackson didn't even know how to rap yet. Not for real, anyway. He was a fan of Snoop's *Doggystyle*;

Thanks to 50 Cent, who has leapfrogged all the rappers he used to idolize, it's a very significant footnote; still, by now, 50 is making global pop, not local rap.

For the class of '95, however, not much has changed. Mobb Deep and M.O.P. are still regional phenomena, and Ma\$e, after a rollicking career from the blacktop to shiny suits to the pulpit, is back to underdog status. No wonder they appeal to 50. "You become a crowd favorite and it's cool to reach back for the underdog," he says. "They've always had quality material—it just wasn't marketed properly."

Skeptics eye another reason for the signings. Are the new G-Unit acts, in effect, hired muscle? Ringers brought in to shore up 50's street base? A loss leader, a write-off on the balance sheet as he continues to dominate the pop charts? (Last April, 50 became the first artist since the Beatles to have four songs in the Top 10 of *Billboard's* Hot 100 in the same week.) That, or maybe 50's trying to get back in touch with his roots, a chance to relive his youth?

Says Havoc: "It's stupid to think something like that. He signed us to see his favorite groups do better than what they was doing. Like, I wanna give them a shot that they deserve."

Says Lil Fame: "How much more street credibility does the man need?"

Says 50: "I enjoy Mobb Deep and fuckin' M.O.P. Is there a problem with that?"

A 50 Cent and G-Unit show in Europe is much like one in the States: a global commodity prized for its reliability. On this run, G-Unit has cut an unusually wide path through the continent, playing not only primary markets like London, Rome and Paris, but also less-likely outlets like Glasgow, Marseille and Zurich. The tour opened in Venice with a private party in connection with the Venice Film Festival. Footing the bill were the sons of Libyan dictator Muammar el-Qaddafi, Saadi and Moatassim.

The night before the crew arrived in Monte Carlo, they played a show to 18,000 people in Lisbon, the capital of Portugal, reported to be the country's largest hip-hop concert ever. "18,000 people attended," 50 says. "And they only had sold 13,000 copies of my CD in the whole country. I went to be there because of that. When they see my performance, there's excitement. I'm all over the newspapers. They have to cover it—it's an event."

Once upon a time, riding the freakish allure of nine shots, 50 was hip-hop's greatest sensationalist. Now, he's its leading pragmatist. He's become the type of artist who speaks in worldwide sales numbers as opposed to domestic, both because the figures are more impressive, and because he knows there's a market for what he sells far beyond America's hoods and suburbs.

At Nice's Palais Nikaïa, 5,600 fans have gathered for this rare taste of American hip-hop. The show is epic and unyielding, almost



L "I DIDN'T EVEN NEED NO PAPERWORK. ONCE WE TALKED TO 50, YOU KNOW YOU IN. IT'S LIKE, WHATEVER. G-UNIT, IT'S DEFINITELY A CHAPTER IN MY LIFE REGARDLESS, SO I JUST PUT IT ON MY HAND. I DON'T GIVE A F&#K. IF 50 GOT BEEF, I GOT BEEF." —HAVOC

its unrelenting street ethic matched with a masterful gift for melody. Death Row was running the show. But the L.A. haze was starting to dissipate, and New York rap was coming back into vogue. Out in Queens, Mobb Deep's Havoc and Prodigy were helping cement Queensbridge as the most foreboding locale in hip-hop since Compton. In Brooklyn,

M.O.P.'s Lil Fame and Billy Danzenie had built on the success of their breakout single "How About Some Hardcore" to establish themselves as the folk heroes of Brownsville. And in Harlem, a onetime high school basketball star rechristened himself Murder Ma\$e and set his sights on the rap game. Add the effect of Wu-Tang, Biggie and Nas on the streets, and New York was reclaiming its hip-hop birthright.

Fast-forward to the present day and almost nothing is the same. The South dominates hip-hop, and New York is but a footnote.

regardless of where he is, even in one of the world's most exclusive locales, 50 Cent will remain 50 Cent. Or maybe there's no choice. "Those people you consider wealthy or rich people," he says, by way of comparison, "they don't have bulletproof cars. But I'm content with where I'm at, and those things are not going to change based on how many records you sell or how big your movie is.

