



# DRIVE

HE TURNED A SMALL-TIME HUSTLE INTO BIG-TIME  
HANDLING BUSINESS, BEEF AND BOOTLEGGERS WITH APLOMB, **T.I.**'S KEEPING





# SNOW

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STARDOM. NOW HE'S EXPANDING ON THAT.

HIS NOSE CLEAN, MAKING SURE PAST MISTAKES DON'T TRIP HIM UP AGAIN.







# IT COULD START HERE. WITH A PURPOSE. "WHAT'S THE PURPOSE?" HE ASKS. "TO INSPIRE, EDUCATE AND ENTERTAIN."

Maybe he's said this before. He speaks with lessons learned from the receiving end of Miranda rights, a lifetime of knowing that anything said can and most likely will be used against him. So maybe he's thought about it over and over in his head and come up with the perfect sound bite, the pull quote that gets big-lettered treatment in magazine spreads.

But nothing seems quite rehearsed about Clifford "T.I." Harris Jr. Perhaps his brain just works faster than his words. Maybe he stalls for time. Could be he's double-checking for acute comprehension. He's prone to repeat questions thrown at him by people with whom he's not familiar. And his responses are full of qualifiers and clarifications, laden with false starts and U-turns. Nothing erratic or scatterbrained. Charming, good-natured, respectful. He'll make a mistake, go down a wrong road, and then double back. Sometimes he'll even apologize—"excuse me"—before continuing. When asked about mistakes, he replies, "For one, a mistake I made was still being in the streets at such a critical point in my career, back when I had to go away. I was still real—I had kinda like one foot in, one foot out, so to speak. And, I mean, shit—my association with certain people in life, certain moves I made that really didn't have to be made, you know what I'm sayin'?"

He sits in the offices of his record label, Grand Hustle. The label's only been located here—in a warehouse district on the west side of Atlanta, not too far from the Bankhead Highway—for less than a year. The furniture is new, the walls and floors clean. No one is allowed to smoke here. Unless you're with T.I., who's taking light tokes on something inside of a Swisher Sweet cigar.

Until recently, Grand Hustle had been a boutique operation in the smallest way. For about two years, T.I. was the only artist in the stable. But last year, the label released *25 to Life* by T.I.'s clique, P\$C, and the soundtrack to the pimp-friendly Terrence Howard vehicle *Hustle & Flow*, which has, musingly enough, garnered an Oscar nomination for Memphis' Three 6 Mafia. The roster now includes close to a dozen acts, including an R&B artist and DJ Drama, creator of the *Gangsta Grillz* mix-tape series.

**It could start** with the music. Without the music, the other things may not have materialized. The entrepreneurial expansion, which includes a construction company and a car-customization shop fancied by young athletes with new money, and the cars in the parking lot, which include a Porsche and a Ferrari,

might not be here. If it weren't for the music, he probably wouldn't be headlining, this spring, in video director Chris Robinson's silver screen debut, the Southern coming-of-age tale *ATL*. It could start with the music, because the music is why he's being questioned by a magazine interviewer and not a federal agent. The music is why we know T.I. And the music has always been exceptional, if not always well-received. His first album, *I'm Serious*, released in 2001, contained the song "Dope Boyz," which, in a sense, could be considered before its time.

"They was scared of this," says T.I. "At the time, the people, the powers that be, weren't so perceptive to the idea of having real niggas run shit. Not real, real, hard, cold, street, hood niggas who wouldn't change and conform for shit."

"At the time" Atlanta rap was still largely defined by OutKast, Goodie Mob and the rest of the Dungeon Family—most of the rest of the city followed in their wake. Elsewhere in the South, there were regional stars uncompromising in their music—like UGK, Geto Boys, 8Ball & MJG and Three 6—but their national hits, if any, were few and far between. Local acts that wanted to get the attention of the major labels were stuck copying the eccentric funk of 'Kast or the smoothed-out stylings of Jermaine Dupri—the hometowners who defined the look and feel of the city.

