



21387

POSITION

OFF

125

POWER

Street-respected and now commercially accepted, **T.I. CONTINUES HIS GRIND** from the trap to the top of the rap game. Whether you feel he's The King of the South or not, it's fine time to give shawty his props.

Words **BONSU THOMPSON** // Images **CLAY PATRICK MCBRIDE**



T.I. is now platinum. Like just now, at 2:30 in the afternoon on Friday, February 25, here in a closet-sized dressing room at the world famous Apollo Theater, where he's waiting for his TV-taping showtime, the Atlanta D-Boy turned rapper and CEO got the call from an Atlantic Records rep. It's official.

His latest album, *Urban Legend*, has shipped its millionth unit.

So today is a good day. But it's been a long, pot-holed road for the man born Clifford Harris some 24 years ago. He was cutting demo tapes at age 11, crack dimes at 12. Discovered by former Parental Authority producer Kawan "KP" Prather, he was signed as a teenager to his hometown's premier label, LaFace

Records. Sadly, though, he was ignored after head honcho L.A. Reid took over parent company Arista and shifted his focus to pop acts like Pink and Avril Lavigne. Despite production work from rap's hottest new production team, the Neptunes, and T.I.'s bold and frequent proclamation that he was "The King of the South," his 2001 debut, *I'm Serious*, went double-Styrofoam.

Dropped, but not quite humbled, T.I. got with his DJ, Toomp, and his manager, Jason Geter, and started a new label, Grand Hustle. Empowering his Pimp Squad Click crew and signing rappers Big Kuntry, Mecca AK and female duo Xtaci, T.I. wrote his name in fire on the streets. He sold 40,000 mixtapes (*In Da Streets Pt. I and II*); appeared on records with the likes of Baby, Mystikal, Tupac and Bone Crusher; and completed 80 percent of a second album before signing a joint-venture deal with Atlantic in 2003. Solidifying him, in David Banner's words, as "the mouthpiece for all the traps and ghettos around the world," *Trap*

Hard work's pretty much your calling card, huh. What's your idea of "grand hustling"? It means hustling in a science form, like to the next level. People take hustling and automatically connect it to selling dope. But to me, selling dope is the hustler's last resort. Hustling is taking nothing and turning it into something, taking what's only worth five and getting 10.

You see dope as a hustler's last resort, but you resorted to it early in life.

Selling dope was the only way that I knew to provide sufficient funds at the time and still maintain the lifestyle that I wanted. The only people that I knew that were driving the kind

Kind of. But at the same time, before I actually turned myself in, I knew I was going, so I made preparations. I orchestrated it to where shit could still move. Like, Kuntry was doing shows, Mecca AK was doing shows. They dropped they mixed tapes; they tapes was doing well. Xtaci was doing shows. And in the meantime, Clay and Hammer [of Grand Hustle] was booking shows like crazy for when I get out.

Clarify exactly how you violated probation.

It was a gun charge. The gun was in my house. But see, the thing is, I was involved in some shit that the Federal Bureau of Investigations was poking they nose in. Somehow my name had came up in the association of these people, and there was some murders and dope [involved]. They had nothing on these guys, so they wanted me to turn on them. But I basically told them, "Y'all barking up the wrong tree, shawty. If y'all figured I had something to do with that shit, you're mistaken." But before they even hollered at me and told me there was a problem, they raided my house. Coincidentally, right after we wrapped the "Rubber Band

"THE FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATIONS WAS POKING THEY NOSE IN.

SOMEHOW MY NAME HAD CAME UP IN THE ASSOCIATION OF THESE PEOPLE, AND THERE WAS SOME MURDERS AND DOPE [INVOLVED]. I BASICALLY TOLD THEM, 'Y' ALL BARKING UP THE WRONG TREE, SHAWTY.'

