



second child hood

B.I.G. was down for his nig-gas JUNIOR M.A.F.I.A. to the highest degree—takin' them from the hood to Hollywood. Now he's gone, and the crew that rode his back to the top of the charts must start all over again.

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Loyalty. Everyone wants it—a loyal dog, a loyal mate, a loyal friend. In every ghetto, loyalty is the code of the streets. Every rapper swears it's a mandatory condition for business or pleasure. But when life brings us to a crossroads, and the coin of loyalty is tossed into the air, we're just as likely to see its flip side—betrayal—winking back up at us. Call it human nature, but loyalty is never guaranteed. It's something that people choose. Or don't.

Christopher Wallace saw the choice made firsthand at the tender age of 19. It was 1991, and Wallace, a.k.a. Biggie Smalls or the Notorious B.I.G., was walking down Gates Avenue in Brooklyn with his friend Damion "D.Roc" Butler. The two had been best friends for years, starting in the sixth grade and continuing into their adolescence, when they ran the streets of Bed-Stuy as small-







time hustlers. At that time the talented, rhyme-slanging Wallace had just earned his ticket out of the ghetto in the form of a rap contract with Uptown Records. But as the two walked down Gates Avenue, a legal boulder rolled into their pathway, threatening Biggie's chance at stardom and financial stability.

"Big had just gotten his deal, and we were walking to my grandmother's house from St. James to Bedford," says Roc, now 29, of their memorable trek through Do or Die. "We were talking how we would buy [Toyota] 4Runners if Big went gold. All of a sudden the police rolled up on us, and a gun was found. Biggie had just signed his deal, and I didn't want his career to get ruined, so I took the weight."

"I went away for it for almost four years."

With D.Roc's sacrifice, Biggie was free to continue rapping. Maybe it was D.Roc's act of loyalty that sparked a flame inside Biggie, or maybe Big had it in him all along—we'll never know. But what is for sure is that during Roc's stay at Rikers Island, the Notorious B.I.G. rocketed to fame and fortune—and he did it legally. Along his way, Big committed his own act of loyalty: He dedi-

cated himself to a group of thirsty teens from the Brooklyn streets he once roamed. At first he just wanted to keep the kids out of the hustling game, but his goal grew to turning them into a successful rap group so they could make their own legal money. The crew consisted of six younger guys—Lil' Cease, Blake-C (a.k.a. Trife), Banger (a.k.a. Larceny), Capone, Buggy and Nino Brown—plus two guys

Big's age—Klepto and Chico Delvec—and finally a girl from around-the-way nicknamed Lil' Kim.

This rap group, however, was not based on musical talent or skill but rather on Biggie's loyalty to the kids he knew. As Big took his infamous ride on the rap game's wild rollercoaster, these kids rode with him. With the exception of Lil' Kim—the only one to become a star in her own right—the members of Junior M.A.F.I.A. shared their story with *XXL*.

The original group was made up of the six young'ns and an old friend of Big's named Chico. These teens, with Banger the youngest at 16, had grown up a few blocks apart, gone to school together and hung out with each other for most of their young lives. Like kids do, they had divided themselves into two groups. "Me, Capone and Buggy were all cousins," says Nino, "and with Cease and Chico we made the 6s. We went to this store to look for stuff to put on our clothes, and we found a whole bunch of Boy Scout patches—a lot of 666s. We had this lady sew the 6s on our vests. Then Blake and Bang, who were also cousins, started calling themselves the Snakes."

"Big took a liking to us," Lil' Cease explains. "I guess we reminded him of him. We never had a chance to get into hustling too much because before we knew it, we was rolling with Big—on tour, in Brooklyn. Wherever he went, we went."

By 1994, while touring and performing in support of his debut LP *Ready To Die*, Big was bringing the mini-mafia on stage to have them rap a little or hype the crowd. He soon started calling them Junior M.A.F.I.A. "M.A.F.I.A. stood for Masters At Finding Intelligent Attitudes," says Blake-C. "We were never into music. Big was the one in music, and he was always dropping our

name in songs and onstage. It was Big's way of stating his love for his little guys. When Big got large, people started asking, 'Who the fuck is this guy talking about?' People wanted to know, 'Who is this Junior M.A.F.I.A.?'"

