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For the past four years, T.I.'s been on a tremendous journey filled with both personal and legal hardships. Finally

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through changes xxxxxx

lly home, the King of the South has found out who he's become along the way. Words Ben Detrick Images F. Scott Schafer

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Echo Recording Studios is not an easy place to find. The unmarked building is lodged in a cluster of industrial structures on a ragged stretch of Southwest Atlanta lined with vacant houses, hair salons and meandering junkies. Before entering, guests wait in front of a surveillance camera, until a chain-link fence wound with razor wire slides open. The yellow Ferrari, silver Porsche and stretch limousine parked in the protected courtyard are early clues that this is not an ordinary warehouse. The entrance to the actual studio is via another secure doorway, this one protected by a large cage of thick metal bars. And deep within this prisonlike tangle of steel and wire is Clifford "T.I." Harris, a free man.

Seated on a swivel chair, beneath a collection of closed-circuit monitors, on a warm evening, T.I. is under observation too. The small mixing room is packed with a camera crew, a VJ with wholesome R&B-singer looks, an engineer and assorted label personnel. Dressed casually but crisply—in dark denim jeans, an army-style button-up, a Red Sox fitted and Air Jordan sneakers—the 29-year-old rapper is illuminated by a halo of camera lights that glint off the chunky watch wrapped around his wrist. With recently recorded songs blaring from the speakers, T.I. mouths the lyrics, his fingers dancing in midair, his wrist flicking to punctuate snare hits. There's a *Jersey Shore*-bound anthem plucked from the same peapod as 2008's Rihanna-led "Live Your Life" single (complete with boisterous "ayes!" and all). There's a poppy love song that the VJ breathlessly proclaims to be his favorite. And then there's another track, a mean one, that T.I. penned while incarcerated in federal prison last year. Here, he growls about grabbing a knife to "leave a nigga drippin' like a sippy cup." The smile plastered on the VJ's face turns waxen. "That one's more aggressive," T.I. says of the song. "Prison kind of shook my mind up a bit. It woke something up in my mind that was gone."

After completing the last three months of his yearlong jail sentence at an Atlanta halfway house—a punishment stemming from federal weapons charges—T.I. has come home. Things are different, and not just because he no longer shares a room with five cell mates. The terrain upon which he built his empire—six albums, a closet stuffed with RIAA-certified gold and platinum plaques, his Grand Hustle Records label, big endorsement deals, millions of dollars in the bank—has shifted. T.I.'s vacated position as ATL's most-celebrated dope

boy is crowded with candidates like Gucci Mane, Jeezy, hell, even Waka Flocka Flame. The *Billboard* pop charts T.I. dominated with smash singles from his last album, 2008's double-platinum *Paper Trail*, have become a playpen for babies such as Drake and B.o.B (an artist on T.I.'s Grand Hustle Records no less). Still, with his seventh album, *King Uncaged*, due late this summer, Tip's not ready to cede his crown. "The term 'King of the South' did not exist before me," says T.I. between sips from a Heineken bottle. "The term cannot be passed along unless I choose to pass it along."

With a small frame, a head slightly too large for his body, and intense features, T.I. doesn't look like a grizzled rap veteran who's spent the last decade battling for primacy beneath the Mason-Dixon Line. But he has aged. While the youthful version of T.I. charged out of Cobb County jail in 2004 with sneering defiance, after serving time for violating probation, the contemporary model is far more subdued. To be sure, a mature, civic-minded T.I. can still sell records. *Paper Trail*, his sixth effort that included several singles with inspirational and reflective themes, was responsible for his most-notable moments of commercial success to date. But the LP was also cleansed of the gunplay, drug dealing and bristling menace that characterized so much of his earlier music. The duality expressed on T.I.'s 2007 split-personality album, *T.I. Vs T.I.P.*, seemed questionable to some critics then, but he contains multitudes. There's the public facade (entertainer, executive, faithful fiancé on the straight and narrow), and then there's the *other* T.I. (a reckless thug who bought a stack of machine guns on the day of the 2007 BET Hip-Hop Awards). Only he knows where one ends and the other begins—or if they both still exist.

T.I. spent much of the last year counting calendar days in a low-security federal prison in Forrest City, Arkansas, in a room with five other inmates. The 185-man dormitory was spartan in comparison to his mansion overlooking Georgia's Lake Spivey, but it wasn't without some comforts. Behind bars, he was able to coach sports, play handball and tinker around with musical instruments. Tip says he never felt any sense of danger, but admits to having a few disagreements over "principle."

The sequence of events that ended with T.I.'s incarceration began on May 3, 2006, in Cincinnati, Ohio. Following a concert, his entourage was involved in an altercation with locals at an after-party. As a van carrying T.I. and his crew cruised along Interstate 75, a green Jeep Cherokee drew alongside and riddled their vehicle with bullets. When they pulled over, Tip's childhood friend Philant Johnson was lifeless, an entry wound in his left temple.

"I felt all those rounds were fired for me," T.I. later told the courtroom during the November 2008 trial of Hosea Thomas, the man sentenced to 66 years in prison for pulling the trigger.