Muzik sold over 700,000 copies before T.I. got knocked last spring for violating parole from a 1998 drug charge. Out just in time to ravage Lil' Flip onstage at Hot 107.9's June birthday concert in Atlanta, T.I. then obliterated his Houston-based rival's street cred with a soon-to-be-classic mixtape, *Down With the King*.

Today, the "Rose Gold King" is placed on a pedestal by music giants in the studio ("T.I.'s the Jay-Z of the South," says Pharrell Williams) and in the offices ("Let's be clear," states Lyor Cohen. "T.I.—that kid's the truth"). Jay's pretty fond of him too, having bestowed an S. Carter endorsement deal, a place on last year's Best of Both Worlds tour, and a huge look on the Destiny's Child smash "Soldier." Grand Hustle's DJ Drama sums it up: "Tip has been proving himself from day one," he says. "'King of the South' is a lot to have on your shoulders, but he holds it well."

Minutes ago, you were informed that *Urban Legend* has been certified platinum. After all the work you've put in, and all the obstacles you've overcome, do you feel like you can finally celebrate?

Not really, not yet. I never placed a number on success. Whether it's platinum, double ... triple platinum. If Usher can drop an album and sell a million in the first week, then that kind of sets the [standard] high. Like, what I'm doing, that shit is aight. Platinum is cool. But you got Eminem selling wild records, OutKast and Jay-Z and... Jay-Z and Linkin Park put some shit together with five songs that niggas done already heard, and it went through the roof. They outsold me in their first week. I just feel I still got a lot of work to do.

of cars that I thought was cool and who woke up when they wanted, hit the clubs and just did what they wanted to do were dope dealers. So naturally, in the environment that I was in, it's everyday life. You look outside; that's what you see. You don't see a doctor, a lawyer, a teacher or something like that. That don't seem realistic.

What was your relationship with your family while you were deep in the streets?

They ain't like it, but they helped me when they could and left me the fuck alone when they couldn't deal with it. They always told me that I should be doing something else, and at one point in my life, I didn't really communicate with my family like that. I'd call them just to let them know I was cool but... At one point we was in the streets real heavy, around '96, '97, '98. I knew not to even go around my mama and my grandmama house, 'cause I knew they was gonna be saying, Why I ain't in school? What am I doing? And I didn't want to hear that shit.

What was it specifically that turned you off about school?

In high school I seen it like, everybody who drove they mama car to school, mama bought they school clothes and ain't had to worry about shit else but going to school—they was the cool niggas. But niggas might not know what this man going through, coming back and forth to school, and here they laughing at his sneakers. This nigga [could be] living some grown man situations. I just didn't like being around that shit. I think I matured way faster than everybody else. I felt like I knew what I wanted to do, and they were trying to figure it out. So why was I there?

But your time in the streets has continued to haunt you, even in your music career.

When you got locked up last year, did you feel like you let your crew down?

Man" video, right when we yelled "Cut, it's a wrap!" I get a phone call from my neighbor, and he was like, "S.W.A.T., helicopters and all kinds of shit is out here." I ain't even go home.

What was all the ruckus about?

My security at the time, a good buddy of mine, was staying at my house when I was on the road. And he had left his pistol under my bed. They went into the house and lifted up my bed and saw the pistol. He comes to the house and claims the pistol and they don't believe him. They say, "How is this your pistol and it ain't your house?" Basically, when they saw they didn't have shit on me for real, and I wasn't cooperating, they just found a way to fuck with me. Following me, all kinds of shit. Like, we had a Grand Hustle Christmas party on the 23rd leading into the 24th. And they come in looking for me—cut the lights on, stop the music. They took me to jail. I made bond the next morning, and they followed me. I get banged coming home from the club the day after I get out. They got me on suspended license, marijuana, all kinds of little shit. They just kept getting me on little shit to where I had to go and do some time.

Everybody was buggin' how you came out of jail and immediately got into drama with Lil' Flip. Being that he's not a street dude, did you ever feel like the fight was unfair?

