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**>>> WHAT
HAPPENED
TO THE
HIP-HOP
MUSIC BIZ?
Pt. 1**

G-UNITY

**Are 50 CENT & His Band of
Brothers Still Hard to the Core?**


THEY'LL PUT YOU IN A BODY BAG


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T H E D R O P

THE RISE WAS METEORIC. THE FALL WAS INEVITABLE. LAST YEAR, AMID DWINDLING SALES AND INTERNAL DISSENSION, CHINKS FINALLY STARTED TO SHOW IN G-UNIT'S PLATINUM ARMOR. NOW, PULLING TOGETHER AND GOING BACK TO BASICS, 50 AND HIS CREW SET TO WORK ON DIGGING THEMSELVES OUT OF A HOLE. AND DIGGING A NEW ONE, TO BURY THE COMPETITION.

INTERVIEWS ANSLEM SAMUEL // IMAGES MICHAEL LAVINE





G-UNIT IS

IN THE HOUSE.

50 Cent, Lloyd Banks, Tony Yayo and Young Buck—all under one roof, roaming the 52 rooms of a famous mansion in Connecticut.

Since 50 made his debut in 2003 with the modern-day classic *Get Rich or Die Tryin'*, his team from Queens has blossomed from a mixtape wrecking crew into a hip-hop enterprise responsible for more than 20 million records sold. *Beg For Mercy* they named their first group album, but they didn't show any—overwhelming the competition with a relentless, win-at-all-costs attitude and a your-beef-is-my-beef, us-against-the-world brand of loyalty.

Of course, there's been a backlash. As soon as the underdogs had settled in on top, lots of folks took to praying for their downfall. Banks and new G-Unit Records signees Mobb Deep were the first to feel the cold shoulder of a fickle fan base, as their 2006 releases—*Rotten Apple* and *Blood Money*—stalled at sales of 341,000 and 275,000, respectively. Buck's 2007 sophomore effort, *Buck the World*, saw slightly better numbers, with 400,000, but that's still a far cry from the seven figures the crew routinely posted three years before. The biggest blow came last summer, when 50's *Curtis* was bested by Kanye West's *Graduation* in their much-hyped sales showdown in September.

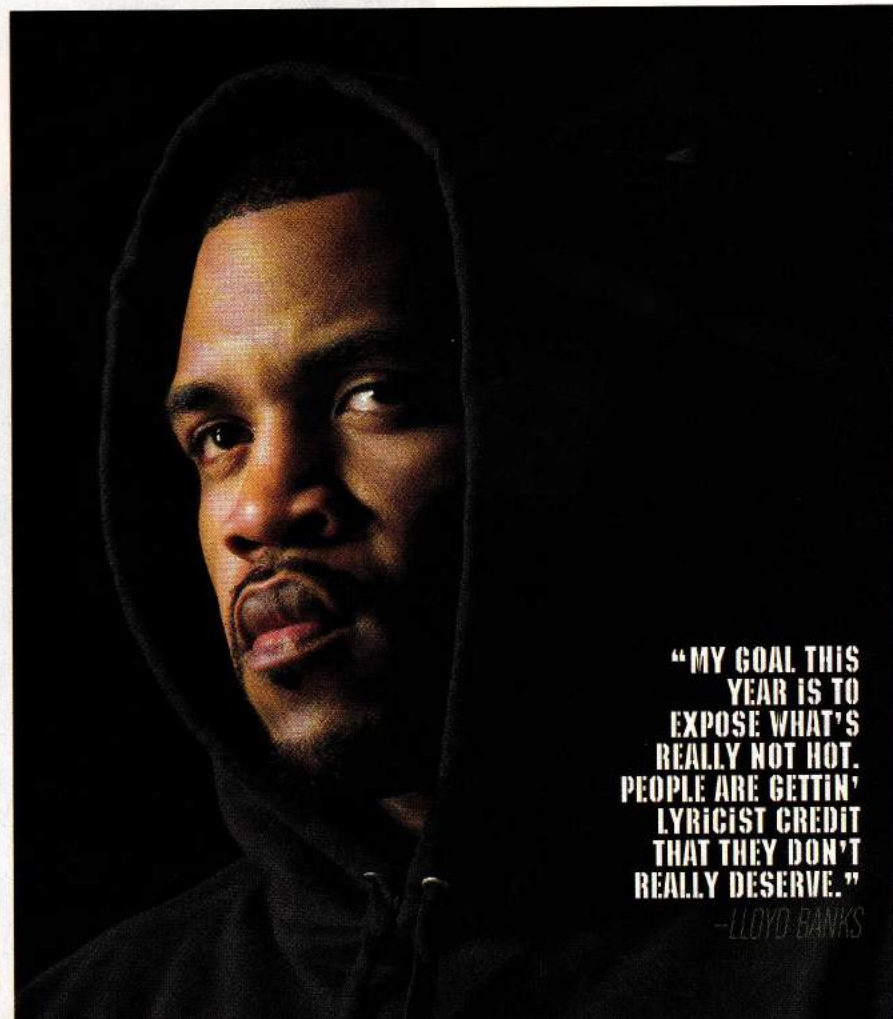
Even more surprising, perhaps, was the new attitude, or the lack thereof, displayed by 50's soldiers. Banks was silent in the face of taunts from Dipset rapper Cam'ron. Buck squashed beef with sworn enemies The Game and Jadakiss, started his own record label and spoke in interviews about not seeing eye to eye with 50 on certain matters. Sensing dissension, 50 publicly dressed down his corps and reshuffled his business operation. For the first time in five years, G-Unit looked less than bulletproof.

