

Score

A year and a half after his friend and partner Pimp C died, Bun B is back to bless hip-hop fans with one last album from the mighty, mighty **UGK**.

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There was a time I'd come to New York and could be anonymous," says Bun B. "But that all changed over the past few years.

Seeing as how he hails from Port Arthur, Texas, you'd think Bun B, Bernard Freeman, would blend right in at a place called Houston's, but this isn't the neighboring metropolis that he and his partner, Chad "Pimp C" Butler, helped make famous with their brand of trill street blues. As a matter of fact, this isn't even the South. This is Houston's restaurant, an upscale steakhouse in the Flatiron district in New York City, where Bun has come to promote *4 Life*, the sixth and final studio album he created with Pimp as the duo UGK.

Dressed in jeans, a colorful graphic tee, matching windbreaker and a black fitted with neon lettering, the rap sticker stands out among the restaurant's power-suit-wearing patrons like a triple-stacked Styrofoam cup at a wine tasting. And sure enough, not long after he sits down, the server, a petite woman in her early 20s, recognizes she's in the presence of hip-hop royalty. "Excuse me, but aren't you Bun B," she inquires, after running through the day's specials, including the tortilla soup that Bun will order along with a tuna burger, fries and margarita. "You did a song with my boy Termanology. I thought you looked familiar."





Considering all the chart-topping collaborations Bun's done with the likes of Jay-Z (1999's "Big Pimpin'"), Three 6 Mafia (2000's "Sippin' on Some Syrup") and OutKast (2007's "Int'l Players Anthem [I Choose You]"), "How We Rock," a single he cut last year with a little-known Boston up-'n'-comer, isn't what you would expect to win him notice. But this is just a testament to the Underground King's far-reaching appeal—even after 17 years in the music business.

From their 1992 debut, *Too Hard to Swallow*, to 1994's *Super Tight*, to the classic *Ridin' Dirty* in 1996, to *Dirty Money* in 2001, UGK consistently delivered state-of-the-art gangsta rap. The combination of Bun's lyrical muscle with Pimp's melodic musings on the mic and behind the boards made for a deep trove of trunk-rattling anthems that earned the duo about the highest level of respect the rap game affords—from fans and peers alike, regardless of coast or region. Still, it wasn't until 2007's *Underground Kingz* that the pair saw their hard work pay off in a major way. The double-disc effort earned UGK their first No. 1 album, selling just under 160,000 copies in its first week out, and eventually garnered a Grammy nod for "Int'l Players Anthem."

"We picked a great week," says Bun of how the veterans managed to top the charts in August 2007. "Secondly, we had the album that people wanted to hear. UGK as a group was blessed in that people understood that we was gonna be consistent with what we did. When I say consistent, it's like we'll make music that makes sense in 2007, but you won't be able to stamp it as 2007... When you stick to the basics and you really deal with issues and human nature, issues that the average person has to deal with, it's timeless."

Then, just as everything seemed to be falling into place, disaster struck. On the morning of Tuesday, December 4, 2007, news broke that Pimp had been found dead in his Hollywood hotel room. The L.A. County Coroner's office attributed his passing to sleep apnea, a pre-existing respiratory disorder, combined with the promethazine cough syrup found in his system. He was only 33, and he left behind a wife and three children.

Pimp's passing was a huge blow not only for his family and friends, it was a huge blow for hip-hop in general. As Bun says, "Hip-hop without Pimp C is boring." For nearly two decades, UGK had stood as one of the game's greatest duos. With one-half of the group gone, many thought it was a wrap for their reign—but Bun had other plans.

"We had to do this album," he says of *4 Life*. "We had the music, so we had to do it. There was no way around that, because UGK always meant more to people... There were a

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lot of fans and supporters who kept us going with the movement when we wanted to let it go. I think it was the best way to honor them for 17 years of support. And to honor Pimp for 17 years of making the greatest music."

Lucky for Bun, and for those fans and supporters, Pimp had long been a tireless studio rat, so there was plenty of material in the can. Enough for not only one more UGK album, but also for a posthumous solo project, *The Naked Soul of Sweet James Jones*, which will be released some time in the near future on Rap-A-Lot Records. "We had enough vocals," explains Bun. "But it wasn't just about taking whatever vocals I had available; it was about constructing songs... It wasn't about just throwing all the Pimp C I had out there. I had to really try to make an album."

The biggest challenge, Bun says, was trying to recapture that UGK sound without the group's main musical force being there to see the project through to fruition. Prior to his death, though, Pimp had begun assembling a stable of producers to carry on his sonic legacy: Brothers Wesley "Beat Masta Wes" and Avery "Averexx" Harris, DJ B-Doe, Cory Mo and Steve Delo. These dedicated soundmen chipped in to finish the tracks the late legend had been working on—and even reconstructed a few lost ones.

"We had an issue on one or two tracks with samples," says Bun, taking a sip of his margarita. "I had gotten one of his people to reproduce a track [they'd done together]. But he didn't have any files, so he had to reproduce this song he hadn't heard in two years from scratch. He didn't even have the same drum machine... When we got him the drum machine back, he had to pull out the manual. So it was crazy.

"It's still, like, a Pimp C co-production, because everything is based on what he taught them. And, really, me trying to get them to

apply everything they had learned to the process."

Indeed, Pimp's presence is felt throughout *4 Life*. The lead single, "Da Game Been Good to Me," showcases the cocksure Texan's often-overlooked vocals, as he and Bun chastise lesser MCs over a bluesy backdrop. According to Bun, the rest of the 12-song disc is vintage UGK—straight, no chaser. "One good thing about this is that we don't have a lot of music," he says. "Which, for the fans, is a bad thing. But it's really not, because it ensures that everything they get is great. This album is really a retrospect and a celebration. It looks back at everything the group has accomplished and puts it into perspective for people, like, 'Yo, these dudes started in '92, and all the way up to the last album it was a constant evolution, a constant ascent.'"

With the release of *4 Life*, Bun finally fulfills the original contract he and Pimp signed with Jive Records back on May 1, 1992. ("For me," he says, "that date's etched in stone.") The next phase of his career is that of a solo artist, something his fallen comrade had apparently foreseen. "For some reason, Pimp used to always feel like he was selfish," recalls Bun. "He was like, 'I'm always producing everything, man. I want you to rap to some other shit, and I wanna rap to some other shit.' But I'm like, 'I don't mind you producing.' Pimp felt like, for me to grow as a lyricist, I needed to rap to [different] music, but I never felt that way... I was in a great group. I felt like the best group ever. Pimp and I were the perfect complement to each other musically, and I didn't see how I would complement myself in a solo situation."

It was necessity—in the form of an eight-year prison sentence Pimp received in January 2002 for violating parole—that thrust Bun into the spotlight. By now, his work outside of UGK—loads of song-stealing guest spots, a classic *Gangsta Grillz Legend Series* mixtape with DJ Drama, and two critically acclaimed albums, 2005's *Trill* and 2008's *II Trill*—has established Bun as a powerful solo presence. Once his promotional duties are fulfilled for *4 Life*, he'll begin prepping his third solo shot, *Trill OG...aka the Trillogy*, tentatively scheduled for release this June through Rap-A-Lot. But whatever the future holds, he'll never turn his back on the past.

"I try to keep the legacy of UGK in my hands, as far as the way it's presented to the people," says Bun. "A lot of people are, frankly, still in denial. Not so much that Pimp is dead, but that UGK may be over... I want people to remember all the good shit that made them love Pimp C in the first place, and realize that nobody else could do what he does and there's no other person that it coulda come from... Luckily for all of us—myself included—we get one more ride." ♠