Nah. 'Cause he put my name in his mouth. If the shit don't never get to me, if you don't never make reference to me, you never put me in it, then I have nothing to say about it. But once you do, then you open season. That's just like a woman. Everybody know a man ain't supposed to hit a woman. But it's certain things that women can do that make you say, "Okay, all bets are off." You put your hands on my mama, all bets are off. You spit in my face, all bets are off. There's certain things that women

STYLING: TAMEKA FOSTER; GROOMER: DEXTER ZACHERY/ALLSTAR CUTZ; PREVIOUS SPREAD: BLAZER BY RYAN KENNY; POCKET SQUARE BY SEAN JOHNSON; JEANS BY EVISU; FROM USA BOUTIQUE



310

MOTORING
FOOTWEAR, APPAREL AND ACCESSORIES



Footwear available
at select
retail locations

NATIONWIDE
Macy's
Marshall Field's
Nordstrom
d.e.m.o.

NORTHERN CALIFORNIA
Oxford Street

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA
A.G. Men's Wear
Hip Hop Connections
Hurricane
Shoe City

FLORIDA
Mr. Kicks

GEORGIA
Friedman's Shoes
Georgio's

MICHIGAN
City Slicker

MINNESOTA
Friedman's Shoes

**NEW YORK
AND VICINITIES**
Against All Odds
B-Jays
Mr. Joe's
Moe's Sneaker Spot
Pulse
Ragamuffin
Shoe Spot
Sneaker Villa

OHIO
Next

TENNESSEE
Village Mart

TEXAS
D&K Fashions
G-2
Georgio's
The Man's Shop

T.I.



**"IT WAS ME, HIM [LIL' FLIP]
AND THE YOUNG GUNZ, AND
I GOT THE PICTURE, TOO.**

**IT'S SO FUNNY, 'CAUSE EVERYBODY GOT A COOL
FACIAL EXPRESSION, CHILLING, AND THIS NIGGA
FACE ALL BALLED UP LIKE HE GOT A POINT TO PROVE,
ALL FROWND UP. SO THEN MY BRAIN COMPUTES:
DOES THIS NIGGA HAVE A PROBLEM WITH ME?"**

can do to make shit change—it's just a woman that did something to make bets go off.

Who pulled your coat to Flip dissing you while you were locked?

My old lady. Somebody she knew had been to a show, and Flip was trying to holla at them, and I guess they wasn't feeling it. He was like, "You don't know who I am? I run this city!" And so they say, naturally, "This Tip city. Tip run this." And he's like, "I know you ain't talking 'bout T.I.?!" with the little laughs and chuckles. So he's like, "I got something for

that nigga. Watch this." So, then he go and do a show: "Tell T.I., 'Game over.' Who's The King of the South?" Naturally, the next day they call my girl. My girl [tells me] and I say, "Nah, you lying." And she's like, "Yeah, that's exactly what happened." Then a DJ came from a radio show... This is another time at a radio show in the daytime. Outside, two totally non-related situations. He heard the same story. "Tell T.I., 'Game over.' Who The King of the South?"

Did you know his history already?



"I WASN'T HALF AS CONVINCED THAT I WAS THE KING OF THE SOUTH BACK THEN AS I AM NOW, SO I PROBABLY WOULDN'T HAVE HELD ON TO THAT SH#T SO TIGHT IF EVERYBODY WASN'T SAYING THAT I COULDN'T BE IT."

All I knew about that nigga was when we did a photo shoot for the cover of a magazine—it was me, him and the Young Gunz, and I got the picture, too. It's so funny, 'cause everybody got a cool facial expression, chilling, and this nigga face all balled up like he got a point to prove, all frowned up like he's some kind of lifer or something. So then my brain computes: Does this nigga have a problem with me? Is he too much of a bitch to open up his mouth and say that he don't like something? Then I got hot. You gonna wait til I'm locked up and you think that I got to do three years, and that's when you figure you gonna? Okay, I got something for you. **Last fall, Jay-Z took you out on the Best of Both Worlds tour after kicking R. Kelly off. When did y'all develop a relationship?**

