THE CHRONIC

He ain't the big, bad wolf, but Canibus sure knows how to huff and puff. And he'll definitely tear your house down.

"I'd rather be a lion for a day/than a lamb that lives forever."
–CANIBUS, on a DJ Clue mixtape freestyle

The MC. Master of Ceremonies. Motivator of Crowds. While becoming the top DJ was all of the rage in hip hop's humble beginnings, the MC has evolved to represent all this rebel culture can signify. Intelligence. Resistance. Masculinity. Femininity. Creativity. Rage. All wrapped up in a B-boy stance. Transforming the English language into slangology. Telling the tales of the underprivileged—it costs nothing to pen the pain of people who have been deemed useless. A DJ can play records to make us dance, cry and celebrate, but who can recreate the tumultuous, complex, beautiful experience of ghetto children in song form? The MC. That's why he shines as a hero to all who understand—and feel—that of which he speaks.

What do all the best, most memorable MCs possess? Wisdom. Skill. Knowledge. Mystique. And a fuck-you attitude. Soul, style and genius. Tight flow, great timing, rhythmic delivery. Dope voice, exceptional inflection, perfect clarity and volume. Your showmanship and freestyle ability have to be on point, and it ain't easy. There are grueling testing grounds—most lie in the heart.

Canibus, hip hop's newest super rapper, has plenty of heart; it's the hardware he's been without. "It's a jail cell," contemplates the lyrical analyst, "The paper. The lines and the margins become a jail cell." However, this new jack king of rap is properly outfitted for the 21st century now. "I got an IBM ThinkPad," he says. "It's one of the fastest ones." Cani's not trying to be a step behind *anyone*. And while he wants to be able to hit all rap music devotees, he insists he has a certain group in his sights. "Intellectuals," Canibus says, "is who I want to kick a conversation to."

Early on, Canibus' extraordinary rhyming sent a tremendous buzz through hip hop. Before blazing the mixtape scene with nitro freestyles and spittin' on The Lost Boys' sizzling 1997 underground single, "Beast from the East" featuring Redman and A+, Canibus was a surprise guest on the soundtrack for the 1997 documentary *Rhyme & Reason*. Performing solely on the strength of Ras Kass' faith in him, the hungry artist flowed viciously with the likes of Ras Kass and Heltah Skeltah on "Uni-4-orm." Ras even caught a bit of heat from Priority Records for sneaking in the young upstart. "Nobody knew who he was," Ras explains, "but niggas trusted my judgement, 'cause I said he was nice."

A mercenary on the mic, Canibus made a name for himself by lyrically twisting heads and wearing out countless rewind buttons with his otherworldly metaphors.

datwon thomas · piotr sikora

1969 TRIUMPH CHOPPER PROVIDED BY PAUL COX OF COXCO CUSTOM LEATHER IN NYC: MODEL: DANIA; STYLIST: MEGA DON

But such braggadocio and I'm-the-nicest banter has its price. The same elements that make the perfect MC attract the vultures.

Take, for example, the 1961 *Twilight Zone* episode "A Game of Pool." Jack Klugman portrays Jesse Cardiff, a pool fanatic who longs to challenge deceased pool champion Fats Brown to prove that he, Cardiff, is the greatest player ever. So the late king of the cue balls (played by Jonathan Winters) returns from the valley of death to face his opponent. After a grueling match, Cardiff, one shot from victory, ignores Brown's warning about the consequences of winning. Cardiff hits the shot, then dies—only to become a ghost who must travel the earth, accepting challenges from countless aspiring champions. Brown, conquered, happily ascends into heaven, his curse of perfection broken.

Change the channel to NYC. Webster Hall. At the 2nd Annual John Lennon Songwriter's Contest Awards, free drinks, hors d'oeuvres and a festive Asian theme make for the perfect afterwork event. Salt-N-Pepa and Wyclef Jean and the Refugee All-Stars are headlining. A distressed Canibus is pollyin' hard to get one of his boys into the tightly-secured event. "Yo, I'm in but my man's outside," he gripes, trying to sway an overwrought security nigga. "What I got to do, give him my laminate?" Homeboy's not feeling him. Canibus rolls his eyes and turns toward me. I extend my right hand to him: "What up, Canibus? I did the piece on you and L in XXL." Immediately his eyes snap to attention, a stone-crumbling glare. He juts his diminutive body toward mine, which is damn-near identical in size. Our noses are tip-to-tip. "Word?" he roars angrily. "I ain't like that shit!"

Damn. I stand my ground, unshaken, with his brolic bodyguard looming. After I inquire why, Canibus stutters, trying to explain his sentiments. "I, I, I...I mean, it's wack," he laments. "Those niggas don't have anything to do with the battle, and they speakin' on it. It just creates a certain atmosphere that ain't right." Hmmm. You make one of the hottest battle records ever—aimed at a living legend—and expect the world to listen and *not* comment? "Yeah, but ["Second Round K.O."] was something personal that I had to get off my chest," he says. But it was made for the masses, true? Looking up at the ceiling, he answers. "Yeah, I know. Sometimes I ponder if I should have done the shit or not." In the same breath, though, he spits with venom, "but [LL] disrespected me as a man, so I had to do it."

A dark-skinned cat approaches on the shady. "What up, Canibus?" he offered, pounds out. Love is exchanged, then the kid yells, "What up now, nigga!?!?" on some "Let's battle" shit. "You that kid from upstairs," mulls Canibus. "Didn't I tell you I'm not here for that shit tonight?" An altercation ensues, and security rushes over. After a few heated words, calm is restored. "See what I was talking about?" Canibus asks, shaking his head. "I go through it every day." He and his bodyguard then walk toward the exit, as if nothing had happened. Later, Canibus and Wyclef tear the house down.

Even before the LL fray, the life of 23-year-old Germaine "Canibus" Williams seemed like a continuous series of battles. The eldest of two sons, he dealt with confrontation after confrontation as a shorty growing up all over. D.C. Atlanta. Jamaica. London. New Jersey. Epic battles with the locals are the basis of all the aggression in his mind-twisting rhymes. "All I used to do was fight," he says with a long face, "Every day, just fightin' with niggas 'cause I was different."

Canibus describes himself then as a recluse. His mother Elaine's administrative position with a housing project company led to the constant moving, which prevented his getting close to neighborhood children. "My mom's company would give bonuses to the person who would pick up their family and go where the company needed the most help," he explained. "Single-parent home. We needed the dough, so wherever they sent her, that's where we lived."

Developing those social skills at a young age is crucial. Feeling out of sync, Canibus started to try on different personalities. "I used to say to myself, 'You gonna go as a thug this year and see what happens,'" he remembers, "I'd not brush my teeth, not comb my hair—I let it dread up and the whole nine. The next time I tried to go to school dipped everyday. I did my little jobs to get dough," he fondly recalls, "had my hot kicks, fly gear, all of that, until my dough started getting low."