But the game moves in cycles, and 50 was about to hit reset. This past February, he pared his squad to its original essence and took it back to its mixtape roots with *Return of the Body Snatchers, Vol. 1*, which he released through his new social-networking site, thisis50.com. Packed with malevolent minor-key beats and steady blasts of gunfire, the tape showcases 50, Yayo and Banks in their comfort zone: talking drugs and guns, swearing

allegiance to each other, cocking and squeezing on adversaries like Fat Joe. But the absence of Buck from the project (along with Buck's appearance at a Cash Money Records concert in Tennessee) fed rumors of tension between the Nashville native and his New York colleagues. While everyone admits there was a brief rough patch, the whole team is back on solid ground, reassembled at 50's 48,000-square-foot country manse to shoot video footage for *Body Snatchers* songs and record music for another mixtape in preparation for their second official group album, *Shoot to Kill*, due later this year. On a very long night in a very large house, *XXL* goes inside the machine to get the four versemen's views on the events of the past year and a half.

LLOYD BANKS HAS BEEN QUIET LATELY.

Since the October '06 release of *Rotten Apple*, the baritone-voiced MC hasn't said much. Not even the infamous February '07 phone conversation between Cam'ron and 50, in which the Dipset chief scoffed at Banks' record sales, resulted in a peep from the punch-line king. A lack of response to a public diss didn't sound like the same rapper



"MY GOAL THIS YEAR IS TO EXPOSE WHAT'S REALLY NOT HOT. PEOPLE ARE GETTIN' LYRICIST CREDIT THAT THEY DON'T REALLY DESERVE."

—LLOYD BANKS

that would lyrically assault Ja Rule at every turn during G-Unit's beef with Murder Inc. years back. For some reason, the Southside killer opted to remain silent. That is, until now. It's around 9:30 p.m. when the 25-year-old MC saunters into 50's "Gucci room," plops down on one of the plush designer couches, leans back and starts talking.

Why haven't we heard from Lloyd Banks in so long?

When all the little bickerin' back and forth with Cam'ron, and every other rap crew that had a problem with the Unit was saying shit... To be honest with you, I wasn't thinkin' 'bout that shit.

Why not? G-Unit is known for welcoming beef.

I was going through a lot at that time. My pops had just died, like, two weeks after [*Rotten Apple*] came out. I've had a lot of close friends of mine who've passed since I got on, but if you're still in that environment, that's nothin' new... But when it happens to your mother or your father, it kinda affects you in a certain way. **Damn. How exactly did your pops pass?** He passed of a cocaine overdose. He had heart conditions... My mother was in the hospital, after suffering from two heart attacks in the same month. I had all this shit going on, and then you still gotta be held to that "bad guy" aura that's around G-Unit... After my father passed, I just needed a couple of months of alone time.

That's totally understandable. Do you think fans took that into consideration?

50 told me all the time that this industry has no remorse. They don't give a fuck about none of that shit. They just wanna hear the record. You can look at it as a mistake for fallin' back, but that is not some shit you plan for.

The music is better now, though. I'm active now. You gonna hear me on remixes, whether it's done legit or if I gotta jack it myself. My goal this year is to expose what's really not hot. People are gettin' lyricist credit that they don't really deserve... I'm not lettin' up off of nobody. What they consider to be hot—that shit comes to me like that [Snaps finger]... If you got a lil' record that's gettin' spun, I'm lookin' forward to gettin' on it and doing it better than you. And anybody that got anything to say, I'm on 'em. By the end of the year, they'll say that that nigga Banks is no joke.

How do you feel when people say they were disappointed with *Rotten Apple*?

You're never gonna make another first album. Music marks time. So when that album comes out, you're gonna know where you were in your life and what you were doing. I didn't wanna do another *Hunger for More*. I felt, lyrically, that I was better than ever—and I feel like I'm better at this point. Nothin' stays the same forever. I just think that people expect to hear some shit to blow their mind every time. I guess sometimes you may amaze niggas, and other times you might not.