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"I weren't with that shit for real," says T.I., although he reveres OutKast so much that he will answer a question with a quote from Andre 3000. "Listening to 'Kast, that shit sounds great, them niggas rap like a muthafucka, the production is stupendous. But when I woke up this morning, I saw *this*," he says, referring to the Trap. The Trap, known to some as the Game, was in him and he was in it. "I had a different take on things. I feel like it was a large amount of people that were being left out. The dope game, it were kind of

unheard of. And if you spoke on it, you had to speak on it quietly."

Tellingly, references to the Trap had been coded in songs like OutKast's "Two Dope Boyz (In a Cadillac)" or nestled inside of Goodie Mob's "Dirty South," where Cool Breeze talked about his favorite game: "*Lemonhead delight/ That's when you lick off all the yellow and you sell the white.*" T.I.'s version was more direct. The chorus to "Dope Boyz" unabashedly shouted, "*For the dope boys in the Trap, nigga/The thug nigga, drug dealer/Where you at, nigga?*" Understandably, such sentiments were rejected by local radio stations, who only relented after "Dope Boyz" took off in the clubs. Claims T.I.: "[The radio programmers] said, 'Who is this guy coming into my market, selling out a club, 1,200 people on a Wednesday? And why am I not playing his record?'"

In 2001, T.I. released *I'm Serious*, which sold 150,000 copies before he was dropped from his label's roster. In 2003, he resurfaced on Grand Hustle, the imprint he started with his manager, Jason Geter, backed by Atlantic Records. The first album produced under this relationship was the gold-selling *Trap Muzik*. But at such a "critical point," he wound up a guest of the state as a result of violating his parole from an old drug charge. The next year, he delivered *Urban Legend* and earned a platinum plaque.

His upcoming album is titled *King*. Its first single, "What You Know?" is as good a song as he's ever made—a drowsy, riding groove with an understated bounce and relaxed threats: "*Whatchu talkin' shit for and gotta run and get folk?/How you were yellin', I thought you pulled out a gun and hit folk/But you's a scary dude, believed by very few/Just keep it very cool, or we will bury you/See, all that attitude's unnecessary, dude.*" It's a marriage of music and phrasing that exemplifies T.I. at his best. He rhymes like a crime boss, reclined back, but more than ready and able to end any quandary without losing the tilt of his cap. His poise remains majestic, but his words form a conversation that comes off as private monologue. A contrast to the encyclical diatribes of most rappers, it sounds personal.

"Nine times out of 10, I'm voicing my opinion on something," he says. "I could do that in a room by myself. Tell how I feel about shit. Just depends who on the outside of the door listening. I'm telling the shit to myself. Ain't necessarily talking to nobody. But then again, sometimes I am."

After some probing, he allows that his songs are more than self-rambling. "A song is a conversation," he declares. "You got a mes-





**"YOU GO TO RAPPIN' ABOUT NIGGAS ON RECORDS AND SH#T, MAN, AIN'T NO WAY FOR YOU TO DO NOTHING IF YOU REALLY DO GOT A PROBLEM WITH THEM. YOU MIGHT HAVE TO HANDLE SOME BUSINESS.**

**YOU RAPPIN' ABOUT IT ON RECORDS, THEN YOU GOING TO JAIL. PERIOD."**

sage that you're trying to convey to someone about something or another."

**It could start** here. On these backstreets of Bankhead, West Atlanta, where the median household income ranges from about 25 to 50 percent of that of the rest of the city. These roads, where T.I. would ride up and down on his bike serving what he could to whoever could buy it. Where little girls scream when they see him driving by. Where he knows everyone and everyone knows him. Where the whole hood comes out whenever T.I. visits.

"This five-mile radius, west side area, this is me—period," he says, walking in the middle of the street he grew up on, his lanky arms wide open. "This my hood, and it's always gon' be my hood. I don't give a fuck how many records it is, or if it ain't no more records to sell. I'm always gon' be the shit right here. If it all goes tomorrow, I will be back here, in *that* house." He points to a house in the middle of the block. That's where he lived until he was 16, before he fell into the Trap.

