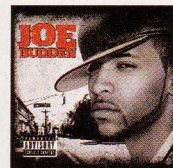


critical breakdown

Your writer's hot but your editor's NOT!



KEVIN KNIGHT



JOE BUDDEN
Joe Budden
DEF JAM

S M L **XL** XXL

Joe Budden has been touted as the streets' #1 draft pick. The next, next big thing. But aren't they all? Every franchise (in this case Def Jam) wants their rookie to have a breakout first season but most times that's not the case. The average new jack ends up warming the bench, accumulating very few minutes. But with his self-titled debut, Mr. Budden has his sights on the starting lineup—of the '03 All-Star team.

After ravaging through mixtape workouts and validating his #1 draft predictions with his pre-season highlight "Focus," the NJ repper takes his official first shot with "Pump It Up." Over Just Blaze's "Scenario (Remix)" inspiration, Joey spits rapid-fire barbs in his signature fluctuating cadence: "Hold up, she wanna work that, twerk that/Then again let me hurt that, murk that/Til you gotta hurt back."

Sexual bravado aside, where Budden truly excels is in his openness about his painful past, filled with drug addiction, depression and baby-mama drama. On "Walk With Me," he faces his demons head-on as his up-and-coming producer White Boy (responsible for the majority of the LP's production) provides the looming piano chord-led forum for Joe to cleanse his closet.

While Joe's history may induce story-like intrigue, listeners can be assured that he comes like most don't—non-fictional. In fact, the 22-year-old blatantly calls out the unreal on the rock-tinged "Real Life And Rap," where his hook barks on about 90% of the industry with: "I hate y'all dudes/Ya get real life and rap confused/Don't get it fucked up and don't get shot/Tryin' to be somethin' that ya not."

For the most part Budden's game is on point, but there are moments where he shoots and misfires. Even though his flow is tighter than a J. Lo thong on "Give Me Reason," Just Blaze's boisterous production isn't. Then there's "She Wanna Know," where Jumpoff's precise flow seems mismatched with hook girl extraordinaire Lil' Mo's crooning. His attempts at a chick record fare better alongside the Def Jammin' bad boys 112 for "Ma Ma Ma," where the quartet's vocalizations play the back to Joe's successful trick-shot at being a playa.

The brief missteps can, however, be easily overlooked as Joe Budden does what few rookie MCs are willing to do: take risks. With only one other featured lyricist, Busta Rhymes, on "Fire," Joe not only lets his reality speak for itself but also takes a stab at harmonizing on the vocal baptism "Survivor." And in today's era of short-attention-span catering, he does the unthinkable and embarks on a 10-minute musical odyssey with live instrumentation produced by Lofey.

While the reigning rookie of the year, 50 Cent need not worry about losing his spot anytime soon, Joe proves that he's got more than enough game and time on the clock to make a run at the title.—ANSLEM SAMUEL