"The world is not fair, and if I could stay a step ahead of them, I can fulfill my intentions. I play less intelligent than I really am. If I can do it to get ahead, why not? I've been unsuccessful



90 minutes of steady hits, with a few dark album cuts thrown in for threatening effect. There isn't a moment when the artists onstage—whether they be 50 and Banks, Banks and Buck, M.O.P., 50 and Mobb Deep, etc.—fail to receive a king's welcome, though, perhaps not surprisingly, some of the cultural particularities are lost. A White kid barely out of his single digits inexplicably screams "beeeeyotch" as 50 launches into "P.I.M.P." A thug-lite dude in a Tony Parker jersey starts a break-dance circle. A couple of 20-something girls, clearly weaned on music videos, improbably do the Yayo dance, hands twittering in front of their faces.

For the most part, though, the product itself doesn't require translation. Shows like this do not generally come to Nice, because up until now, there wasn't an ambassador for hip-hop who was famous enough. 50, Havoc says, is "a marketing genius who loves to promote and loves to shed light on situations." And indeed, it is 50's hope that after a night spent swooning over him, fans might also take some time to swoon over the guys who did "Quiet Storm." Or the ones who did "Ante Up." Or maybe even the guy who did his verse from "Mo' Money, Mo' Problems." With his imprimatur, he thinks he can restore Ma\$e to his former glory, however unlikely the association with G-Unit, and

turn Mobb Deep and M.O.P. into bankable international stars. He believes he could push a million copies, maybe two, of a new album from each. The former duo has gone platinum just once, with 1999's *Murda Musik*. The latter, despite a couple of unlikely crossover hits, has never even gone gold. "They can look for an album from Mobb Deep that's held to the standards that Eminem and Dr. Dre set for 50 Cent," he says. "I won't put out a record on any of them that I feel wouldn't be good enough for me to put out."

This is better than good news for the veteran artists, who have each been beset with an array of label difficulties frustrating enough to have sent lesser men to early retirement. M.O.P. and Mobb Deep were fired in the cauldrons of, respectively, Relativity and Loud Records—labels that, for the better part of the '90s, had the market cornered on projects-savvy NYC hip-hop, but not crossover success. M.O.P. are pure adrenaline, as close as hip-hop gets to heavy metal. When they signed with Roc-A-Fella in 2003, it seemed like they might finally be

something more than cult favorites. But in the midst of Jay-Z and Damon Dash's quibbles, they were left out to dry. "We did our part," says Fame. "But Roc-A-Fella was weak. We heard the rumors, but we never asked questions. Next thing you know, they split up, and we were just sitting there with a perfect album. 50 being CEO of a company, it's dope that we can call him, 3 in the morning, and he come to my room. Jay-Z never did that."

Similarly, Havoc says, "We're not dealing with some stuffy CEO you gotta call three people just to get to." That was just the problem Mobb Deep encountered at Jive, the label they landed on after corporate restructuring swallowed Loud whole. After fighting with Jive brass over a marketing budget for their last album that never properly materialized, they found themselves in an ideal and unexpected position—dropped from the label. Less than a week later, 50 had phoned in his offer. The recording and video for "Outta Control (Remix)," which introduced Mobb as part of the G-Unit family, were completed even before the paperwork. Same goes for the cursive G-Unit tattoos that adorn the right hands of both Havoc and Prodigy. "I didn't even need no paperwork," says Hav. "Once we talked to 50, you know you in. It's like, whatever. G-Unit, it's definitely a chapter in my life regardless, so I just put it on my hand. I don't give a fuck. If 50 got beef, I got beef."

"It's a steamroller," says Prodigy. "Never get in the way or you'll be flattened."

M.O.P. are perhaps a touch less sanguine than their cohorts. "Far as any beef with any other artists, I don't know nothin' about no beef," says Billy Danze. "I don't know them

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other artists. I don't know nothin' about it."