There haven't been mixtapes before any of the last few G-Unit releases. Why do *Body Snatchers* now?

To be perfectly honest, man, nothin' else would be accepted. People wanna hear that shit. They wanna be reminded why we hold the position that we hold. It wasn't by mistake. It came from the grind—not havin' a Plan B. We go into the studio with that same mentality. That's what incites me.

The new material is very aggressive. Will you be addressing the rappers that came at you last year?

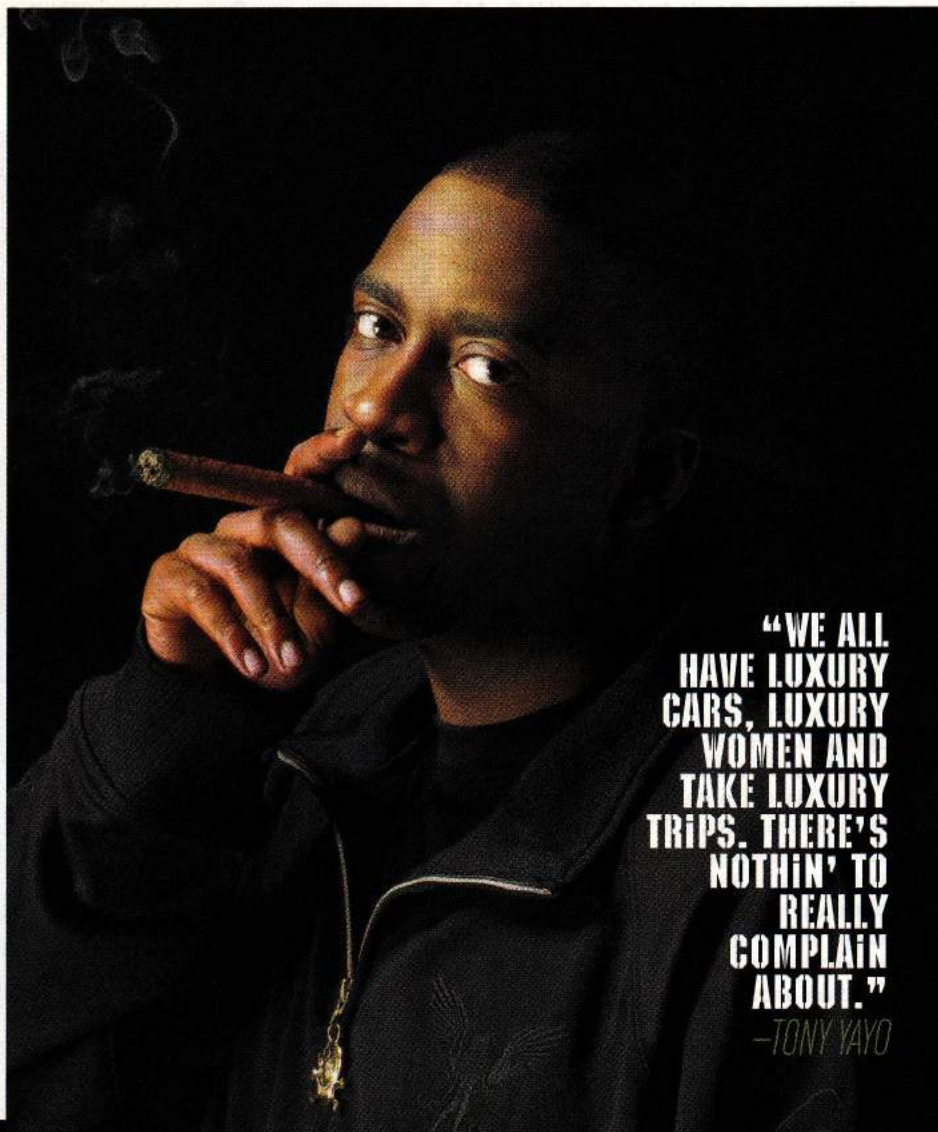
Believe me, they'll pay this year. 'Cause nothin' falls upon deaf ears. If you've never shook my hand or never had any altercation with me, then don't say nothin' about me. Everybody is competition. There ain't no more, "He ain't worth it."

TONY YAYO'S NEVER BEEN QUIET.