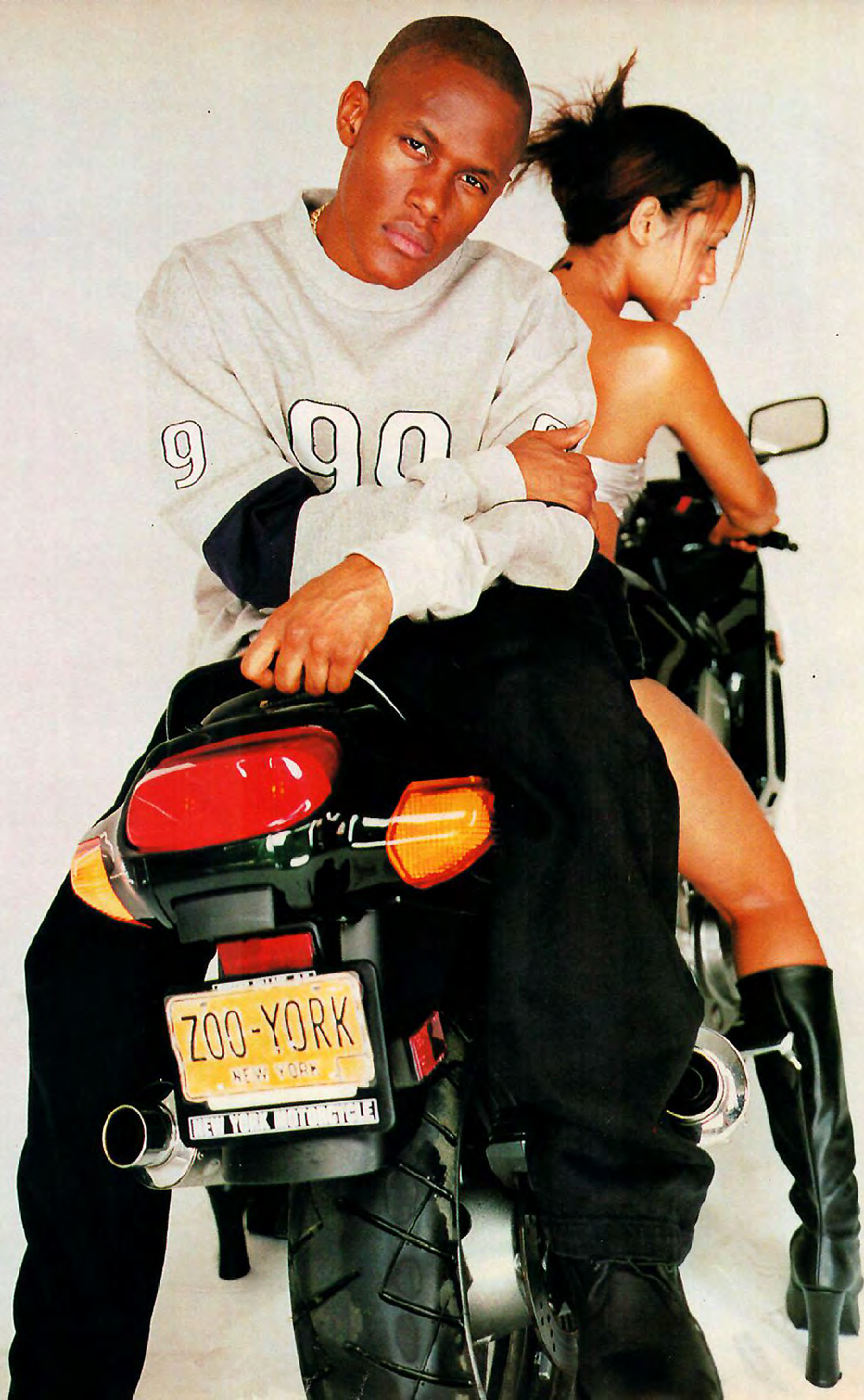
Misunderstood and lost in the shuffle of an identity crisis, Canibus turned to rhyming. It all started with his mom's helping him purchase his first boom box. "It was a Edison, yeah, I used to just sit in front of it and watch the E.Q. levels go up and down." He smiles. Unknowingly, his moms set him on the path to contentment. "She just knew that it would make me happy. She didn't know why," he says, his voice low, "but she helped me get something that she knew was important to me. That's why I love her so much."

NYC. Sun Studios. Ceiling-to-floor, the spacious loft is filled with photography accessories. Black velour backdrops. Huge rolls of white construction paper. Gigantic light stands. Mobb Deep's "Eye for an Eye," is blasting courtesy of Mr. Cheeks of the Lost Boys, the designated DJ for the day. A friendly game of C-Lo is in full effect over in the left corner, between a representative of Pure Playaz clothing, Cheeks, Moe, the bodyguard from Webster Hall and two other cats. The Group Home fam is in full attendance, chillin'. Stylists are running ragged, trying to appease Canibus' fickle tastes.

"I'm afraid that no matter what my accomplishments are, I'll go down in history for 'Second Round K.O.'"

Five days before the shoot, Canibus had called. "I want the shoot at a heliport, and I want the shots to be of me on the open door area, facing the inside of the helicopter, while we are in the air," he had said, as serious as a heart attack. "Then I want a real fly girl with me on a motorcycle. But the girl has to be fly, and I want a hot-ass motorcycle."

Unfortunately, with tight budgets on both magazine and label ends, Idea Man can't have that picture. Instead, Cani has to settle for a chopper—a burgundy, semi-rusted, road-battered, 1969 Triumph. But all isn't lost. Mr. Cheeks brought out—from his personal collection of motorcycles—a money green ZX 600 Kawasaki Ninja. The bike's headlight damn near blinds the photographer.


ZOO-YORK
NEW YORK

Gripping the cycle's handlebars, Canibus calls to Cheeks, "YO CHEEKS! How you turn the lights off?" Cheeks raises his eyebrows, yells back, over the blaring music, "OFF?! OFF?!"

Cani nods, and Cheek answers, "Turn the key off!" Cani searches in vain. Cheek jokingly says under his breath, "Turn the key, muthafuc... " and then blurts out on his way to help, "That's one thing about Canibus—he don't know how to ride no bike!"

Charles Suitt, CEO of Group Home, Canibus' label, vividly recalls meeting Canibus, circa 1995. "When I met Canibus, I had The Lost Boys, but they weren't signed yet," he says, digging into his grilled chicken platter. "This barber out in Atlanta knew me and my partner Big Tiz, who's locked down right now, and hooked us up with Canibus." Their relationship took a while to gel, because Canibus came to them, as Suitt points out, "on some real different shit, like, I couldn't explain it. I just knew he was different." Cheeks co-signs: "I know he a skinny little nigga. But that nigga powerful, though. He got heart. He got the balls for this."

It takes more than a tough set of nuts to survive the ratchet world of rap, especially when you're shown no money early on in the game. BJ Kerr, president of Atlanta-based Patchwerk Recordings, remembers when all Canibus had was a dollar, a dream and an ill rhyme partner. "He used to be in a group called T.H.E.M. [*The Heralds of Extreme Metaphors*]," recalls Kerr, who almost signed them. "His partner was this kid named Webb. Webb is dope as fuck too. He's right there with Canibus."