The house has been under renovation by New Finish, his construction company, for

three years. His uncle Quentin, who mans New Finish's day-to-day operations, refers to the house as a money pit. But T.I.'s grandmother, who he affectionately addresses as "Mother," did not want a new house. This house is about 100 years old. It has housed three generations of the family. Mother wanted *this* house. So there's new brick facing, columns and a wraparound porch on the outside, and new wiring, floors and ceilings on the inside. "Make more sense to keep it forever than trying to sell it," says T.I. "That way, nobody in the family ever be homeless."

The room he grew up in is now vacant, but it still seems small. It's reminiscent of his room in the one-level house around the corner, where he spent his latter teen years. Where his clients would knock at his front window so he could come out and fulfill their orders. "If you notice all my rooms, I have my eye to the streets," he says. "Every room in every house, I got to get up and look into the streets."

Across the way is the house his uncle bought at age 19. Down the block is the creek that leads to a cemetery. The creek is where T.I. used to "hide shit."

*What kinda shit?*

"Shit that you can't keep at your grand-mama house." He smiles.

The neighborhood is littered with marks of his past and present. Cousins' houses, uncles' houses. The houses that have been remodeled by New Finish are easy to pick out. The lawns have been tended; some of them are even green. There are maybe 40 of these houses around Bankhead. They stand in stark contrast to the rest of the houses in the area, which stand as collateral damage of the Trap. But the company's most ambitious project is not in the hood. New Finish recently purchased nine undeveloped acres that they intend to turn into a private subdivision. Four, maybe five homes, up to 20,000 square feet, long driveways, privacy, exclusivity.

"I was from that porch to that street," says T.I. "But I got older and I expanded. First, I couldn't leave the porch. Then I couldn't leave the neighborhood. Then I just ran wild."

**It could start** here. With a revelation, a glimpse of him telling something to himself. A hint that *Trap Muzik's* "T.I. vs. T.I.P." may have been more than just a cute song concept.

T.I. is inside of Club Crucial, which he bills as "the greatest place in the world to party." Just a few months old, located down the block from the Poole Palace—the place where D4L and Dem Franchize Boyz popularized the snap music movement—Club Crucial hosts a "Hustle and Flow" open mic competition with



a \$500 grand prize. It's midday, and a handful of workers move about preparing for the night, cleaning the bathrooms, polishing the mirrors.

"I'm trying to stay out of trouble and just stack a \$100 million in a couple of years," he says. "It's like T.I. and T.I.P. Like, T.I. has a very, very strong mind-set as far as business is

gain. "Tip has a bad temper," he admits. "And it disabled me, like the way I carry myself and how I'm used to doing business. You go to rappin' about niggas on records and shit, man, ain't no way for you to do nothing if you really do got a problem with them. You might have to handle some business. You rappin' about it on

album, I'ma put my own songs out. Fuck you.' And T.I. say, 'Aight, cool. You do that. I'm just gonna take a couple of these songs offa yo album, and I'ma keep them for my album. And I'ma put the rest of my shit on there. Cool?' And, later on in life, they'll shake hands." He clasps his hands together and laughs.



**"I WAS SPEAKING IN TERMS OF WHAT I PLANNED ON BEING, WHERE I WANTED TO BE IN MY CAREER. THOSE WERE THE EXPECTATIONS I HAD SET FOR MYSELF.**

## **KING OF THE SOUTH.**

**YOU SPEAK IT, YOU LIVE IT, YOU BELIEVE IT, YOU DO IT."**

concerned. T.I.P. has a very strong mind-set as far as the streets and the hustle is concerned. And if T.I.P. get too far in the streets and start getting hisself in too much trouble, T.I. say, 'Wait! Nigga, we got millions to make. You need to chill out.' So you know, they constantly check each other."

This explanation doesn't sound rehearsed. It doesn't come across quite as schizophrenic as it sounds, either. But he explains the differences between these two men with enough sincerity that there may be cause for concern. One can imagine that it was T.I.P. who engaged in the rap beefs that could have potentially derailed everything that T.I. had worked to

records, then you going to jail. Period."