If he's in the vicinity, chances are you'll hear him before you actually see him. At 11:15 p.m., having just wrapped a scene for one of the several videos being shot tonight, the clique's most troublesome member holds court in the lounge area just in front of 50's personal discotheque, Club TKO. Cracking jokes with the film crew, Yayo's infectious laugh travels around the many corners of his boss's abode. Based on his jovial demeanor, one would never guess this is the same man who was just facing nine months in jail (again) for allegedly backhanding the 14-year-old son of The Game's manager, Jimmy "Henchmen" Rosemond, in March 2007. (In February, the charges were dismissed, when G-Unit associate Lowell Fletcher accepted blame for the assault. Yayo received 10 days of community service for harassment.)

With a shot of Hennessy in one hand and a freshly rolled blunt in the other, the self-proclaimed "Talk of New York" ascends the spiral staircase up to the theater room. Taking a seat in the front row, he fires up the chronic. "You can talk to me about whatever." He exhales. "Fat Joe, Game, Henchmen... I don't care."

Since you brought it up, what happened with the Henchmen case?



"WE ALL HAVE LUXURY CARS, LUXURY WOMEN AND TAKE LUXURY TRIPS. THERE'S NOTHIN' TO REALLY COMPLAIN ABOUT."
—TONY YAYO

I never did it in the first place. You know, niggas make scandals, and it's crazy how newspapers was slayin' me, yo. Sayin' that shit was close to child molestation, and everybody had me guilty before they even knew what the fuck happened... I didn't smack him. I'm a fuckin' millionaire, and I got kids myself... I'm aware that, if I smack somebody, I'ma have a lawsuit. So why would I do it?

Did you hear that Henchmen's baby mama wants a public apology and said that 50 shouldn't associate with you because your actions are "despicable"?

Why should I give a public apology for somethin' I didn't even do? And a lot of people think 50 shouldn't associate with me. Who gives a fuck? Fuck what they think. I'm me, man, and I'ma do what I wanna do. Fif is my nigga. I'ma listen to Fif. He's the businessman in this shit. If a nigga got a problem with Fif, he got a problem with me. Any nigga. Fat Joe, Game, Henchmen—the list goes on and on.

Why do you think people started hating on the Unit?

Because niggas didn't make it. Look at Fat Joe fat ass. I remember hearing *Jealous Ones Envy* eons ago. And, truthfully, niggas financially don't have this [Spreads arms out]. I'm not tryna brag about what I got, 'cause I feel like God blessed me, but niggas don't have movie theaters and strip clubs in they crib. Niggas don't have Bentleys outside... See, the thing about a lot of these niggas is they RNs. Not registered nurses—they regular niggas. Me, 50, Banks, Buck—we special kinda niggas. I know I'm definitely a special kinda nigga. 'Cause the shit I been through, none of these niggas could walk through my shoes. None of 'em.

Recently, the Internet's been buzzing about problems between Buck and 50.

What's your take on all of it?

I think sometimes Buck just be buggin' out and makes excuses for shit. Just to be honest with you. Because, we all have luxury cars, luxury women, and take luxury trips. There's nothin' to really complain about. Me? I'm a gangsta. I came from nothin'. I came from a 9-by-5 cell right into this shit, so I look at shit totally different from other niggas. And you know Buck is my nigga, but sometimes niggas make mistakes.

If what Buck was doing was wrong, how come he didn't get booted out of G-Unit, like Game?

Because Buck is more of a family member to us. Game was more of a business situation. I look at Game as a faggot-ass nigga, but Buck's like family. Everybody make mistakes, but the nigga's back, and we doing our thing. The nigga never went nowhere, truthfully.

People would look at 50 as the bad guy. But compared to all the other CEOs and the people that run businesses—the Diddys? Them dudes is coldhearted. They'll get rid of you [Slaps hands] like that. 50 never did that to none of us. Really think about it.