Like from the beginning, when I was locked up, Steve Stoute had contacted me and said that Jay wanted me to endorse the sneakers. I was like, "Great man, that's wonderful. I'd love to. As soon as I'm able, I'll holla." And that's what I did. Once we closed that deal, me and him still

hadn't met. I came to New York—I think I was doing [MTV's] *Direct Effect* or some shit, and he was doing *TRL*. We met in the dressing room for the first time. See, I just be slapping hands and keepin' it moving. The last thing I want is for a nigga to be like, "Yeah, that nigga all in my face." Just like I want a muthafucka to do to me, that's how I'm a do you. Nigga called me back [to the dressing room] and was like, he wanted us to come to the show at the Garden, and wanted me and Bleek to do "Round Here," and me to do "Rubber Band Man." And I was like, "Yeah, cool." It just so happened that when I came that night, that's when the R. Kelly shit happened, and Jay said, "Come back." I was like, "Cool," 'cause I was keeping in contact with Bleek. Free Beanie Sigel while we at it.

These were the New York shows, right?

Yeah. I was keeping in contact with Bleek, and he hit me like, "That nigga Jay said he want you to come back down today." So we just keep going back and forth. Then the last show—'cause there was four shows, three at Madison

Square Garden and one in Jersey, so I had did all four shows—and at the last one, it was like we were a team: me, Jay, Puff, Mary J., Bleek, Freeway, Young Gunz, Method Man, Redman, Foxy Brown, Busta Rhymes, Q-Tip. It was like we was seeing each other everyday, connecting. It was a good feeling. And one of them nights we was popping bottles like the '96 Bulls, like we done really pulled it off. It felt like I was a part of something real big. But then Jay said, "Yo, you coming to Miami?" And I'm like, Man, it's time to wake up now. [Laughs] "I got a album coming out, I got some money to go get. I love y'all niggas, but I gots to go." I had to go to the West Coast to do a promo run, and in the meantime, I'm back and forth with them. And Jay say, "Aww shit, man, promo tour? What's better promotion than this?" I'm like, "You got a point there. I'm on my way." So, I went on and finished the tour, man.

So, you've wrapped up the South and NY.

Where else do you still have to conquer?

I would say Hollywood, L.A. That's all I'm missing right now. I mean, niggas know my face and know who I am. I think I'm in L.A. where I was in New York before I dropped "Bring Em Out." Like, niggas in the hood love me, but the mainstream don't know me yet. I think that'll all come into play with the movies and shit like that. They'll fall in line.

I guess it really helps when Lyor Cohen is cosigning heavy, huh?

Absolutely, man. I get a call from Lyor probably once every week, saying, "How's everything going? You satisfied? What do you think could be done better?"

Did Lyor seem excited to have inherited you when he took over Atlantic?

The first time I met Lyor in person was when we was playing the album. We spoke on the phone when I was locked up. He was real concerned and supportive: "How you doing man? They ain't fucking with you, is they?" That kind of shit. And then him saying, "Hey man, we trying to build something real great over here. I'ma put this label on your back." And I'm like, Shit, that's what I been telling these muthafuckas for a long time. As long as the shit that I want to do get done, then I don't mind helping you. If my shit ain't done right, then I ain't focusing on nothing else.

Nothing else but being The King of the South, right?

You know, [I remember the first time I said that]. I think it was me and KP just talking. We could've been talking about fucking hoes, anything at the time. And I was just saying, "Shit nigga, I'm The King of the South!" And he was like, "I bet you won't say it." And I was like, "Why not? Who's gonna stop me?" It wasn't until muthafuckas started caring about it and saying, "No you ain't..." I'm like, "Who the fuck are you to tell me what I am and what I ain't?" I wasn't half as convinced that I was The King of the South back then as I am now, so I probably wouldn't have held on to that shit so tight if everybody wasn't saying that I couldn't be it. ♠