Whether or not Mobb Deep and M.O.P. were recruited to be new warhorses, they join an already eager battalion. The war metaphor is often used euphemistically in hip-hop, but G-Unit takes it seriously. Young Buck refers to the power structure as a "chain of command." Spider Loc, the most recent rookie addition to the Unit, feels that it's 50's strengths as an individual that allow him to unite several strong-willed individuals. "For him to grab someone of my caliber who is not necessarily a follower-type individual—he knows my status and what

type of presence I hold—I have no problem being subordinate. I submit to the situation. This is the first time in my life I've been comfortable in calling myself a soldier."

Seen in this light, is Ma\$e then the G-Unit chaplain? A listen to "Check Cleared," his mixtape salvo that opens G-Unit DJ Whoo Kid's *G-Unit Radio Part 14: Back to Business*, would indicate that he has less Christian thoughts in mind for his return to the game. Diddy takes a shot, and so does Brandy. Safe targets? Sure. But Mase's path of righteousness will lead him in darker directions, he says. Alluding to his

president of G-Unit Records," he says. But it's going to take much more than one executive to manage the G-Unit release schedule, which 50 swears will include releases from each and every crew member by the end of 2006.

That said, 2005 wasn't the easiest year for G-Unit. Only four projects were released—the two versions of 50's *The Massacre*, the *Get Rich or Die Tryin'* soundtrack and Tony Yayo's *Thoughts of a Predicate Felon*. And by company standards, Yayo's album has to be considered a disappointment. While it moved 210,000 units in its first week, two months

This tour, then, is crucial in that regard, the first chance for the new hands to mingle with the long-timers. By all accounts, it has been a blessed arrangement. "Brothers from another mother," says Buck. While Banks lauds the years of experience the new additions bring to the team. "They've been doing this for years," he says. "So when they come around, it's not the arrogant attitude you get from a new rapper. It's more of the wisdom. Not only do you have that support onstage, but off the stage, too."

That's spilled over to the recording booth, where new collaborations are already taking



former friends Cam'ron and Jim Jones, with whom he's openly feuded in the last year, Mase says, "Most people come at people with cheap shots. I'm not coming with cheap shots. The truth about you is, we're both not gangsters, but the world only think I'm not a gangster. You never hear people say that."

Presenting himself as the antithug is slick strategy. And when Mase talks about it, he sells it, staring down his inquisitor with almost awkward fervor. The man who refers to his Bad Boy comeback album, last year's *Welcome Back*, as "boxing with my hands tied" still wants to preach, but wants to be somewhere where yin and yang coexist. At press time, Mase's paperwork had yet to be finalized, though onstage and in photo shoots, the pass-down G-Unit spinner everyone sports when they first join the crew now adorns his neck.

Fact is, G-Unit doesn't face a music challenge as much as it faces a management challenge. Mase has vision beyond the recording booth—"By the time I come out, I'll be the

later, sales stood at 400,000, making it the first of G-Unit's eight offerings not to go platinum. The problem? "So Seductive," the lead single, failed to ignite everywhere it was supposed to, costing the project invaluable support from parent company Interscope. "The company is not used to a record not automatically responding from G-Unit and 50 Cent," says 50. "So when it didn't respond in certain markets, they didn't react properly. We've never [before] been in a situation where we had to change a record." It's possible, too, that with 50 himself pulled in so many directions simultaneously—he spent much of last summer in Toronto filming *Get Rich or Die Tryin'* with acclaimed director Jim Sheridan—his artists will have to rely on each other as much as they do their boss.

"I'M GOING TO BE ON MOBB DEEP'S AND M.O.P.'S ALBUMS. I'LL BE PRESENT, AND M.O.P. FANS AND MOBB DEEP FANS, IF THEY WEREN'T ALREADY, I WANT THEM TO BECOME A LLOYD BANKS FAN." —LLOYD BANKS

place at a prodigious clip. "We're workaholics," says Olivia. "Sometimes even after the shows, we'll go back and get in the studio bus and record right after we get off the show."

And if that creates a backlog of material, well, no one on the bus is complaining. This is an organization that has put out three full mixtapes of all-new material, 20 songs each, during the span of the two tours. "50 never moves without a plan," Buck says. "I was man enough to come into the game under his plan and be a part of it and be successful. So what if my album was to come third or fourth?"