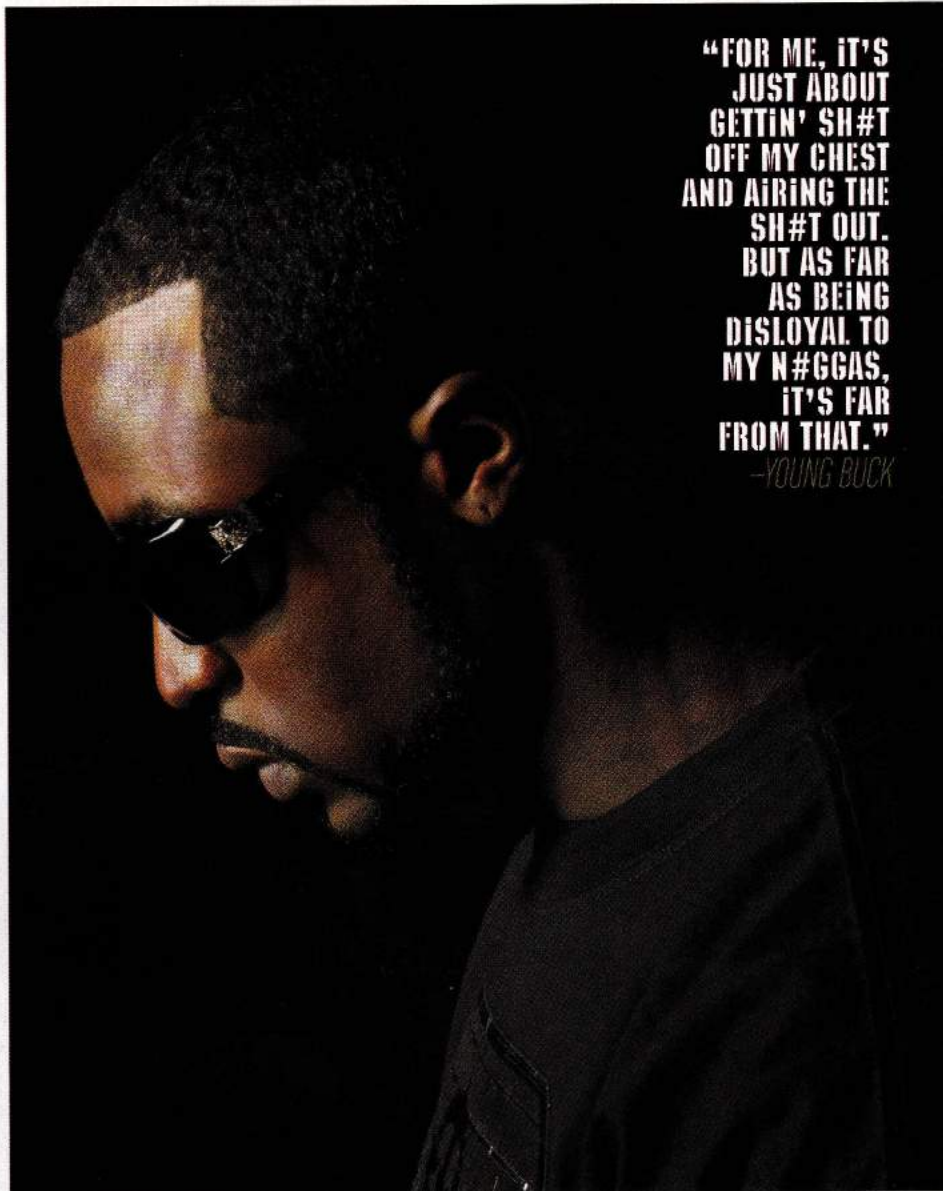
YOUNG BUCK IS A HARD MAN TO PIN DOWN.

Buck finally decides to take a break. He makes his way to the cavernous indoor-pool area to sort through the bags of food that just arrived. Grabbing a Styrofoam takeout tray stuffed with a burger and fries, he sits down by the Jacuzzi and opens up on all those pesky rumors.

Let's cut right to the chase: Was there ever any friction between you and 50?

"FOR ME, IT'S JUST ABOUT GETTIN' SH#T OFF MY CHEST AND AIRING THE SH#T OUT. BUT AS FAR AS BEING DISLOYAL TO MY N#GGAS, IT'S FAR FROM THAT."

—YOUNG BUCK



From the moment he and his entourage arrived, G-Unit's sole Southern representative has been holed up in the basement-level studio. Residing in Nashville, the Ten-A-Key rapper doesn't get to work with his New York-based label mates as often as he'd like. So while Banks, Yayo and 50 are scattered throughout the house doing interviews and shooting videos for *Body Snatchers*, Buck is playing catch-up, adding his vocals to material they've already laid down for *Shoot to Kill* and another planned mixtape.

It's coming on 1 o'clock in the morning when

Me and 50, the communication had just kinda separated for a lil' minute. It wasn't nothin' far as expectancy of me leavin' G-Unit. A lot of extra shit surrounded it—like the fact of me not being on the *Body Snatchers* mixtape and that Cash Money shit with me comin' out on-stage at one of their shows—[and that] made the shit a little bit hyper than what it really was. At the end of the day, my niggas know where I stand. I missed *Body Snatchers*, but, goddamnit, expect me on the next mixtape. **Over the past year, you've aired differences with 50 in the press. You've made**

peace with artists G-Unit still has beef with. You don't think stuff like that comes off as being disloyal?

It's an understanding that we have as a crew. Not just with 50, but as a family. Everybody has had they situations, but everybody handles that shit a lil' different. 'Cause we all individual men. For me, it's just about gettin' shit off my chest and airing the shit out. But as far as being disloyal to my niggas, it's far from that.