Canibus attended Dekalb Community College and worked odd jobs, but his life was all about beats and rhymes. "Canibus would come to the crib after work at 5 p.m. and wouldn't leave 'til like six the next morning. Straight rhyming, straight making beats," insists Webb (now C.I. a.k.a. Central Intelligence) from Atlanta. The two met through Webb's cousin Pat out in D.C. Pat called Webb and told him about the lyrically-advanced Canibus, who was moving to Atlanta. "You always hear cats are ill," Webb insisted, "so I was like, 'Yeah, yeah, send him through.' But then when he spit, he was definitely ill."

In late 1995, the two decided to make a run at the rap industry. T.H.E.M. performed at the 1996 Gavin convention and shocked Charles Suitt by presenting him with a tight 18-song demo, made in two and a half months. The project was constructed solely by the two, on Ensoniq EPS 16 and ASR 10 beat machines, played through the headphones of a four-track. "Suitt was like, 'Y'all definitely did y'all thing,'" Webb assures.

The determined young rappers' training was vigorous. "We'd pull out the physics book and throw a word out. Like, 'Canibus, take *radioactive*. What you gonna do with that?' And he would come up and hit me with a word," Webb recollects. "It used to get wild." Wild but useful. One night, the wonder twins of rhyme battled the Wu-Tang Clan and their extended family in a parking lot outside of a popular Atlanta nightclub in Stone Mountain. "First, it was just RZA and Rae. They just wanted to see what we had," Webb says. As the two proved to be formidable opponents, RZA called in the cavalry. "U-God spit, then we spit, Sunz of Man spit, then we spit." Webb gets hype at the memory. "After we knew, it was like 100 people surrounding us." With Meth, Ghost and the rest of the Clan in attendance, the crowd wanted to know who these kids hanging verse for verse with the Wu were, until "they brought Killah Priest in," Webb sighs. Priest kicked a wicked six-minute freestyle that capsized the duo. But respect was given nonetheless.

"In rhyming battles, Canibus was extremely aggressive. He memorized like 40 rhymes," Webb reminisces. "I died at about 23." Patchwerk's Kerr vouches for Canibus' relentless rhyming prowess. "In the booth, the nigga cuts the lights off, has candles burning in the dark, just snapping." Before that, he's in the hallway pacing like a lion in a cage, eyes closed, with his Walkman on blast—like a fighter in the training room, getting ready.

Although T.H.E.M. may have been the perfect combination of Canibus' fierce punchline battle verses and Webb's space-age lyrical complexity, all good things come to an end. "Unfortunately, about a year ago a third party got involved," Webb shrugs, "and made it seem like I was sayin' stuff about Canibus behind his back. We haven't even spoken since that day it went down. It's really over some nonsense." Asked later about his old partner, Canibus spits, "What you trying to get at? It's obvious that things happened if the nigga ain't around, right?"

Mid-Manhattan. Universal Records. 7th floor. Group Home's unfurnished new offices. I'm being entertained by Alex Andino, general manager of Group Home Entertainment (Canibus' position before getting signed), GH's stunning artist Tiye Phoenix and some Universal representatives. A visibly-weary Canibus arrives in a gray Gap pullover, black stone-washed jeans and black suede Tims and shoos away the entourage. "Okay," he grunts. "Talk to me."

Last fall, on the opening night of Puffy's restaurant, Justin's, Jay-Z advised the young mix-tape terror "to be prepared for what he was getting into." Canibus was actually rendered speechless for a moment: "I didn't know how to respond to that. I didn't want to come off as if I knew what he was saying, and I didn't want to seem like I *didn't* know. It was ill." What's iller is that it was the Roc-A-Fella don who also pulled Wyclef's coat at the event, and introduced him to Canibus. "I know you know who this is, right?" Jigga rhetorically asked Clef. That very night, Wyclef invited Canibus to rhyme on the remix of Clef's red-hot "Gone 'Til November" from his acclaimed solo opus, *The Carnival*. After a few more cameos, Canibus became a full-fledged member of Clef's Refugee All-Stars. "That nigga Clef didn't know me from anywhere and took me under his wing," Canibus reflects, "and took me around the world."

After a hearty hour of strolling down Memory Lane, our conversation naturally goes toward the LL conflict, and Canibus becomes agitated. This interview is suppose to be on some different shit, but who is gonna pass up the opportunity to find out about this historic battle from one of its participants? Not me. And in a naturally flowing conversation with no ill intentions, I unknowingly fire the cannon: "What was your initial reaction to LL's 'The Ripper Strikes Back?'"

"All I used to do was fight. Every day, just fightin' 'cause I was different."

Showtime. "Yo, you making this battle shit the bulk of the interview!" Canibus snarls. With over an hour's worth of tape on topics ranging from family and dolphins to technology and Bill Gates, I reply, "No, I'm not." While members of the Group Home staff creep around corners to witness what's happening, Canibus steps into Drama 101. "Well, if you want to know, read all of the other publications that did the same bullshit!" In debate mode, I retort, "How do I know what they print is correct? I need the background information straight from the source—you." Rising from his slouched position, he exclaims, "No, you don't! You just like the rest of them! You're a chameleon! You trying to trap me by talking about my childhood all nice, then bringing up this bullshit! I told you I didn't want to talk about this shit!"

At this point, Canibus ain't trying to hear a brotha. Fists clenched, he springs out of his chair towards me, chest all pumped up. Still sitting, I'm unfazed. Canibus is ranting and raving. "Word? You want to talk about something else now?!" Blood pressure bubbling, he grabs my tape recorder, which is resting on a partition above me. Still popping shit, he yanks out the tape, sets down the recorder, storms to his seat and stares me in the face. Just as I think to myself, "This nigga is trippin'," he places the tape between his hands like a sandwich and applies pressure. "Ugh!" His first try at breaking the tape is unsuccessful. "Ugghh!" Second go-round barely cracks the frame. On his third press, my tape is smashed to bits and thrown near a corner. "Now let's see if you still want to talk," he sneers. I'm heated as hell, but I bark, "Yeah, I still want to talk, but the interview is blown the fuck up now!"

With his label's staff and various crew niggas present but trying not to intervene, Canibus and I experience an extremely tense cooling-down period. After justifying our reasons for reacting wildly, we realize the things that make us alike. Both young Black professionals. Both writers, sharing a love for new technology. Both living hip hop at it's *highest* levels. Both under tremendous pressure. And both with a "little man complex." "Niggas like you and me are too similar to be going at each other, man," Canibus sighs. "A nigga could only speak on a topic but so much. After a while, that shit drains your life force."

Like a true-blue survivalist, Canibus attacks when cornered—not only in his feud with LL, but with every challenge. Imagine a brick wall behind you and a Mack truck coming full speed in your direction. For him, the brick wall equates to his hype-driven, highly-anticipated first album, *Can-I-Bus?*, and the Mack truck is everything else. But he only fears one thing: "I'm afraid that no matter what my accomplishments are, I'll go down in history for 'Second Round K.O.'"

No need to worry. This groundbreakin' debut is hip hop at its most creative and experimental. Tracks like "How Deep" take your mind on a quantum leap back to 1987, when Canibus was breakdancing with a crew called The Last Platoon. He even answers the questions that Q-Tip raised on "What?" from A Tribe Called Quest's *The Low End Theory*. Being the self-proclaimed supreme lyrical machine, Cani ventures out to dangerous territory on "The Grand Deception," a list of conspiracy theories in rhyme form, and "Rip Rock," a foolhardy attempt at blending hip hop and heavy metal, Run-DMC style. The sublime "Get Retarded" finds Canibus verbally bashing wack MCs over a neck-snapping old school drum pattern and staccato guitar strums. And don't sleep on "Hypnitis," a phat "Vapors" for the new millennium.