According to 50, the new members will indeed get priority. "Mobb Deep, M.O.P.," he says, "the new groups, they have to get special attention." But rather than see that as an obstacle, the more established G-Unit artists see nothing but potential. "I'm going to be on Mobb Deep's and M.O.P.'s albums," says Banks. "I'll be present, and M.O.P. fans and Mobb Deep fans, if they weren't already, I want them to become a Lloyd Banks fan."

If 50 has his way this upcoming year, every six weeks will see a new G-Unit release. He

50 Cent is the type of person who, though he remains on top, sees slights everywhere. He has VH1 Soul blocked out on his cable system at home because they don't play his records, even though other rappers get their ass-friendly collabos aired. At the MTV Video Music Awards in August, only he and Snoop Dogg had off-site trailers. And worse, MTV held his portion of the show until late in the evening, making him sit through an onstage jab from Fat Joe, who thanked G-Unit for the police presence at the venue. "The police presence isn't there to pro-

"I can work against everyone feeling like I'm supposed to fail," says 50, "because originally that's the position that I come from." Which might explain why, six years after the take-no-prisoners bid for recognition "How to Rob," five years since he and Ja Rule duked it out at the Hit Factory, 50 is still preoccupied with those who are preoccupied with him. He brings up his falling out with The Game unsolicited, just as he does during his concerts, either still smarting from it or trying to prove he's not. "I was disappointed at not only my



“I SUBMIT TO THE SITUATION. THIS IS THE FIRST TIME IN MY LIFE I’VE BEEN COMFORTABLE IN CALLING MYSELF A SOLDIER.”
—SPIDER LOC

has intimated that that might require a unique arrangement with Interscope, one where G-Unit records are worked to radio and video through a different pipeline than records from the rest of the company. For now, though, he wants to give the little-conglomerate-that-could a chance.

"Interscope is absolutely ready," he says, before flexing his power a bit. "They have to move things if they're not. If I'm batting a thousand, you going to make me sit on the bench? If it's not Dre's shit or Em's shit in the pipeline, I could give a fuck about it. Otherwise, I have writer's block. I said it. If my album is the best-selling record this year, if that don't buy chips, what does?"

tect me from them. The police presence is there to protect them from me," 50 says dryly, the boast so familiar that it hardly matters whether or not it's true. "They clowns, man. Sometimes when kids touch things, you gotta spank their hand and say don't do that." There were rumors of a backstage scuffle between G-Unit and Terror Squad that night, but Tony Yayo, on the phone from New York, puts it plainly: "Fat Joe? He did the Mookie Wilson. Ran out of there."

50 even sees the recent release of court papers detailing the plot hatched by onetime Queens drug lord and Murder Inc. associate Kenneth "Supreme" McGriff to have him killed as a means of trafficking on his notoriety. "Regardless where they pick a juror from, the juror knows 50 Cent," he says, analyzing the prosecution's strategy. "And they'll understand this is the kind of person they need to keep off the street." (There's no love lost between 50 and 'Preme. "They should let him out," says 50, "so he can die in the street like he's supposed to. If he could touch down in the street and find out what the difference between 50 Cent without finances is, and the new me...")

judgment, but Dr. Dre's judgment," he says, ruing the decision to join Dre in executive producing the Compton upstart's album, *The Documentary*, and lend his expert hand in hook writing. "Me and Dre don't really speak about it much. There's nothing really to talk about. Dre is the best producer I ever worked with in my life, and you know what? His beats wouldn't have sold that kid's album."

But the album did sell, 2.2 million copies to be precise. And though its profits have helped line 50's coffers, it's also made his former protégé famous. And confident to boot. Game's taken aim at G-Unit on a mixtape cut "300 Bars and Runnin'," and with a persistent, if bizarre, G-Unit campaign.

Of course, Game's not alone in his dissent. Though 50 once immortalized the crew in song ("All the other hard niggas, they come from Yonkers," he proclaimed on 2003's "Back Down"), it seems like every couple of weeks D-Block unloads another volley in G-Unit's direction. This even as the two key D-Block members, Jadakiss and Styles, languish on Interscope, which seems to be very much 50's house.