A lot of niggas hold in their true feelings toward situations, and then they build up so much anger. When they finally let their anger out, they make mistakes behind that anger. I choose not to make mistakes through anger, by voicing it before it even turns into anger. These situations is never anger for me—they're just me venting and lettin' a mutha-fucka know what a nigga going through.

Why couldn't you just call 50 if you had a problem?

I tried to call and didn't get no answer. Picture you constantly callin' my phone and I don't pick up. You gonna stop callin', right? Then you look up on TV and you see a video, and everybody there but you. Then what? So you can start adding it on, my dude, and then you'll see where I was at the time. It wasn't a situation where I'm not there and I ain't called and I ain't lookin'. Nah, man. I pretty much pushed every line that was possible to try to make contact, and it just wasn't there, and that was hard for me to understand.

How did the lines of communication between y'all finally get back on track?

I pretty much knew that, after me being verbal with the press and lettin' them know I felt like communication is slackin' between me and my nigga, that somehow 50 was gonna reach out, and he reached out to my manager, Sha Money. Sha was like, "Yo, I got 50 on the phone. Y'all need to talk."

What was that conversation like?

I just pretty much explained to 50 everything that's been going on and the reason for what I've said and what I've been going through over the period of time of me not communicating with him. He understood a lot of different things, 'cause he knew the position he played in the situation, too. We both came eye to eye, like men, being it wasn't nothin' that was that deep, far as me displacing myself from my niggas.

You started your own label, Cashville Records. Is that incorporated within G-Unit?

Cashville records is G-Unit South... I started yellin' "G-Unit South" from the beginning, throughout my music, being that I'm the only fuckin' South nigga within G-Unit. So that was my push. 50 always know that what a nigga always wanted to do was start his own label. Whether it was a sublabel to G-Unit or his own shit. That's what always been my whole thing from the beginning. 50's whole thing to me was: It's just about getting that positioning. "When the time is right, nigga, go. When the time is right and you're in the position, just go." I felt like I was in the position. Who wouldn't feel like they was in the position,

when you able to sign niggas like the Outlawz—seasoned niggas. As far as underground, seasoned niggas like C-Bo... I started to conversate with 50. And I branded it Cashville Records, being that that's my home, and it's a brand itself. That's what I leaned on. That's what we agreed upon to move and do.

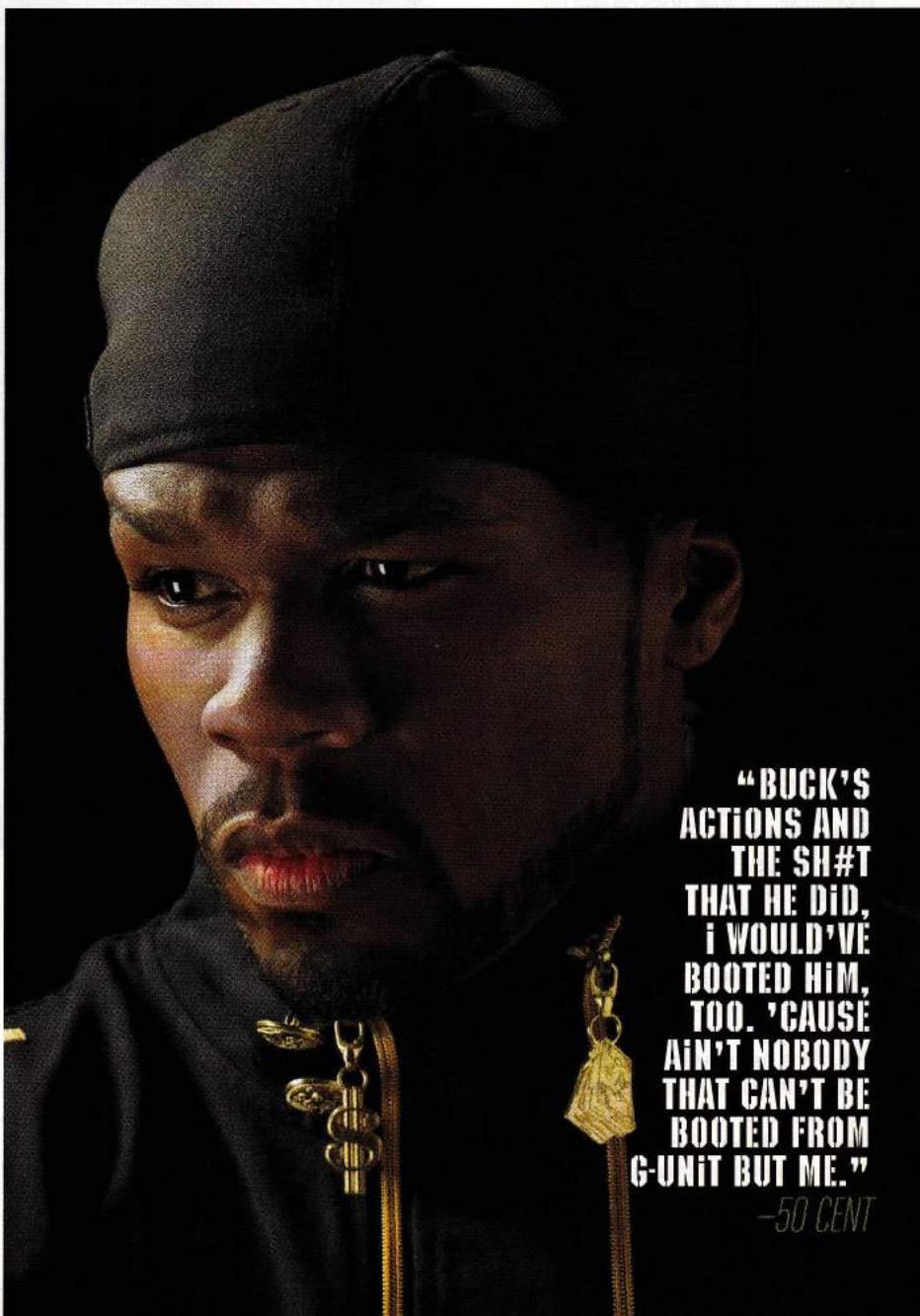
50 focuses. And 50's shit has been having to be so focused on a lot of big other things, that I feel me putting my artists up, putting my business, far as with my label, is a burden to 50 Cent. So the situation that you see created through Cashville Records is a situation that I created on my own—but I still got my big bruh push whenever I need. And I ain't lean on his shoulder yet in no kind of way. I know it's there. That's what means the most to me, okay? I can be sitting here with two million, but I know it's a hundred million right here. It's just in a different way. So why leave this? There's no need.