As evidenced by his coarse exterior and cocky temperament, Canibus is one MC who has hip hop by the throat, and he won't let go 'til he feels like it. "We are born into resistance, live through resistance, and we die in resistance," he says. And you can expect Canibus to carry on with the heart of a lion.

King of Pain

R. Kelly's songs win Grammys, his albums go platinum and the ladies love him like his name was Cool J.

So why isn't he happier?

Soul singers are not your ordinary breed of entertainer.

WORDS Tonya Pendleton IMAGES Sandro Miller

"We can all get to crying if we really get deep into what we used to do when we didn't have nothing.

That's when collard greens, black-eyed peas, summer nights, crickets and things like that was what I was all about."

If music is indeed a balm for troubled spirits, then soul music is a full-blown ministry—the blood, sweat and tears of the artists coalescing into the bittersweet brew that serves as the salve for our psychic wounds. So, of course soul singers have their struggles, because without suffering like the rest of us, they couldn't do what they do.

To the public, celebrity is all good, but to be a Black celebrity is very difficult. Picture experiencing the envy of all the broke motherfuckers who didn't have your drive or your talent. Imagine being betrayed by a woman that you thought loved you for you. Envision having to watch your back constantly because even your mom, dad or best friends could be plotting against you. Publicly, you must be a star and look like one. You must somehow still walk the fine line between fame and commonality. Move out of the neighborhood, and people scoff at your isolation. Stay in the 'hood and run the risk of getting robbed, 'hated or harassed.

This is Robert Kelly's story.

Kelly's dreams began in the projects on Chicago's South Side, where gangbangers live beside working-class families. He was shy and describes himself as a "dark-skinned kid with nappy hair," one of four children raised by his mother Joann, who died of cancer five years ago.

"We can all get to crying if we really get deep into what we used to do when we didn't have nothing," Kelly says now. "That's when it was real. That's when collard greens, black-eyed peas, summer nights, crickets and things like that was what I was all about. I had a great ghetto life. The only thing I can do is try to make my music remind others of those days. I try to make my music feel like home."

Greatness was thrust upon Kelly, a gift from a power much larger than himself. But being chosen can be both a blessing and a curse. Kelly's patented dark glasses are a tool to hide his soul from the critical world. Even when the shades are in his pocket, the mask remains. Occasional glimpses of the man peek through it—unexpected humor, a devilish flash in his eyes—but then he's gone. He says and does all the right things, playing a role he thinks everyone wants to see.

Tonight, Kelly is at Chicago's Columbia College, a music school that's honoring his mentor, Lena McClin. The school's Urban Music Association, which helps young people achieve their dreams of music star-

dom, has organized the dinner, and about 50 Black students attend, dressed in their Sunday best. Awards are given, speeches are made and tears fall. Kelly was once one of these young people, hopeful and excited. Now he is a veteran, a survivor of the vicissitudes of public life.

"It was the most awesome thing that happened in my life," he says of McClin's music class. "It was a stepping stone to where I am today." McClin beams proudly as Kelly presents her with a large platinum plaque that commemorates four million sales of his third album, 1995's *R. Kelly*. "You've been everything to me," he says to McClin. "You are everything to me, and you'll always be everything to me."

At 29, R. Kelly may be the preeminent R&B star of his generation, achieving both mainstream success and ghetto respect. Since his first album *Born into the 90's* (with Public Announcement) was released in 1992 with the hits "Honey Love" and "Slow Dance," Kelly has dominated the charts. His subsequent release, *12 Play*, with its salacious hits "Bump and Grind," "Sex Me" and "Your Body's Calling," sold 2.8 million copies. In 1994, he produced "Age Ain't Nothing But a Number" for then 15-year-old Aaliyah, his manager's niece; its platinum sales further established him as a one-man hit factory.

When it was rumored that the two had married later that year (a marriage certificate was published in *Vibe*), the ensuing scandal may have hurt Kelly's repuation, but it hardly stalled his career. He worked with Michael Jackson, writing and co-producing the No. 1 single "You Are Not Alone" in 1995, before releasing his self-titled third album, which spawned the smash "Keep it on the Down Low." When asked by Michael Jordan to do a song for *Space Jam*, Kelly wrote "I Believe I Can Fly," a crossover hit that earned him three Grammys. He's produced hits for Toni Braxton, Mary J. Blige, Vanessa Williams, the Isley Brothers and others, and lent vocals to songs and remixes for Nas, Wyclef and Biggie.

"I think R. Kelly will go down as the giant of this era," says writer Nelson George, author of *The Death of Rhythm and Blues*. "He's become a real songwriter. He's gotten better as he's gotten away from hip-hop and become more influenced by other traditions. He's been a huge, huge star who's just now coming into his own. R. Kelly has the chance to be the next Lionel Richie and write anthemic music that people will sing at their weddings."

In high school, Kelly was only thinking about being the next Jordan. Enter Lena McClin, a music teacher for 36 years. "The little guy entered my room very interested in basketball," she says. "The Lord showed me that he was Stevie Wonder. He said no, and I put sunglasses on him and said, 'You're in the talent show in two weeks.'"

Kelly smiles at the memory. It's way beyond the midnight hour, and he's in the Chicago studio where he spends most of his time, recording the music he constantly hears in his head. In a throaty Chicago twang, he recalls how, at the time, he was starting for Kenwood High's basketball team. His mother was a singer who often coached him around the house, but he had no idea of his true talents. On the first day of school of freshman year, he was sitting in a noisy classroom when McClin started playing music. And then she spotted Kelly.

"She stopped playing gospel chords on the piano and told me to come here," Kelly remembers. "I thought, this lady is weird. She's tripping, playing gospel in school. It let me know that in music there are no rules. Whatever you feel you want to do, you do it. She called me up, and said, 'Do you know who you are?' I said, 'Yeah, I know.' And the class laughed. She said, 'Who are you?' I said, 'I'm Robert Kelly.'" As he talks, Kelly sounds like that little smartass South Side kid. "She said, 'Nah. You're the next Stevie Wonder.' I'm bugging, everybody's cracking up. She said, 'I want you to sing me a song.' I said 'What? You know me?' She said, 'Yeah. Do you know you?' She's putting her hand over her mouth, laughing at me. I don't know if I'm on *Candid Camera* or what." He sang. The song was "America the Beautiful." She put sunglasses on him, and told him to walk around the class like Stevie. Two weeks later, Kelly was singing "Ribbon in the Sky" in the talent show.

"I was nervous as a big dog, boy!" Kelly is animated. "I got through half of the song, and the crowd was snapping. I didn't finish the song. I walked myself back off, and then I was running off [stage]. After that, I realized that no one was cheering for me like that while I was playing basketball. I'm not a fool. I love to be loved, just like everybody. Once I felt the love that those few people had for me, I guess I got greedy. I wanted to feel more love."