With the name of Big's crew now on the tip of every East Coast rap head's tongue, the lyrical giant embarked on a plan: to turn a troop of street kids with barely any musical background into a successful rap group. "His plan was to write rhymes for those who couldn't write," Cease explains. "Blake, Bang and Kim used to rap a little, but the rest of us didn't. We was just Big's people trying to do more than sit here on the corner selling crack."

At the same time Big was conjuring up his plan, Chico introduced him to Lance "Un" Rivera, a Brooklyn hustler who was putting together a rap group of his own. "Un was the nigga from around the way, hustling," Cease tells. "He saw Big was doing something good by taking all us young niggas under his wing and he came to Big with the idea to make a rap group. Big had the idea already, but Un had the Snakes rapping for him—even though they was down with the crew. Big was like, 'I could use them, and he

could use my niggas.' We just combined and added a few others."

The group came together quickly, but Big and Un knew they needed a couple more rappers since a few members weren't actually going to spit. Nino was going to help with the business end, Buggy would be the hype man, and Capone would DJ. So Big added a Flatbush native called Kleptomaniac, who made

his living selling clothing on the streets at discount prices. "Klepto used to sell us Iceberg clothing for half the price," says Nino. "So we knew him, but not well. He showed a serious interest in rapping, and Big decided that if there was someone who could work well with us, it was him."

To complete the group, Lil' Kim, Cease's sister's best friend, was added. Kim already had a reputation as a raunchy lyricist whose raw talent would be a plus for Junior M.A.F.I.A. Back then, rap crews with female members were rare, let alone bawdy female members, so that perk would be an added bonus. "Kim was the nastiest bitch around," Banger insists. "I don't know nobody in the game who could fuck with her style lyrically."

With the construction of their supergroup complete, Biggie and Un decided to share all of the decision-making. That included choosing the lineup for the songs and which songs would be used as singles. The two tremendous entrepreneurs also started a new record label, Undeas Recording, which they shared fifty-fifty. Un was to be the businessman, while Big would write songs and generate ideas.

The next move was to get a distribution deal for the label. "Un was on the train every day trying to get us a deal," Blake recalls. "He'd get off the train, we're on the corner, and he's letting us know, 'Nah, it ain't happening today.' Then one day he got off the train and told us it [happened]."

By the end of 1994 there'd been a sudden burst of positivity smacking JM in the face. Biggie's debut, *Ready To Die*, was selling steadily, D.Roc was released from prison—which completed the crew—and Undeas Recording scored a distribution deal with Atlantic Records, which meant that Junior M.A.F.I.A. would soon release their debut album, *Conspiracy*. "It took eight months for

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Blake-C and Lil' Cease



us for make the album," Banger reminisces. "Big always made sure it was right. And if it wasn't tight, he would make you go back and write your rhymes again. But we wasn't taking it as serious as Kim. Nobody in the group was more focused than Kim. Her focus focused everyone in the crew."

Conspiracy was released in late 1995, and the album's first single was "Player's Anthem," which featured Lil' Kim, Lil' Cease and Biggie. The song quickly became a radio and club favorite. With the success of the first single, Biggie and Un were prompted to put out "I Need You Tonight," which showcased Klepto, Kim and Blake-C, plus a guest appearance by a very young Aaliyah. The song failed to earn the same love as the first single, but it still kept Junior M.F.I.A.'s buzz alive. "Get Money," the third single, featuring Big and Kim in a battle of the sexes, was a monster.

All three singles received lavish video treatments, but even with the vids and the success of "Player's Anthem" and "Get Money," *Conspiracy* sold just under 700,000 copies. Still, the singles did spur the solo careers of Lil' Kim and Lil' Cease. "Soon when people was saying Junior M.F.I.A., they wasn't looking it as a crew," says Chico Delvec. "They were just saying Cease and Kim. Those two became the most well-known of the group, the only two that later had the solo. That pissed me off, but I got over it."

