





# Talking That TALK

**FREEWAY**

**He made a hot debut album, but folks slept on the Philly cat with the unique rap. Beanie's man Freeway is back to clear the rumors and grab more consumers. Early!**

Words **Anslem Samuel** // Images **Clay Patrick McBride**

“I think my last album shoulda went platinum,” says Freeway. “But the promotion wasn’t good when they dropped my shit, and I was indecisive about a lot of things. It was my first time around, and I was dependent on other muthafuckas. This time around it’s all me, so if shit don’t sell I can’t say nothing about nobody.”

After the two-hour trek from Philadelphia, the bearded MC steps into Def Jam’s Manhattan HQ wearing jeans, polo shirt and baseball cap—all black, all Rocawear. After exchanging a few daps, he learns what his day has in store: a pair of phone interviews, a session to update his media-kit bio, a visit to MTV to promote his sophomore release, *Free at Last*. But first he’s gotta deal with the quiet guy in the corner holding the micro-recorder. “Damn, I gotta lot of press this week,” he says. “But whatever, I’m here.”

Freeway’s never been afraid of hard work. Born Leslie Pridgen 26 years ago in West Philadelphia, he earned his nickname as a teenager, shuttling narcotics up and down Interstate 95. His favorite saying, delivered with the strained-voice passion that makes him instantly recognizable on record, is a testament to his dedication: “Early!”

While Freeway’s unorthodox delivery and detailed descriptions of time on the grind have earned him considerable street cred and critical acclaim over the past five years—both as a member of Roc-A-Fella Records’ seven-man squad, State Property, and as a solo artist—the admiration has yet to translate into comparable record sales. Neither the two State Prop albums nor his 2003 solo effort, *Philadelphia Freeway*, have sold more than 500,000 copies.

Dipping into an empty office down the hall, he makes himself comfortable behind a long black desk, barren but for a dusty phone, a pair of unopened water bottles and a pink promotional pen for Ludacris that lights up when you click the top.

“We really gonna promote and market this

one,” he says of the new album. “I’m ready to kill the mixtapes again and get on a promo tour. It’s gonna be like I’m running for president. Plus, I got Big Homie in pocket, and he gonna make sure the whole Def Jam/Universal building’s behind me.”

Big Homie, of course, is Jay-Z. After the Roc-A-Fella cofounder split with his partners, Damon Dash and Kareem “Biggs” Burke, last December, he took over the president’s office at Def Jam, which influenced Freeway’s decision to stay put. “As far as the music and getting everything done, this is where I feel comfortable,” he explains. “I feel like it’s more stable over here. The marketing team is on point, and muthafuckas are paying more attention to my project. With Jay in charge, I just feel like he’s gonna put that push behind me and make sure my shit is right.” Pausing for a moment, he looks down at the recorder and continues, “But I can’t take anything away from Dame and Biggs. I got respect for them niggas, and I’m gonna miss their input, ‘cause we was like family.”

It’s a difficult situation. Incarcerated State Property captain Beanie Sigel opted to join Dash and Biggs’ new company, DDMG, so many believe this is the end of the all-Philadelphian collective. Not according to Freeway. “All that shit is just rumors and gossip,” he says flatly. “We just had a State Property show the other day. Niggas still fuck with each other. Once Mack comes home, everything should be straight and situated. Niggas just gotta sit down and bust it up.”

But to hear Sigel’s mother, Michelle Brown-Derry, tell it, State Property’s foundation is less stable. During a March interview with allhiphop.com, she put the crew on blast. “[Beanie] was instrumental about getting [State Property] their deal and getting them into the industry. To me, with that situation there’s no loyalty,” Brown-Derry said. “They haven’t even written him a letter or dropped

him a dime. I feel some type of way about that. I feel that they should have found some type of contact, some kind of way. At least say, ‘Beanie, what do you think about [staying with the Roc]?’ And none of that was done.”

While others in the group have offered rebuttal interviews, Freeway, who many view as Beanie’s closest friend, has remained silent. “I don’t even wanna get into that,” he says, slightly perturbed. “Like, that’s my man’s moms, you know what I’m saying? I’m not gonna go up against his moms and say this and that. I’m just gonna let it ride. When Beans come home, he gonna reach out to the press and let people know how it’s going down. I love Beans’ moms, I love Beans, and he knows I love his family.”

It was a freshly signed Beanie Sigel, after all, who first brought him to spit for Jay-Z back in 1998. Unfortunately, Free was arrested for possession with intent to deliver soon after the audition. Facing six months in jail, with two kids on the way, the aspiring MC realized it was time to make some serious changes.

“Shit was crazy,” he says. “I had my son on November 19<sup>th</sup> and had to turn myself in November 23<sup>rd</sup>. Then I had my daughter February 11<sup>th</sup>. That’s two different baby moms at the same time I was locked up, so it was a lot of stress on me. When I came home, I was on house arrest and only had a couple thousand dollars saved up. I was like, Man, I gotta make this rap shit happen, ‘cause I can’t keep doing the same shit I was doing.”

**Freeway returns from** a bathroom break with a copy of his new single, “Where You Been,” and pops it in the office stereo. Coproduced by fellow Philly natives Scott

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Storch and the Roots’ Ahmir “?uestlove” Thompson, the flute-laced track comes blaring through the speakers.

“I been away for a minute,” says Freeway, nodding his head. “So it’s a lot of questions like, ‘Where you been? What’s going on?’ So I’m answering everybody’s question.” Then he joins his recorded voice, breaking into the chorus: “*They like, ‘Freeway, where you been?’/In my skin/When I jump out, you jump innnnn/All these rappers trying to be my twin!/I tell ‘em, ‘Not by the hair of my chinny chin!’*”

Freeway seems happy with his career path, but he’s far from satisfied. Rising from his chair, he walks over to the window and looks out at the city below. “I appreciate the love,” he says, “but this album gotta go platinum. I got family to take care of, and I gotta lot of people depending on me. So I need that paper. ‘Cause I’m just a regular nigga that just happened to get on. I’m still hungry, and I ain’t trying to fall back.”