McClin guided him, and by Kelly's graduation, he had absorbed her teachings enough to start singing for money in the subways and streets of Chicago. He was eventually discovered by Barry Hankerson, now his manager, when he auditioned for a musical play.

Hours after the awards dinner, Kelly oversees a choreographer taking Sparkle and two dancers through their paces. "Be Careful," his impassioned duet with Sparkle, has become 1998's sure-fire summer anthem for feuding lovers, much like "G.H.E.T.T.O.U.T." the song he wrote and produced for Changing Faces, was the year before. Sparkle's album, which he wrote and produced, has just hit the street to favorable reviews and remarkable first-week sales. Kelly says "Be Careful" wasn't even intended to be a duet. He'd written Sparkle's part and played it for some male friends, who told him men would be mad about its strictly female point of view. That night, he wrote the male verse.

Sparkle and the dancers practice the steps to the strains of "I'm Gone." Kelly and his management have thus far restricted Sparkle from doing any press, but Kelly can't help but refer to her as Stephanie several times, shutting off my tape recorder when he slips. "Everything happened so quickly with Sparkle," Kelly says. "We went in, did a few songs, did 'Be Careful.' Then it was like hurry-up-and-get-this-thing-out. She's from the West Side; she's ghetto; she's cool, classy, and it was all about the music."

The self-titled Sparkle album is the debut offering from Kelly's new venture, Rock Land Records, distributed through Interscope. "I met her through one of my boys a long time ago," Kelly recalls. "I didn't think she had the greatest voice, but it was something about her. I started talking to her, and I tapped into her when I heard she had a lot of men problems."

After pantomining how he wants her to hold the mic and use expressive gestures, Kelly goes upstairs to work with his new group Talent, a young male quartet. They are already in the darkened vocal booth, so Kelly starts coaching them. The four-part harmonies are beautiful, but Kelly isn't satisfied, singing the melody back to them.

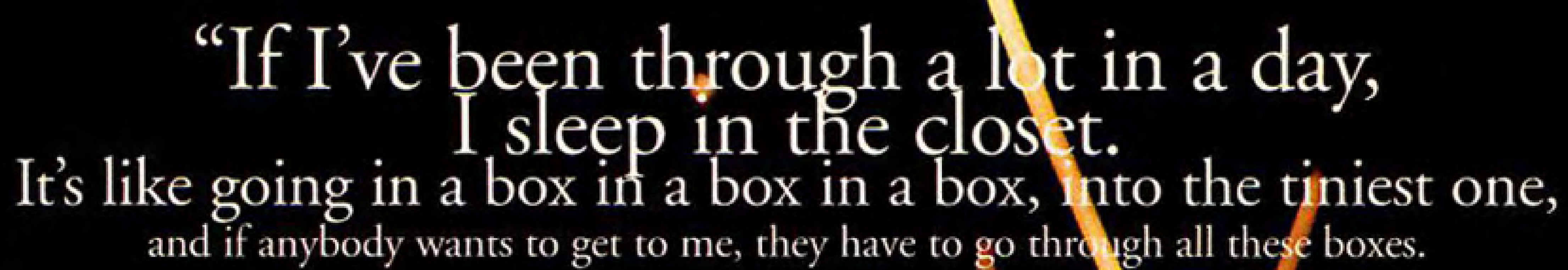
"Don't give me no excuses," he says to one of them. His voice isn't loud, but it's forceful. "Are y'all listening to the songs? No way if one y'all fall out, the rest of y'all shouldn't be able to take over," he tells them tersely. "Your destiny is in your own hands now. If one gets sick, if one misses the plane, the rest of you have to go on."

The takes continue, with Kelly asking one singer to drop out. They sound fine without the fourth part, and the lesson is noted. But when they all come back in, the ebb and flow of the harmonies is not right.

"Y'all should be like synchronized swimmers," Kelly says. "Y'all got to jump off the hill at the same time. Are y'all feeling each other? Are y'all looking at each other? Come to a whisper with those ooohs." The next take is brilliant and beautiful, the singing as full and euphonic as a church choir; Kelly's arms move to the music as the voices swell to a crescendo around him.

In the studio, Kelly is completely in command. It is when he leaves those confines that dealing with people is more difficult. In the hours preceding our sit-down interview, he seems remote, the mask firmly in place. He understands that marketing sells records, but he makes it clear he doesn't intend to get into his personal life. "It's all I have," he says. Signs are posted at Chicago Trax, warning outsiders away from his private lounges. Though it's been rumored that he's been married and has a child, he denies that the platinum-and-diamond ring on his left ring finger is a wedding ring.

R. Kelly states firmly that he no longer talks about Aaliyah, but when asked if the two are still friendly, he is momentarily taken



"If I've been through a lot in a day,
I sleep in the closet.
It's like going in a box in a box in a box, into the tiniest one,
and if anybody wants to get to me, they have to go through all these boxes.

When I get home, it's quiet. But that's not enough for me.

I want to go where it's dark ...
where I can't see nothing, and I know they can't see me."

aback, turning off my tape recorder. For a second, the mask slips, and there is a glimpse of acute pain, quickly hidden. He recovers and smiles again, but has nothing to say for public consumption.

He can now talk about his mother easily and with affection, though in the years immediately after her death, he publicly mourned her. He sang "Sadie" in concert as a tribute, with a larger than life-sized photo of her hanging from the rafters. His three Grammys are displayed on a shelf at his home, next to her picture.

Chicago newspapers have trumpeted Kelly's purchase of a suburban property, but he'd rather not confirm those reports. He remains in the city for now, but often feels besieged. He's come home to find people sitting on his porch, drinking, and has had to have cars towed that were parked in his driveway. "If I've been through a lot in one day, I sleep in the closet," he says. "It's like going in a box in a box in a box. And if anybody wants to get to me, they have to go through all these boxes. And I know it sounds crazy, but it feels good. Being at the level of success that I'm at, when I have to go out, I see everybody and they see me. And I have to deal with an autograph, or somebody's giving me a tape, somebody wants to borrow some money, or somebody needs a house or a car, or somebody needs a song or a favor. When I get home, it's quiet. But that's not enough for me. I want to go where it's dark, where I can't see nothing and I know they can't see me."

Basketball is another escape. He plays regularly at a downtown gym, where he's fouled as hard as any weekend player in a street pickup game. He's got some skills too, scoring from the perimeter and hitting the many foul shots he takes after being knocked around by his opponents. He's a diehard Bulls fan who says that when Jordan retires, he'll probably stop watching basketball altogether. He's already achieved his basketball fantasy by playing one-on-one with his idol.

"Who won?" he's asked. "He did," he says peevishly, with an expression of comical regret. "But only by about 20 points, though."

Those are the times when fame certainly has its perks. But Kelly will sometimes do things just to feel more a part of the real world. In Atlanta, he stopped in at a McDonald's and ended up working in the drive-thru for several hours with the permission of the store manager.

Despite his concessions to the fame it has wrought, Kelly says the music makes it worthwhile. His work ethic is legendary—he's in the studio without fail, seven days a week.