So it was never a case of you trying to

leave G-Unit?

My heart really is with my crew, because we built what we got from nothin'. I came amongst these niggas when 50 was ink-in' his deal with Dre and Em, and I come from the same environments as Yayo and Banks... I'm just comfortable with my niggas, and I don't wanna see myself departing from somethin' that is so dear to me. Especially when a nigga work so hard to get it. 'Cause, to watch somethin' crumble for nothin', you look back on that like, Damn, I let this shit go for *nothin'*. I view all that as nothin', because I'm still here.

50 CENT WORKS UNGOGLY HOURS.



**"BUCK'S
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G-UNIT BUT ME."**

-50 CENT

It's almost 3 o'clock in the morning, and he's in the process of shooting his third music video of the night—this one for "Be Good to Me." Mean muggin' the camera, the G-Unit CEO performs on cue each time the soothing bass line drops. His energy level seems remarkably high for someone whose workday began with an 11 a.m. photo shoot in Manhattan that didn't end 'til 4 p.m. That was followed by back-to-back meetings and a three-hour commute in rush-hour traffic to his Connecticut crib, where he immediately jumped into this marathon of video shoots.

Once this set of scenes is complete, 50 heads upstairs to the "white room" until he's needed for the next video. Walking over to the fridge in one of the house's seven kitchens, he grabs an almost-empty two-liter bottle of Coke and heads to the all-white couch by the wide screen TV. Putting his feet on the matching white coffee table, 50 takes a much-needed breather. But with loads of controversy to clear up (and maybe more to stir up), there'll be no rest for the weary tonight.

Do you feel like *Curtis* was a success?

I like the *Curtis* album, 'cause it's well executed, and it's what I wanted. I just think the ball was dropped with the presentation to the public, because I didn't get a chance to present it properly.

What do you mean by that?

When I dropped "I Get Money," "Ayo Technology" came right on top of that. Then the Robin Thicke video leaked.

You had some harsh words for Jimmy Iovine after that.

Interscope manufactures hate for 50 Cent. 'Cause they go pro-50 Cent, then they go anti-50 Cent. They fund me when I'm makin' my music, and they'll finance the whole G-Unit campaign. So, from time to time, I feel like I'm entitled to tell Jimmy Iovine, "Fuck you, mutha-fucka! Don't fuckin' tell me nothin'."

And the 9/11 showdown with Kanye. For the first time in your career, you were perceived to have lost a battle.

It wasn't a battle between 50 Cent and Kanye West. It was Interscope versus Def Jam, and Def Jam bust they ass. Even when Interscope was the favorite at that point. Now they can make like I didn't deliver hit records. And you're only foolin' your fuckin' self at that point, because the material is proven. It's just the time frame. I know what I would do differently now. But that's after experiencing it.

What would you do differently?