"If I wasn't Tony Yayo, I probably would diss G-Unit, too," says Yayo, with characteris-

WITNESS LIFE IN DIFFERENT HOODZ ACROSS AMERICA

Hoodz
STREET GAME

YOUNG JEEZY
Fighting & Boring (and
the streets of Atlanta)

HOODZ XCLUSIVES
...the streets of Atlanta
...the streets of Atlanta
...the streets of Atlanta

BABY & SLIM
THE RESPONSE TO THE STREET

HOODZ TO HOODZ
WITNESS LIFE IN DIFFERENT HOODZ

**TRAP STARZ - GANGSTAZ
HUSTLAZ - HOOD LEGENDZ**

Hoodz
HOODS FROM THE STREETS

CHAMILLIONAIRE
The streets of Atlanta

BOSTON O.G.'Z WAGE WAR
VS. ...

EMINEMZ ARCH RIVAL BENZINO
HOODZ XCLUSIVES
...the streets of Atlanta
...the streets of Atlanta
...the streets of Atlanta

HOODZ TO HOODZ!
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tic bluster and self-effacing charm. "If I was broke in the hood, doing nothing, man, that's how people are. My road manager got more money than Styles. Do the background check, man. Are they purchasing?"

At some recent shows in New York, 50 was met less than warmly by the crowd, indicating that a backlash might be brewing not only within the industry, but without. Even if that materializes, though, current G-Unit Records president Sha Money XL expects 50 to persevere. "He wins even when it's not him winning," he says. "He wins when Banks wins. He wins when Mobb and M.O.P. come out and go platinum and fuck the whole game up. [The people] ain't tired of him, they're just tired of his success. He's like the horse that you can't even bet on no more because he done won too many races and you can't get in on his races."

Banks sums up the camp's attitude: "Being honest with you, the only thing that can stop G-Unit is G-Unit."

After the show is over, while the rest of the crew gets dressed, 50 is escorted to a small van for the ride back to the hotel. A few women who have finagled their way backstage are held at bay by security.

"50, we take picture!" one says, with a heavy French accent and even heavier enthusiasm.

"Yes!" 50 replies, teasing. "Take pictures!" No pictures will be taken.

A few minutes later, the remaining vehicles load up. The lone path out of the arena, though, cuts directly in front of the main exit, so the remaining buses are intercepted by swarms of hyper fans craning for a peek at the star—who, of course, by now is long gone. At the end of the path, there's a traffic light stuck on red, which leaves the bus in full view, prone.

By definition, mobs are irrational, but that doesn't mitigate the sensation of being on the receiving end of one's frenzy. Young Frenchmen (they are, for the most part, young men) begin howling at the bus. And then pushing. And, after just a few moments, they have opened the bus' back hatch, where there are some supplies and some food. Soon, these things are airborne, chucked at the bus' tinted windows in a strange attempt to...communicate?

Here, again, is a language barrier of a more troubling nature. Under attack, the men of G-Unit do what comes naturally, they strike



"IF I WASN'T TONY YAYO, I PROBABLY WOULD DISS G-UNIT, TOO. IF I WAS BROKE IN THE HOOD, DOING NOTHING, MAN, THAT'S HOW PEOPLE ARE." —TONY YAYO

back. (Though not before taking off their jewelry and leaving it on the bus.) Of course, once the handful of angry rappers disembark and look around to see who want what, it becomes abundantly clear that, in fact, no one wants anything other than one more glimpse of 50.

Which is impossible. He's already halfway back to his hotel room. When he gets there, he intends to find some Emergen-C to ward off the cold he always seems on the verge of having these days. And mere hours later, while the rest of the crew sleeps it off, and by the time *Nice-Matin*, the city's main daily newspaper, appears on newsstands splayed with the headline "50 Cent survitaminé au Nikaïa" ("A supercharged 50 Cent at the Nikaïa"), he will already be awake, pouring himself into another van, beginning another day of work. He'll be early, as usual, and for the most part, alone. ♠