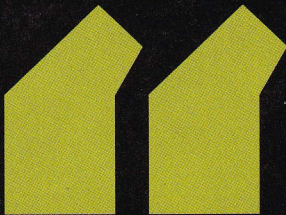


# STAY AROUND

It's been a rough five years, but the most famous casualty of the 21st-century rap game is putting his troubles behind him and getting back to work.

DON'T BURY JA RULE.  
HE AIN'T DEAD YET.

WORDS ANSLEM SAMUEL IMAGES MIKE SCHREIBER



Why'd you pick this chichi, frou-frou spot?"

Ja Rule turns to his publicist upon entering

the main dining room of Kittichai, a posh Thai restaurant in the Soho section of Manhattan that features intricate wood carvings, colorful curtains and a central viewing pool with flowers and floating candles. "How you know I ain't want a nice big steak or something?"

You couldn't blame the guy for wanting beef. For the past five years, he's been publicly ridiculed by one of the biggest rap stars on the planet, Curtis "50 Cent" Jackson—a campaign that rendered Ja's name synony-

mous with the unflattering term "wanksta." After totaling more than 10 million in sales with his first four discs, Ja has watched his last two projects, 2003's *Blood in My Eye* and 2004's *R.U.L.E.*, sell 467,000 and 657,000, respectively. Meanwhile, the government effectively shut down his recording home, Murder Inc., as his longtime friend and partner Irv "Gotti" Lorenzo fought federal money-laundering charges. (Gotti and his brother Chris were acquitted in December 2005.) To top it all off, GLAAD tried to initiate a media boycott this past September after Ja was quoted in a recent interview making comments that came off as antigay. So, no, you wouldn't blame him for being a little feisty.

Settling in with a lychee martini, though,

he seems anything but. Cracking jokes, laughing boisterously, the 31-year-old Hollis, Queens, native entertains a group of friends with stories about a recent trip to Germany and insists he's moved on. "I throw a jab here and there, but for the most part, I'm not concerned with it," he says of his high-profile strife with 50. "I said all I had to say. If anybody needs to hear any beef or any hatred I have toward any artist, they can go get *Blood in My Eye*, 'cause that's why I made it... I needed it to get it out my system, so now I don't have to dwell on it, 'cause it's all been said."

After a three-year hiatus, Ja is ready to get back to the business of making hits. When it came time to record his warm-up single "Uh-Ohhh," he enlisted the services of hip-hop's



current guest-appearance king, Lil Wayne. "It's always good to do records with niggas that are considered the best out there," Ja says. "Throughout my career I've always spit with the best spitters and sung with the best singers. Niggas can't take that away from me. I like to be on tracks with great talent, and Weezy's great talent. It set the tone, let people know I was back in the building and I can still spit."

Unfortunately, not everyone was convinced. During the recording process for his new album, *The Mirror*, Ja kept hitting roadblocks. "I reached out to a few people for the album, and it was like I was running into dark corridors," he says after ordering a plate of chicken fried rice with steamed

## MY N#GGA 'PREME

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shrimp. "They'd be like, 'Yeah.' But then it's like, 'Where the fuck you at when I need to do the actual work?' I felt a lot of fake shit out there. So I said, 'You know what? Realistically, I don't need none of these muthafuckas to make hit records.' They would be good collabos, it woulda made for good stories—Ja did a record with such and such—but that doesn't always make for good music. So, after a while, I just said fuck it. I'ma go completely creative, and I'ma canvas my album with the proper voices, regardless of who they are or what they look like."

Save for Wayne, the only high-profile guest on *The Mirror* is The Game, who's featured on the California ode "Sunset." The rest of the album is a mix of Ja's patented aggression (the epic "300," the paranoid "Judas") and R&B-powered duets with as-yet-little-known songstresses ("Damn," featuring Jenna, and "Body," with Ashley Joi). The one track Ja notes as a highlight, though, is "Enemy of the State." Taking cues from Biggie's classic "Warning," the record lets listeners eavesdrop on a phone conversation between Ja and Gotti as they relive the stress of being indicted by the feds.

"People don't really understand what we was going through with that shit," says Ja. "'Enemy of the State' is kinda like a realistic but fun look into what we were going through. It was more so Irv's situation than mine, so I definitely wanted to give him a voice on the record and let it be known it was a lot going on during the time. I felt that record had to be made."

Over the course of the almost-three-year investigation, Murder Inc. was vilified for its principals' association with incarcerated Queens drug kingpin Kenneth "Supreme" McGriff. Corporate parent Def Jam severed ties, ousting Murder Inc. from its Midtown Manhattan offices in March '03. While it was only the Gotti brothers who were facing jail time, Ja owns a portion of the company, and in the event of a guilty verdict, he would've had to assume power—a reality the rap superstar wasn't exactly ready for.

"I ain't even gon' front, I wasn't mentally prepared for it," he says. "I know the business very well, but as far as sitting behind a desk and doing the business and making the calls, that's not really what I strive to do at the moment... But my nigga 'Preme always said you gotta prepare for the worst. If the worst scenario don't come out, then, nigga, we good. Thank God we lived through that and got ac-

quitted and everything is cool."