"R. Kelly taught me how to survive in this business," says Earl Robinson, the remaining original member of Public Announcement, who've regrouped and earned a platinum single with "Body Bumpin'." They parted amicably, and Robinson credits Kelly for instilling the importance of a work ethic in him. "Even on the road, I have a studio set up and I'm still working. I learned from R. Kelly to relax, but while you're relaxing, create."

Kelly creates daily. He wakes up with a song in his head every morning, though he doesn't read music. Songs come to him complete with video concepts. Even he is baffled by the consistency of the music and artistic vision flowing through him.

"I don't even sit down and say I'm going to write a song today. It just happens," he says. Kelly often starts his mornings transferring the music in his head into a nearby dictaphone. "I thank God for that. It's just amazing how I hear [music]. I'm hearing so many melodies, but I don't have time to write them, because I already have stuff in me that I have to let out before I put something else in my brain. I don't feel like I write my songs. It comes so clear and it comes so perfectly shaped that it can't be me. If a light comes through the window, and it's the right light, it's a song. It's always a song that fits the day, that fits the moment. I could never say I think I'm a genius. I think God is a genius. I'm just happy to be chosen to do what I do."

The songs on *Rated R* are like most of his songs: reflective of real life. "True stories," he says. "True stories." They are for the most part songs about relationships, songs that women will appreciate, because Kelly willingly bares himself to the women he's wronged. They are songs for men who can admit they're in pain because they've hurt someone they loved. There is a wide variety of music, from hip-hop-edged uptempos to a cut with Spanish influences. But it's the passionate ballads, naturally, that anchor Kelly's two-disc set.

"I always tell people the depth of your struggle determines the height of your success," he says. "I've been through a lot, and struggles create a sense of passion. If I just stop and think about everything I've been through, I'll bust out in tears. But see, I don't, because my songs bust out in tears."

For *Rated R*, Kelly worked with Trackmasterz and with new R&B diva Kelly Price. Price is the first person he's let write with him, and Trackmasterz is the first outside production squad he's used on an album. "It was one of the most pleasurable experiences I've had working with an artist," says Price. "I didn't realize he'd never been comfortable enough to let somebody write with him." She is especially grateful that Kelly let her bring her two young children to the studio.

"He sat there and made little character voices at them and asked them to sing for him," Price says. "He had my daughter write a song for him on the spot. To me, he's just a regular person."

Indeed, Robert Kelly is Everyman: sensitive, thoughtful, funny, a talented man who wrestles with his own demons and his own contradictions. He will eventually put his mask on again to deal with the world, as most of us do to survive being hurt or misunderstood. When it's on, Kelly distances himself, keeping his manner aloof to keep vultures at bay. But while it's off, there are glimpses of the shy, tender man behind the sometimes remote exterior. Despite his fame, fortune and independence, Kelly often yearns for the days he sang on the Chicago subways, awaiting that "big break."

"Believe it or not," he says, "there are times when I say to myself, 'I wish I was still on the streets, performing with my chitlin' bucket and my damn coin belt tied to my ankle, getting my money that way.'" He's quiet for a moment, thinking of how far he's traveled, how much he's gone through, to get where he is today. "I wasn't making the money I'm making now, nowhere near it. But I had peace of mind, you know? I had peace of mind."♠

the second coming

Death Row escapee Snoop Dogg has a new address—No Limit Records—and another shot at immortality

words Cherie Saunders images Anthony St. James

"I heard Snoop Doggy Dogg live here."

The lone, Black waiter that night at Drusilla's seafood restaurant stole an opportunity to chop it up with the table of women.

"Oh yeah? Where?" asked Shante Broadus, her eyes wide.

"I heard he live right here in Baton Rouge!" The waiter left the table, never knowing he was talking to Snoop's wife of one year—a fitting tribute to Snoop's newfound longing to live without fanfare. But the Ghetto Grapevine is correct: Snoop has built a second nest nearly 1,700 miles away from the place of his birth, whose literal and metaphorical earthquakes he has no problem leaving behind.

"You know how all the rappers used to dream of being on Death Row Records?" Snoop asks the next day, sitting on a miniature picnic table in his backyard, hugging one knee. His voice takes on the dreamy tone of an aspiring rapper. "'I dream of being on Death Row Records, [to] let Dre produce my music and Snoop rap with me, Kurupt, Rage...'" He pauses for a moment. "What I dreamed—being on No Limit, rapping with Master P and lettin' Mystikal scream on my shit, and Fiend, Silkk, C Murder, Mama Mia, Beats by the Pound, you know what I'm sayin'? It's like a dream come true, a seasoned vet coming into a situation that's beautiful."

On the phone from the set of his latest movie, Master P agrees: "Snoop's a veteran. You need a veteran, like what Michael Jordan brings to the Bulls. I think he fits right into the program. I mean, he had to start all over again from scratch. The talent that he had made him into a veteran player, but we still had to do it the way that No Limit do thangs."

Snoop wears his "No Limit Records" chain as proudly as he once wore the Dogg Pound paw print or the infamous electric chair of Death Row. His move to No Limit capped off a period of trying to work with any and everybody after the so-so reception of 1996's *The Doggfather*, his second album. The *Doggumentary* project for Death Row had stalled, even after its first single with Rafael Saddiq, "Midnight Love," was a West Coast radio hit, and a remix of "Snoop Bounce" with Tom Morello of Rage Against the Machine was number-one on L.A.'s KROQ. Also hot was the single off the *Men in Black* soundtrack, "We Just Wanna Party With You," with Jermaine Dupri; it ended up remixed with Da Brat and Usher when Death Row drama rendered Snoop unavailable for the video. Snoop says the 1997

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Lollapalooza tour was a life raft. "I thank Perry Farrell and Jeff Smith, my tour manager, for settin' that up for me. That tour kept me alive."

Having befriended one another after a meeting at Priority offices in the summer of 1997, it was only a matter of time before Master P's and Snoop were in a business relationship, and Snoop made his 'bout it 'bout it debut with Mystikal on "Gangstas" on the latter's 1997 album, *Unpredictable*. The situation pleases P: "Snoop has mass appeal, and he has an overseas market that he brings to the table. Just the notoriety of [us] being affiliated, it's almost as if it was meant to be. It definitely takes [No Limit] up a notch. I think we both, hand in hand, helped each other out. No Limit is one of the biggest as far as fan base, [with] street credibility...It brings Snoop back to the real world, where people see that, 'You know, he never lost it.'"

"I wanted to do a one-album deal on No Limit," explains Snoop. "P was like, 'Give me an option to regulate like you giving other big labels.' I was going to see all the big labels, lettin' 'em see what they could do for me. So I gave him the opportunity and didn't have no reason to go back and listen to them other labels. They wanted to give me a whole lot of money up front, but they ain't wanna give me nothing on the back [end]."

That was a major issue with Death Row, where Snoop was often blinded by the jewelry, cars and suites he was given in lieu of royalty payments. Another issue was the increasing feuding with Bad Boy and the unsolved murders of Tupac and the Notorious B.I.G. Reports of Snoop rolling around in bulletproof vans started to surface.

"I had the tank," Snoop admits, referring to his van. "I had to take it on the Lollapollooza tour. All the rappers was dying; I didn't wanna be next. I never had no fear from Death Row, just fear in general."