With *Conspiracy* earning a gold plaque, *Ready To Die*'s platinum-plus sales and the 1996 release of Kim's solo debut, *Hard Core*, Junior M.F.I.A. spent the next couple of months basking in their newfound success. And prospects for even more success loomed large as Big readied his follow-up, the double LP *Life After Death*. "We were having the time of our life," Buggy gushes. "[We had] expensive clothes, high-priced things, parties, hotels. Then Big went to LA. We had gone to LA when 2Pac was alive, but people hated on us, so I was kind of concerned about Big being over there. When we talked to him on the phone, we would ask him when he was coming home. He had already been out there for like a month. He was getting love, but they still be acting like crazy over there, and he hadn't been there since that feud was going on with him and 'Pac. I could just imagine 'Pac fans who thought [Big] had something to do with ['Pac's murder] saying it was an East Coast thing. So for Big to go over there when 'Pac wasn't even alive—I didn't know how 'Pac's fans was going to take it. It might be something ugly."

Disaster struck late one night after an industry party on March 8, 1997, when Biggie and his crew were on their way home. "Cease and our man G was in the car," recalls D.Roc. "We was always on point with security, but we didn't think nothing was gonna happen or feel no vibes. It was just a regular day."

But the night was anything but regular, as Biggie fell prey to gunshots from another car. He died in the ambulance on the way to the hospital in the arms of his best friend, D.Roc, and was pronounced dead shortly after midnight. The members of Junior M.F.I.A. each experienced their leader's death in different ways:

BUGSY: A girl I was seeing called me up and told me to turn on the TV. I turned on Hot 97, and it was silent. I was like, "I never heard Hot 97 quiet before." Then Mister Cee told us he was killed. I had to be with my family.

BANGER: I was uncomfortable that he was in LA, and we had a little static, not really much, but a little beef over that. Then I got a phone call one morning. One of the M.F.I.A. called Blake at eight o'clock in the morning, and then he hit me with the words, "Niggas just killed Big." I dropped the phone and picked up my gun. I went outside and caught myself like, "Ain't no one did it out here, so there ain't nothing I really could do." So I went to Nino's crib, put [the gun] under his bed, and we just sat there."

NINO BROWN: I can't say I was shocked when Biggie died. I was more scared than shocked. It was so much to think about.



It was like all the negativity he was going through was coming to us, too. Maybe it could've been us next. At the time we couldn't really talk about it 'cause everybody was feeling so shocked. Every time you try to say something you're crying. You not listening to what the next person is saying. You couldn't understand why anyone would do that to him.

CHICO DELVEC: Why would somebody do that to him? I know Big could talk slick with the mouth, but he was still a good dude.

CEASE: We never thought Big was gonna get killed. Why would he? We ain't never think about 'Pac getting killed. We had nothing to do with 'Pac getting killed—nothing to do with that.

Overnight, Junior M.A.F.I.A. was fatherless. "Things got kinda crazy within the team," D.Roc explains. "Big held weight, and a lot of decisions depended on him. When he wasn't there, it was hard to get a grip on what we was trying to do." Biggie's crew had lost not only their guide but also their inspiration. They had to grieve, but more important they had to face a future they never saw coming. "If your parents die, you're not going to completely crumble," Nino expresses. "You have to keep going, but sometimes [your family] do drift apart. It took so long for everybody to realize that 'cause we was just used to having a silver spoon in our mouth and not having to do nothing. We didn't even have to swallow."

The crew had decisions to make. "The money wasn't guaranteed anymore, and making music wasn't an option," Chico states. "Our vibes were too way off to do that. We couldn't go back to the streets. There wasn't no leader. Big wasn't here and Un wasn't saying nothing." With not much to go on except their friendship, the crew parted ways, planning to stay in touch but choosing new directions. "You move on, but you never forget that each one of you are family and have to be there for each other," Buggy sums up.

It's been five long years since Biggie's all-too-soon exit. During that time, JM members grew from boys to men, started families, got jobs. Some battled the law, some found new careers, and one crossed over into the mainstream and became a pop star. "I understood that I had to make reality," says Blake-C. "I started working a 9-to-5 every day. God put me on a path to humble me, and [I] appreciate whatever he has to comfort me in the future. I wasn't ashamed to work."

"We was not getting acknowledged enough 'cause Big passed," Banger tells. "I was like, 'Fuck rap. My man died for this shit.' Most all of the guys got real jobs. I started hustling. I took about two years off to hustle, then some of the M.A.F.I.A. came and scooped me up, and we worked on Cease's album."