That's a bit of an understatement. Last year, Irv and company signed a \$10 million distribution deal directly with Universal Music Group. As part of the agreement, Irv retained ownership of the masters for his entire roster, and Ja got his own imprint, Mpire Records. Nonmusic business is blooming, too. The gravely voiced rapper recently went into business with Flawless Jewelry for his Asja collection and launched an umbrella organization called Rule Global Media. He has two new films in the works, and he and Gotti just landed a 50/50 partnership with electronics giant Samsung for their Ervingeoffrey clothing line.

"I got some of the biggest business deals that y'all can ever fuckin' think of on the table right now," says Ja, who also runs the L.I.F.E. Foundation, which provides inner-city kids with guidance. "When you are who you are and you're not ashamed of who you are, nothing can stop your movements. Nothing can stop what you want to do in life. Nigga, that's where I came from. If you haven't noticed, I'm Black. I came from people saying, 'You're nothing. You can't do it. You'll never be nothing. Matter fact, you're a slave.' I came from that. I know what we went through as Black people. So, for me, struggle is nothing. And what y'all people—the fans, the public—call struggle, or y'all thought what I was going through was the worst thing in the world, you can't be serious."

**By the time** dessert comes around—a cup of hot cocoa with a complimentary side of banana spring rolls and ice cream—Ja Rule and his entourage are embroiled in a conversation about the recent push to censor rap music. In defense of his craft, against the persecution, Ja points to controversial bands in other genres, like the Bloodhound Gang, an alternative rock group known for paying audience members to strip, urinate or defecate onstage during their shows. "Why the fuck are they not under fire?" he says. "Why Congress ain't coming down on shit like that?"

One of Ja's companions nods in agreement. "Yeah, they a bunch of faggots," he says casually. Ja immediately tenses up, taking note of the reporter's tape recorder lying on the table in front of him. "Don't say that word around me," he says. "Don't you ever say that word around me again. That is a very foul word. That's a bad word. Don't say that word around me. I'm dead serious. I don't play those games."



Homosexuality has long been frowned upon in hip-hop circles, but Ja's uneasiness with the derogatory term probably has more to do with a September interview with *complex.com* in which he commented

on the abundance of shows on MTV "promoting" same-sex relationships. The rant ended with him saying, "If that's not fucking up America, I don't know what is." The statement became a hot topic on the Net, and Ja found himself in the middle of a firestorm. Gay-rights organization GLAAD issued a statement calling for media outlets "not to provide in the future a platform for his ugly, vulgar displays of prejudice."

"It's fucked up that sometimes your words get taken out of [context]," Ja says now. "Like, you're speaking about one thing, and then it spirals into this whole other thing. What I was saying in that article is everyone has that same responsibility. They're absolutely right: Rappers have a responsibility to the kids. But don't just pin it on hip-hop. If I gotta curb my lyrics or censor what I say, no problem. But if you gonna show sexual images during the daytime for children, that should be censored as well."

Taking pains to ensure that his words aren't misconstrued a second time, he continues: "And I'm not just talking about homosexuality. I'm talking about any sexuality. If it's too sexy for kids, it's too sexy for kids... I think anybody that hears me or reads [the interview] the way it is kinda understands I wouldn't do that. I'm going through it now. It's crazy. But I have no problems with no homosexual people. So, GLAAD, don't be mad. I'm still rockin' with ya. It's all love."

**Just as the** waiter finishes clearing the table, a timid female tourist from Switzerland approaches and asks Ja if he'd pose for a picture with her. The embattled MC happily obliges. Despite the time away from the spotlight, he clearly still gets love in the street. "With the

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*R.U.L.E.* album, it was kinda different," he says. "I was still getting a lot of that hate a little bit. I was still getting it in certain areas from the public. With this album, word to mutha, I haven't had an ounce of hate going outside. It's been 120 percent love, like, 'Yo, Rule, I can't wait to hear your new shit!' I never had that, throughout my whole career."

But that isn't the only difference Ja's facing. In the three years since his last effort, sales have plummeted across the industry. The reality of modern-day rap is that even artists with the biggest singles don't necessarily move units when it comes to their albums. Ja understands that but still has high hopes for his latest offering. "Right now, you can't put a finger on what I'm going to do," he says. "There's so many people that are curious, like, 'Yo, I wanna know what Ja Rule has to say.' Then you got those hardcore fans out there that's like, 'I'm supporting Rule. I'm gonna buy his album 'cause I know he's been dealt a rough hand throughout the last few years.' So I don't know how the fans are going to [respond], but I feel like they gonna go out and support the project."

Only time will tell. Regardless of whether *The Mirror* blows up, though, Ja is proud of the work he put into the album. Comfortable in his own skin, he wouldn't change a thing in his tumultuous career. "I'm always going to be proud of who I am," he says. "When you're confident in yourself, and you're confident in who you are, [you can] sleep very well at night. When this shit is all said and done and it's time to take that final bow, your life will flash before you, and you should make sure that it's worth watching. I've done so much in my life that, when the flash goes off, I'll be happy with what I see. I'll be happy." ♠

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