Is the fear still there?

these niggas big as you now.' They didn't hear me, but God has a way of taking care of what he takes care of, and he pushed me to the side. God didn't want me to know nothing about it."

In February 1997, Snoop took part in a press conference with Puffy following the filming of their guest appearances on *The Steve Harvey Show*. "That let everybody know where my head was," Snoop explains. "The press conference wasn't all, 'I'm leaving Death Row for Puffy.' I'm still down with Death Row *and* I'm down with Puffy. Shit started getting shady for me on Death Row after that. The month after that, I didn't see no more checks."

But in fact, the lack of royalties started way before then. Snoop has filed a multimillion dollar lawsuit against Death Row's accounting firms, alleging that during a two-year period beginning in 1994, he didn't receive a single royalty statement or royalty audit. Gelfand, Rennert & Feldman, its parent company Coopers and Lybrand and former Gelfand employee Steven Cantrock are also being sued by Dr. Dre, Suge Knight and Knight's attorney, David Kenner. Snoop's lawsuit, much like Dre's, also alleges that the accountants failed to inform him that as a condition of signing with Death Row, he would be required to employ Knight's wife as his personal manager and agent, and that she would receive 20 percent of his gross income.

Then, on May 29, 1997, Sharitha Knight filed suit against Snoop, alleging she wasn't paid her 20 percent of an estimated $8 million. Snoop's tone turns to disappointment. "I don't even know why she trippin'." He looks at the tape recorder. "Sharitha Knight, why you trippin'? All you had to do was holla at me. I trusted her with everything, and when I finally decided to be my own man, to manage myself, make my own money and decisions, that was a problem. You should be happy, like, 'Okay, damn—this nigga done grew up. If he

"IF 'PAC'S MURDER HAPPENED WHEN HE FIRST CAME OUT ON DEATH ROW, I COULD FILL YOU IN ON EVERYTHING. **BUT TOWARDS THE END, MY RELATIONSHIP WITH THEM WAS SCATTERED. THEY WERE IN THE FAST LANE, AS FAR AS THEM SONGS AND ALL THAT SHIT THAT THEY WAS DOING. I WAS LIKE, 'I DON'T WANNA BE AFFILIATED WITH THAT.'"**

"Do it look like it? I'm chillin'. I'm happily married, one-year anniversary, two kids, trying to enjoy life. Everything else is secondary."

In the shadow of the murder of Orlando Anderson, a prime suspect in Tupac's killing, we discuss why, according to the LVPD, no witnesses came forward after 'Pac was gunned down. "That was when my affiliation and association became very distant," says Snoop softly. "If [Tupac's murder happened] in the beginning, when 'Pac first came out on Death Row, I could fill you in on everything. But towards the end, my relationship with them was scattered." A frown crosses his brow. "They were in the fast lane, as far as them songs and all that shit that they was doing. I was like, 'I don't wanna be affiliated with that.'

"When we was talking about Eazy E and Luke and all them, we were like, 'If we see them niggas, we have to get down with them niggas.' My thing was like, 'Fuck rappin' about the shit. Handle these niggas if they did that. Or let's squash the shit, because we can make money with these niggas. You ain't doing nothing but making

learned right, he gone be all right, but if he didn't, he'll be back.' [She] didn't get a dime from me, ain't gonna get a dime from me."

So that lawsuit is over?

"I think it got reversed on her. My attorneys is handlin' it. I know in California, there's laws to protect artists that are new to the game and get sucked into contract conflicts of interest. I didn't care, because it was all family. Right now, if P was to say, 'Snoop, I think that whoop, whoop, whoop should be in control of this,' I'ma ride with him, because it's all family. Until I find out shit ain't right—then I got something to say. I never had nothin' bad to say about Death Row, Suge Knight, Sharitha Knight, whatever, until I found out shit was wrong."

Snoop can't even pinpoint when this epiphany occured. "As far as Sharitha, I was getting to the point where I felt I could set my own shows up. And I thought that a manager would have me on commercials and doing bigger things, because I was a big artist. Every t-shirt I wore, the kids wore. So I'm like, 'Why I don't have none of my shit in

stores?' I said to myself, I need to be doing my own shit, or get with a motherfuckin' operation that knows how to handle me. It's like Shaq on the Lakers. They ain't winning a championship until the Lakers put him in the right position. That's how I felt I was on the Row, a standout. Everybody else just standing around watching." He breaks into a wide grin. "You know, I get 40 points a night, but that can't win the game."

trator was sent by Suge Knight to retaliate against the record.

All Snoop will offer is that the incident had nothing to do with Suge. "I had a misunderstanding with some people that were non-Death Row affiliated. It was cool. I moved forward; hopefully they moved forward. That night was that night—a night of comedy. It was funny to me."

According to AP, after Snoop alerted a police officer to the

"Gangster movies meant something to me. I ain't from New York, I ain't in the mafia, I ain't Italian, but I could identify with what they were saying, because I'm just a hustler from the streets trying to get mine."

On April 8 of this year, a joint No Limit-Priority Records press release announced that No Limit had "secured the exclusive recording services" of Snoop in exchange for Death Row receiving a lump sum payment and a percentage of all of Snoop's future projects. The first was to be the August 4th release of *Da Game is to be Sold, Not to be Told,* as well as its first single, "Slow Down," a twist on the Loose Ends classic. Snoop has dropped the "Doggy" from his name, alluding to legal obligations in his explanation. "I'm like Tina Turner," he says. "I just wanna keep my name and move forward."

In moving forward, Snoop has put his relationship with Suge in perspective. "I built my own relationship with Suge, because he was a gangster and I was a gangster. He knew that it was certain shit that Dre couldn't feel me on or inspire me as far as keepin' the Crip alive. He told me to keep bangin' that Crip shit. 'Nigga, you a Crip nigga. Represent it to the fullest, dog.'"

Suge said this? A Blood?

"Yeah! Always. It was just real shit that he helped me on. When Dre left, I was a little down on myself. He was like, 'Snoop, motherfuckers love you for you. Put [*The Doggfather*] together. You don't need Dre. Handle your business.' He gave me that first big push. There's a lot right about that man that people never really got a chance to know about. He was a bigger positive inspiration to me than negative."

Yet when Snoop wanted out, he says he was not allowed access to Suge at the California Men's Colony jail. "It was just a matter of talking to his attorneys. It was never no me and him sit down and talk and handle it. To this day, I don't have no hate toward him. He know that. He know how I am. I'm serious about what I do. I'm just trying to get my money."

But word has it that Snoop recorded a scathing, anti-Death Row diatribe for an Easy Mo Bee compilation album early last year. He pauses when it's mentioned. "Yeah," he says, barely audible. "When you frustrated, you do things...[but] y'all ain't gonna never hear that."

Still, the industry rumor mill exploded after an incident last May at Master P's "I Got the Hook Up" comedy show in L.A. The Associated Press version had Snoop walking backstage after his performance, when somebody slapped him. One theory was the perpe-

assault, he and Daz ended up being charged with misdemeanor marijuana possession when the officer smelled weed on them.

"There was marijuana present," offers Snoop, carefully choosing his words. "Who it belonged to, I don't know."