A few weeks after the bloodshed in Cincinnati, T.I. booked a New York City recording studio for himself and Grand Hustle artists Young Dro and Alfamega. If his anguish appeared under control on the surface, his state of mind was revealed in the booth. Over a jarring, violent beat, he snarled threats and promised vengeance upon enemies. Sadly, any therapeutic benefits were negated by interruptions caused by an inept engineer. At first, T.I. was friendly, offering encouragement, weed and beer. But when technical difficulties dragged on for hours, his mood darkened.

After the engineer made another mistake, an angry Tip threatened him from the vocal booth. "I ain't going back to jail for you," the rapper said. "Don't make me fuck you up." A few minutes later, after another trip up by the engineer, T.I. rushed from the booth like a whirlwind in a white V-neck, yanked the man from his seat and dragged him out into the adjoining hallway. Tip could be seen barking into the engineer's face through an interior studio window. The engineer went ashen.

T.I. remembers the incident as part of a tumultuous time. "I just had a lot of mixed emotions, a lot of unchanneled aggression that I had not yet found ways to deal with properly," he says. "It started coming out at different points and periods of time, minor situations. I just spazzed out and spiraled out of control, little by little." T.I. twisted into the abyss, and his landing at rock bottom was not a soft one.

On October 13, 2007, federal ATF agents swarmed T.I.'s Range Rover in an Atlanta Walgreens parking lot just hours before the BET Hip-Hop Awards. Corey Williams, a man who had used his clean record to assist the feds and buy a number of guns for the rapper's crew during a five-month stint as his bodyguard, was wearing a wire during the delivery of three machine guns and two silencers, for which T.I. had paid \$12,000. Williams had been arrested three days prior while purchasing the weapons and had agreed to cooperate. Authorities discovered three more pistols and half a pound of marijuana in the Rover. They raided Tip's home and in his bedroom closet found two rifles, a pistol, magazines and ammunition. Hidden behind a false wall in the closet was a biometric fingerprint-scanning safe (for T.I.'s fingers), which contained two more pistols, one revolver and ammo.

When the entire cache of seized weapons was spread across a table, it looked like an arsenal suitable for invading a small



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island nation: AK-47, AR-15, HK, Calico, laser scopes, silencers. It didn't help matters that the video for "Hurt," a single from *T.I. Vs T.I.P.* that name-checked several of those exact guns, came out almost simultaneously. ("Great moment for hip-hop," T.I. chuckles ruefully about the video's timing. "Sucks for me, though.") Since then, T.I. has insisted the arsenal of firearms were only for protection, his response to festering paranoia brought about by the murder of his friend. "This world has made guns," he says. "If didn't nobody else have 'em, I wouldn't have. I wouldn't have never had 'em if muthafuckas weren't

trying to kill me. It wasn't nothing like I wanted to have guns to seem tough. I felt like they would have saved my life."

As a previously convicted felon, who could not possess firearms legally, T.I. appeared destined to serve serious time—up to 10 years, it was speculated. But he had a powerful tool at his disposal: celebrity. Tip and his legal representatives were able to convince the federal prosecutors in the Northern District of Georgia that he would be more valuable as a vocal opponent of guns, drugs and gangs on the street than behind bars. The judge was presented with a hefty

binder of clippings that detailed T.I.'s past appearances at Boys & Girls Clubs and his visits to youth detention centers.

With his potential as a vocal anticrime spokesman taken into account, T.I. asked for a plea deal heavy on community service and light on jail time. The structure was unique. In the period between the plea agreement and sentencing, he would spend a year on house arrest and perform 1,000-plus hours (out of 1,500) of community service and volunteer work and preach positivity. If his performance was deemed satisfactory by the court, T.I. would then serve a year and a day

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in federal prison, instead of a longer sentence, be under three years of supervised release, finish the remaining community service and pay more than \$100,000 in fines. "It's very hard to measure the absence of crime, but it's structured so he would have to reach the right kind of people and do it on a massive scale," explains David Nahmias, an associate justice on the Supreme Court of Georgia and the U.S. Attorney prosecuting T.I. at the time. "He reached literally tens of thousands of people. All the reports we got were that he was extraordinarily good at delivering that message."

Still, due to T.I.'s extensive criminal history, the bundle of weed in the truck and the sheer scariness of his weapons collection, the dramatic reduction in prison time raised eyebrows to the public. T.I. is quick to point out that his circumstances were unique. "Everybody want to think, Oh, well shit, I got the same charge, he ain't no different than me," he says, adding emphasis as he leans back in his seat. "No, I'm very, very different from you. I put myself on a whole 'nother playing field than you... What people don't take into consideration is the reason that I was eligible for certain agreements that they weren't eligible for was because I made myself a useful member of society. Most muthafuckas catch cases and get time. My nigga, you wasn't doing shit when you was out here, so wasn't no reason for them to keep you out here."