When songs from *King* were bootlegged, the lineup for the album, which had upward of 70 songs recorded in its making, was changed, and *The Leak*, a mixtape credited to T.I.P. and DJ Drama was quickly issued. "T.I.P. did the album," he explains, of *The Leak*. "Those are all the songs T.I.P. would put on his album if T.I. didn't have such a strong mind-set on multiplatinum success this time. T.I. know that there's some songs on the leak that's on *The Leak* that woulda been great on the album, but it's some songs that will replace those songs that's gonna enable us to sell millions of records. So T.I.P. say, 'Aight, nigga, you don't want my songs on yo

*These two guys don't actually sit down and have this conversation for real, though. Right?*

"I don't know," he says, still laughing. "Do they? Or did they? Did they just have that conversation just now?"

**It could start** here. With the incendiary declaration that started a rap war on plastic. Apropos of nothing but a vision, T.I. created a position, and then stepped into it, crowning himself King of the South. From the start, he has peppered his music with nods to his rule—"Grand Royal" on *I'm Serious*, *Trap Muzik*'s "King of Da South," where he stated, "I'm the king 'cause I said it and I mean that shit." *Urban Legend* featured "Tha King," *Hustle & Flow* offered "I'm a King (Remix)." He even released a *Down With the King* mixtape. The latest album, *King*, implies that he's running out of titles, or he's simply simplifying his statement.

Throughout his career, his position has been silently endorsed by those who might have challenged his claim. Due to his panoramic view of the South, T.I. has collaborated with





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T.I. and "Mother" at her home in the Bankhead section of Atlanta



**"RIGHT NOW, THE SHORT-TERM GOAL FOR ME IS TO HAVE THE NUMBER-ONE MOVIE AND THE NUMBER-ONE ALBUM IN THE COUNTRY AT THE SAME TIME. AIN'T NOBODY DONE THAT BUT BARBRA STREISAND AND JENNIFER LOPEZ.**

**THAT'S PRETTY GOOD COMPANY."**

Trick Daddy, Young Jeezy, Bun B, Lil Wayne and Scarface. This approach—which he says is nothing more than real recognizing real and not a marketing tactic—has served double duty. When Atlanta's music made a national resurgence in 2003, he was right there with his own "24's" and "Rubber Band Man," as well as Bone Crusher's "Never Scared." When the industry's attention shifted to Houston, his tight relationships with Bun B, Paul Wall and the like kept him relevant. The only person who seemed to take offense was Lil' Flip. Despite Flip's denial of having problems with T.I.'s declaration, words and more were exchanged between the two before a meeting arranged by Houston godfather and Rap-A-Lot Records CEO James Prince put an end to the friction. T.I. may play up the King thing, but he's not necessarily tripping off of it.

"That 'King' shit is really for muthafuckas like journalists and media hounds to feed off of it and make it something it's not," he says. "That shit ain't shit to us but another way of conquering this shit like we supposed to. That's just like me going out there and saying, Why Jeezy Da Snowman? Why can't I be Da Snowman? Muthafucka, 'cause he came out and said he was Da Snowman, that's why!

"That title, when I first spoke it," he continues. "I was speaking in terms of what I planned on being, where I wanted to be in my

career. Those were the expectations I had set for myself: King of the South. You speak it, you live it, you believe it, you do it."

**It should end** here. In motion, en route. Tip is behind the wheel of his Dodge Ram Pickup. Every time he guns the engine, he spots a police vehicle in the periphery. T.I. slows down. He has enough on his record, he's not looking for any more. "I'm done with jail," he says. "Jail, I'm done with you, thank you. You leave me alone, and I won't come bothering you."

To say T.I.'s past is behind him would be a cliché, and an inappropriate one at that. His music is still rooted in the Trap. And the Trap is still in him. Things like that never leave one's system. But the lessons learned from the Trap can be transmuted to higher means.

"Right now, the short-term goal for me is to have the number-one movie and the number-one album in the country at the same time," he says. "Ain't nobody done that but Barbra Streisand and Jennifer Lopez. That's pretty good company."

No cops around. He makes a screeching right turn. He doesn't like sitting in traffic, and he doesn't like being driven around. "I rather drive," he says. "'Cause don't nobody know where I really wanna go. Sometimes I don't know where I'm going 'til I get there. I guess you can say I have a personalized way of driving." ♠