Lil' Cease's solo debut, *The Wonderful World Of Cease A Leo*,

was released by Atlantic Records in mid-1999 and offered guest appearances from several Junior M.A.F.I.A. members. "My album was a classic," Cease insists. "I was making moves. But I got more recognition from being a part of Junior M.A.F.I.A. and being with Big. Niggas ain't never really got a chance to focus on me. On my album I let people know what I was about, [but] Atlantic just didn't take care of my shit. I can't really blame it on the label, but they just thought, from the Big situation and from the Junior M.A.F.I.A. situation, that I was gonna blow up. That was wrong."

Indeed, the album garnished just 178,072 in sales. But Cease is moving forward, working on another under his new

moniker, Cease A Leo.

Since then, Cease has caught some light, though perhaps not the ideal kind. In the past year Cease, a.k.a. James Lloyd, and Banger, a.k.a. Antoine Spain, have seen their names publicized in media accounts of several crimes. These include an alleged gunfight on February 25, 2001 at New York City's Hot 97 radio station. Banger was also hit with a gun charge and Cease with a drug-possession charge (for marijuana) after the two were pulled over on March 18, 2001 in Harlem. "The cops caught me and Cease uptown in Kim's Jaguar. I had a gun on me," Banger says. "Cease ain't know. It was just me and him in town, and Jadakiss called me to the studio. I ain't know who was gonna be in the studio and we just had a little beef at Hot 97 which I won't comment on, and me and Cease was out by ourselves. I took a little deuce-deuce [a loaded .22 caliber semiautomatic] and put it in my sneaker. Later we went uptown to buy an ounce of weed, and the police seen Cease coming out the weed spot. They pulled us over. But everything happens for a reason." On December 11, 2001, Banger was locked up for an eight-month bid at Rikers Island for the gun charge.

Cease and Banger have also been indicted for attempted murder, stemming from an August 10, 2001 incident. Both deny the charges. "I got one case right now

that I'm dealing with," Cease says. "All the other shit is thrown out. At the end of the day, my shit is nothing different than what other muthafuckas is going through. It's better than some people's lives, but it's worse than others. Think about the muthafuckas that's in jail for nothing. Like me, I'm on trial for nothing. I'm going to court for shit I didn't do. I don't have the money for the lawyers. This is the shit that really fucks up my life. A muthafucka goes by what he sees on TV as what he knows about me. I ain't got money. You heard more bad shit than good shit about me lately. I [appeared on] four or five albums, but I got locked up four or five times. I wish the shit I know now I knew earlier. I could've been in a better position than I'm in right now. Don't get me wrong. I'm happy 'cause it could be worse than it is right now. But me using what Big planned for me, I



D.Roc, Capone and Nino

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could've done much more."

Bang and Cease's legal battles have not only cost them thousands of dollars in lawyers' fees but have also touched the lives of other Junior M.A.F.I.A. members, including Lil' Kim, who, out of love for her family, has put up with much of the legal drama. "Kim put up her house for me to get out—\$350,000 bail," Banger admits. "I respect her for that. She got back the Jaguar, but she lost the truck we were in one time 'cause they impounded it. But it's a small thing to life. Cars change every two, three years, but family is forever."

And that everlasting family called Junior M.A.F.I.A. has converged to rebuild the 2K version of the group. There will be similarities, such as D.Roc's continued support. "I keep my eye on all of them," says Roc, who manages most of the group. "I'm there for them. I support their decisions. When they do something, I just give my opinion, and if it don't apply, let it fly. That's the type of thing Big would've done."

There will also be differences, such as a new member, Ill Bill—

who is actually an old friend—and a group name change. "We just M.A.F.I.A. now," Blake states. "We no longer little." Cease, Kim, Banger, Blake-C and Ill Bill have recently recorded 13 songs for a new album, but they're in the middle of a label drama, which they declined to elaborate on. Chico and Klepto have yet to record any tracks for the project, but Banger insists that when the guys are ready, "We will have open arms."

With that, a new chapter begins. But the memories of their journey from a blessed beginning to a painful middle have not disappeared. "I can't really say why all of this happened," says Cease. "Maybe the bad shit hap-

pened so that muthafuckas could step their shit up. I can't think of nothing else. I can't sit here and say my man Big was a bad person and he had to go. When shit like this happen, you got to think about why. What else can you can you think, he was a foul nigga? This was a nigga that was loyal to his people. For that to happen... I can't see nothing else making sense. And now he gone, and we are 100 percent for him. We are doing everything for him and us." ♠

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