Daz's presence was more of an issue. Daz and producer Soopafly had recently appeared on L.A.'s 92.3 The Beat, dissing Snoop and Mack 10, claiming they'd gone Hollywood. Snoop says all that has been squashed: "We cool. That's my little cousin. I brought him into the rap game. I just seen him before I came out here. We had little family problem, but we handled it, and it was good that people got a chance to see us have an argument, settle it and move forward as men."

"Look at that big-ass mosquito."

Snoop is staring past me to the wall of his house. I turn around. "That's a daddy long-legs."

The poor thing is probably craving the A/C. The 97 degrees, 50 percent humidity make even sitting still induce massive perspiration. A chorus of crickets and other Louisiana insects are singing in the patch of trees just behind his backyard. Snoop's extended roots lie just across the river in Mississippi, where both of his parents were born and raised.

"I went there like four or five times in my whole life. I came down there in '85, when I was still in junior high. The shit was cool, cuz I got a chance to see fish and cows and horses and just different shit." A far cry from Long Beach, the California hub made famous by Snoop's records.

"You don't miss it at all?"

"Unh-unh. I been livin there my whole motherfuckin' life. You need a change of environment when you growing and developing."

The members of Snoop's adopted musical family who stop in throughout the day are far from the rowdy-rowdy bouncing brothers seen on stage. Mo B. Dick, Omega Psi Phi'd down in purple and gold, shares a blunt with C-Murder and Snoop at the wooden dining room table, while they listen to one of two existing dubs of *Da Game is to be Sold, Not to be Told.* (The other is in the possession of Master P.) Shante is in the kitchen, whipping up some Kraft Macaroni & Cheese, and Snoop's amiable bodyguard Marcus is

squeezing lemon over a row of seasoned raw chicken wings.

Outside, Snoop and his wife's matching Chevy pick-ups are in the driveway, and a fenced-in area in the backyard awaits the arrival of one of Snoop's dogs from Cali. Now close in on another of his passions: the backyard basketball hoop. Mo B. Dick comes looking for a ball.

"C-Murder fittin' to go get one right now," says Snoop, shuffling a deck of cards. "You don't know nothin' about that."

"Yo, that was a part of my *life*," says Mo.

"That *is* my life. If I wasn't a rapper, I'd be in the NBA right now. And I wouldn't be throwing towels around neither. Y'all lucky I'm in the rap game, cuz y'all be buying my shoes right now. Air Doggs."

Later C-Murder returns with his two daughters, ages 5 and 1. "His wife and kids ain't never met my wife, so he coming over to introduce," says Snoop. "It feel good to come out here and know that everybody family wanna know everybody family, and not like just the artists know the artists and that's it. Just that hospitality. It helps my marriage out, really. It helps me become a better family man."

It was after a show in London that he decided to place a ring on the finger of the woman he's known since first hitting the scene on Dre's "Deep Cover."

"I was on tour after the *Doggfather* album came out. I had took her with me; it was the first time taking her with me anywhere. Being in London showed me I could get off stage and go and be in the room with her, not wanna be with nobody else and just enjoy it. When you have two babies for somebody, and be there for 'em through a murder case, before they became what they became, watch them become who they are, the least [I] could do is put a ring on her finger."

As Snoop Daddy Dad, disciplining four-year-old Cordell and year-old Corday doesn't involve much more than the dreaded "look" Snoop says he's perfected. "I ain't never had to hit my son. They both respect me from looks. That's how my mama was with me."

Are your kids spoiled?

"Hell yeah, the little one is. Little Snoop Dogg is the baddest."

Do you want girls?

"We gettin' ready to have a girl."

Shante's pregnant?

"Nah, but she gonna be when I finish," he cracks up. "I'm the man. I know how to make my babies." Snoop flashes the wide grin that encompasses the bottom half of his long face. With his 6-4 frame, most of it legs, he resembles the spider perched on the wall.

"I always been small. Even when I went to jail, I never lifted weights. I said that on one of my songs. I don't fuck with the iron, I'm just pimp-size." He's grinning again. "All the real pimps and players of the seventies were never over 170. They was always slim. But I pack it well."

"you shade-tree nigga. you ain't no pimp."

Later that night, the quintessential pimp movie, *The Mack*, is in the VCR in Snoop's tasteful living room. Pretty Tony was in the midst of his player-hater speech to Goldie, whom his hoe China Doll just "chose." Snoop laughs out loud at what must be his zillionth viewing.

"Oh, he watches it all the time," says the star of *The Mack*, Snoop's close friend Max Julien, on the phone from his California home. "Last time I was out at Snoop's house, he said, 'Max, now that I met you, there are only two other people that I really need to meet. I gotta meet Richie [Richard Pryor], and I gotta meet Pretty Tony."

"Really? Put the nigga on the phone," was the excited response from actor Dick Anthony Williams. They called Snoop three-way.

"I said, Snoop, I got someone on the phone for you," explains Julien. "Then Dick said, 'Snoop, I just wanna tell you, man...*you the dog!*' Snoop said, 'Pretty Tony?' He started screaming, telling people, 'Man, I don't believe this shit, this is Pretty fuckin' Tony!'"

Yes, the pimp fixation is still alive and well in Snoop's world. Same can be said for his obsession with the American mafia. "Al Pacino and Robert DeNiro, them my favorite two actors," Snoop says. "All the gangster movies meant something to me. I ain't from New York, I ain't in the mafia, I ain't Italian, but I could identify with what they were saying, because I'm just a hustler from the streets trying to get mine. I wish I could get in a movie with one of them motherfuckers." In the meantime, Snoop's scheduled to release a straight-to-video project written and directed by Master P, *Da Game of Life*; it will coincide with the release of *Da Game is to be Sold*. His next No Limit album, *Top Dogg*, is already in the can and will be released with the short film, *Snoopafly*.

Julien values his self-described "big brother" relationship with Snoop. "When he's in that house with Shante, they're just like two young people who are in love," Julian says. "They respect each other. She's not flashy. She's a real understated, wonderful lady, and he loves it. When you walk into the main house, you don't even know an entertainer lives there. There's African artwork. Above his fireplace, you've got wonderful pictures of this man holding these little babies, which knocked me out.

"The part I love about him is that he's extremely political. He has a consciousness that I've watched develop over the years, about family, extended family and loving Black people."

When he retires, Snoop wants to own a radio station dedicated to old school r&b and hip hop, and he'd like a pad in Amsterdam, Holland, a city with a soft spot for marijuana smokers. 'Til then, he's hoping to navigate the rest of his career through seas free of industry sharks and invisible parasites. Whether his newfound serenity is due to freedom from Death Row or Shante's macaroni-and-cheese is anybody's guess. And being "the bigger man" is admirable. But *winning* is the best revenge. Snoop Dogg's puttin' his chips in the Bank of No Limit and hoping for major dividends, not all of them financial.

"I want my kids to grow up and live their life and be like I am," Snoop says, casting his eyes onto the Southern horizon. "I handle my business, and I want them to handle theirs...not be so dependent on me. They gettin' everything they want and need in the world right now. But there's a certain time in life when you gotta go get your own." And this big poppa oughta know.♠