While awaiting sentencing, T.I. voluntarily recorded a PSA commercial for a local Atlanta TV station in which he encouraged witnesses to contact law enforcement. "People call me Tip, but this is about another kind of tip...that could help our mothers, our sisters, our brothers and our fathers help get the perpetrators who commit crimes against them off the streets," he said in the spot. The commercial gave credence to rumors that he was cooperating with the feds, that he was informing, that he was *snitching*. "Who I tell on, Escobar?" T.I. asks rhetorically. "Who I tell on? I told where Osama was at? Who did I tell on, the Glock manufacturer? There was no one above me. What you think, I'm a kingpin, telling where keys coming from Cuba?"

On the subject of snitching, T.I.'s veneer of cordial cool evaporates. His voice rises an octave. "Please understand the G code that I learned from, if you speak out your mouth that a muthafucka is telling on somebody and you can't come with undisputable, irrefutable fact to support that statement, that makes you the sucker," he says. "You are now in violation of the G code. And there ain't nobody, nowhere in

naan jail sayin' I was on they paperwork. Can't nobody show you no paperwork with my name on it. Ain't naan judge, ain't naan D.A., ain't nobody. But what troubles me is that there's muthafuckas out there talking 'bout they *think* or *believe* I'm snitching, but riding around, smoking weed and drinking beer with muthafuckas who they *know* telling. But you want to sit back and talk shit about me on the computer."

For the record, there is no mention of informing on the copy of the presentencing plea agreement obtained by XXL. Nahmias also refutes such allegations: "Whatever is in the plea agreement is what happened," he says. T.I. did testify at the 2008 trial of Thomas, who was found guilty of murdering Tip's best friend, Philant Johnson. For more than 40 minutes, Tip went over the events of the night and the skirmish that led up to the shooting, but he never made any IDs.

"I had no useful information that could help them," says T.I. "If you pull up the statement that I made, I said I didn't know who it was. All I could tell you was a car pulled up, open fire, pulled off... I looked at dude and say, 'I don't know if that's who did it. I didn't see no face.'"

"Paperwork say his own brother, whoever was in the car with him, told on him. Whatever I got to say couldn't be more useful than that. What they gonna do, give me some time off for testimony that's not a tenth as good as the person riding in the car with him? That shit don't make no sense." (XXL confirmed Tip's claims: Padron Thomas and another man, Mose Patrick Brown, testified that Hosea Thomas was the shooter. T.I. never ID'd him.)

T.I.'s transformation from trap star to model citizen has been abrupt. It's difficult to recall another artist whose public persona and musical content distinctly shifted due to the insertion of the legal system, and not as a result of natural maturation. On "Top Back," a 2006 single off *King*, T.I. rapped, "Other rappers old news, told dudes I'm a pro/With a loaded .44 and a quarter-brick of blow/Nigga, don't you hit me 'less you buying six or mo'." These were not uncharacteristically aggressive lines from T.I.—from the beginning of his career, first-person, present-tense references to hustling and violence littered his music. Now they don't.

While the court didn't demand that T.I. water down his lyrics on *Paper Trail*, the terms of the plea agreement stipulated that his reduced sentence was dependant on his spreading positivity. "I can talk about drugs and guns," says T.I., who frames his change in content as a matter of authenticity. "And I do.

It's just in a different way. I *can* go on a record and say whatever I want to say, but I just never done that. When T.I. was threatening you, whatever he was threatening you with, he had. Whatever it is he was saying would be done and could be done. He was telling the truth. Right now, for me to sit here and talk about having guns in my waistband would be a far cry from the truth. It's not the case. It doesn't feel like me to kick shit that ain't a reality."

There's a catch. By the end of the summer, T.I. will have completed the remaining 500 hours of community service demanded by his plea agreement, at which point, his legal responsibility for being a positive role model ends (although he still will have probation for the next three years, only traditional requirements apply there). And August is right when *King Uncaged* is scheduled for release. "As for his music, we'll have to see what he does," says Nahmias. "He has freedom of speech."

For the time being, T.I. is playing the role of the law-abiding citizen focused on the good things. He has a big role in the new movie *Takers* and is busy promoting his clothing line, Akoo. He's engaged to long-term girlfriend Tameka "Tiny" Cottle, a former member of the group Xscape and the mother of two of T.I.'s five children. He says the right things in court. He says the right things in interviews. He hosted an MTV series called *T.I.'s Road to Redemption* in 2009, where he encouraged at-risk kids to stay out of trouble. He followed Chris Brown's lead, with a rehabilitative appearance on *Larry King Live* expressing contrition while cloaked in pastel colors. Could his next career move be making songs to help toddlers learn the alphabet? "Word, I can dig that, man," says T.I. "AK-47, M-16, HK, SK." He pauses, before retracting what could be interpreted as advocating guns for kids. "Nah, I'm just joking," he clarifies.

There's no question T.I. is serious about staying out of legal trouble. The question is whether he can remain a rap superstar while fundamentally changing his lifestyle, his persona and his music. "It's hard to turn people on to a new side of you," Tip says. "But no one is going to stay the same forever. Most people find something to like about you. I don't feel the need to unnecessarily be aggressive. But when the mood strikes me, and it's sincere, I just go with it... Now, you have me, and you have the me that used to be. Oddly enough, I'm still the same man. I just have a different mentality. A lot of my values, morals, standards and principles are the same, but my mentality is different."

As it should be. ♦