If I had came with "Straight to the Bank" and "Amusement Park" after "I Get Money," they would've took off... What was missing was the content that they receiving on the mixtape now. When you hear that consistently, when I give them the material where they lock into me because they're actually enjoying what I'm saying to them continuously, I can get a chance to make a record that will work at Top

40 crossover, at all formats. And they'll give it a, "Okay, let's see how this goes." And then it becomes the biggest record in the world. 'Cause when I see the response I get to these records internationally—it's just the right material released at the wrong time.

But the circumstances of how things happened made things the way they are, and I'm fine with the outcome now. But when I return with the next album, if anybody's in the way, I'ma break their neck.

So if Wayne is still hot, you're going to start up your beef with him again?

People think I don't like Lil Wayne. But, to be honest with you, I do. It's just when I'm gettin' ready to come out, everybody in the way is gonna get moved. Like, that's what I do. When I'm gettin' ready to launch somethin', anything that's there that's creating energy or noise, I'm gonna kill it. I gotta remove it so people can get a clear look at the picture I'm painting.

Basically, you were just baiting Wayne by calling him a whore for appearing on so many songs?

Right. So, again, I don't dislike Lil Wayne, and I don't want him to interpret it that way. He had the opportunity to jump out the window when I said he's a whore, and he didn't, 'cause he's smarter than the other guys.

And you're still going hard at Fat Joe on the mixtape.

I'll compete with artists, regardless of what position they're in, because they're callin' me out. So you might look at me and go, "Why is he arguing with Fat Joe? This guy is never gonna sell more than 100,000 copies ever again. The major record labels won't even support him." But I still jump on his ass, because hip-hop is competitive. When you start feelin' like you're bigger than the art form, you're gonna lose your relevance.

Is that what happens to someone like Ja Rule?

You don't understand. My consistency will break your neck. I didn't go door to door and say, "Don't fuck with Ja." My consistency tells people don't fuck with Ja. He thought he had momentum with that [Sings the chorus to Ja's "Uh-Ohhh"] "Uh-oh, Uh-uh-uh-oh..." You're dead. You're breathin' dead. I buried that nigga alive, and I gotta do this one more time before I clear hip-hop. It has to be at least another Ja... Hip-hop is quiet right now. They need me, because there's nothin' going on. I gotta be active to keep things in motion. Not just for G-Unit, but for the whole fuckin' art form.

Let's talk about the Buck situation. He was in the press saying a lot of stuff about a lack of communication, and hanging with people you weren't cool with, like Jadakiss. How come he wasn't kicked out, like Game?

You know what it is? Buck's actions and the shit that he did, I would've booted him, too. 'Cause ain't nobody that can't be booted

from G-Unit but me.

So why wasn't he?

He wasn't booted because he gets confused.

Confused? Didn't you used to say the same thing about Game?

This is what I'm sayin' to you. With Buck, it's a difference, 'cause he'll come to his senses. When Buck gets upset with me, he says some shit that he knows is not okay for him to say. But when I confront him on it, he'll stop. Because he's finally gettin' the attention that he was lookin' for.

Buck said he reached out but you weren't calling back?

We didn't speak because I left on an international tour when he had the Young Rich tour domestically with Rich Boy... If I'm off doing an international tour, and, to my knowledge, you're doing yours domestically, and your album came out last, I'm just feeling like you got enough energy to go get it on your own. That's what they wanna do: be on they own. Again, they constantly make reference to them being they own man, so when that doesn't happen, you gotta figure out a way to make what the fuck you doing make sense. Because it doesn't make sense. Buck, Banks and Tony have earned over \$6 million in their career. Name one rap group or crew that came out with each one of them sold over a million records. There's a significance in G-Unit as a group and crew that's bigger than people acknowledge.

You've started a Web site, thisis50.com, through which you released the *Body Snatchers* mixtape. What part will the site play in future G-Unit business?

With thisis50.com, I created an outlet that's stronger than the actual mixtape circuit for me. I toured internationally and went from the Czech Republic, to Croatia, to India, to Germany and all these different places, and I did a slight promotion for thisis50.com. I got people in each one of those territories to check it out and create profiles. So when I launched the mixtape, it shoots to them directly. They all have an opportunity to download it at the same time, when those markets usually get things three months after the U.S. To be able to allow them to have it at that early point creates a strong impression and makes them more excited about 50 Cent. And videos. If you look at a music video as a three-minute-and-50-second commercial—because that's how I view it, with all the product placement and things that are in it—it'll allow you to sell things in a different way.

Is that why it's almost 5 o'clock in the morning and you're about to go downstairs and shoot some more?

When you own your own companies, you work harder than when you work for someone else. An employee go from 9 to 5, clock out, and then you go home and relax. When it's your company, you don't go to sleep until the job's complete. ♠