

HIP-HOP ON A HIGHER LEVEL

IN STEREO

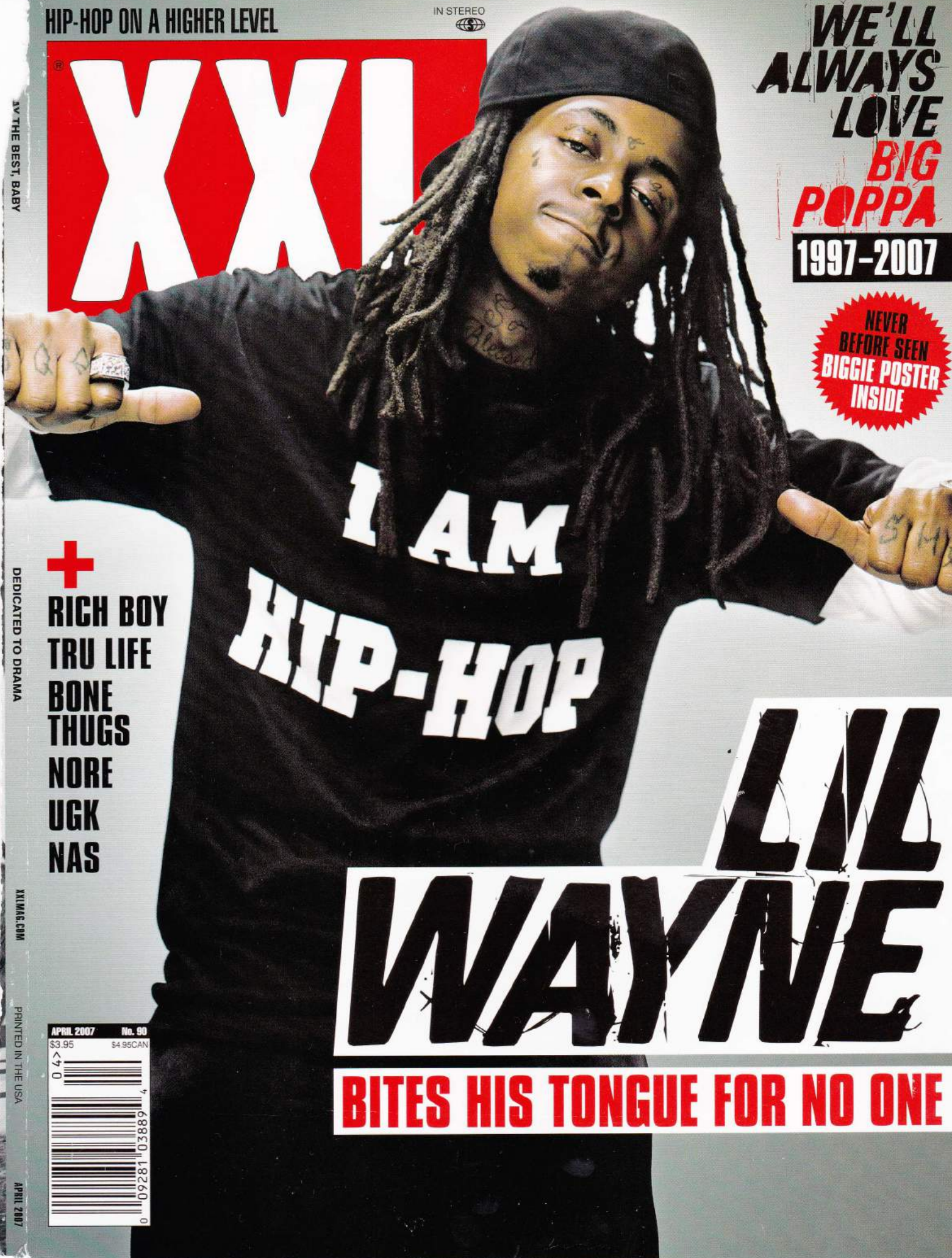
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XXI



I AM HIP-HOP

LIL WAYNE

BITES HIS TONGUE FOR NO ONE

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RICH BOY
TRU LIFE
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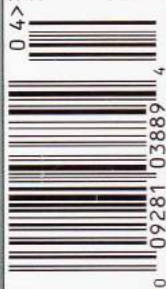
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XXIMAG.COM

PRINTED IN THE USA

APRIL 2007

APRIL 2007 No. 90
\$3.95 \$4.95CAN



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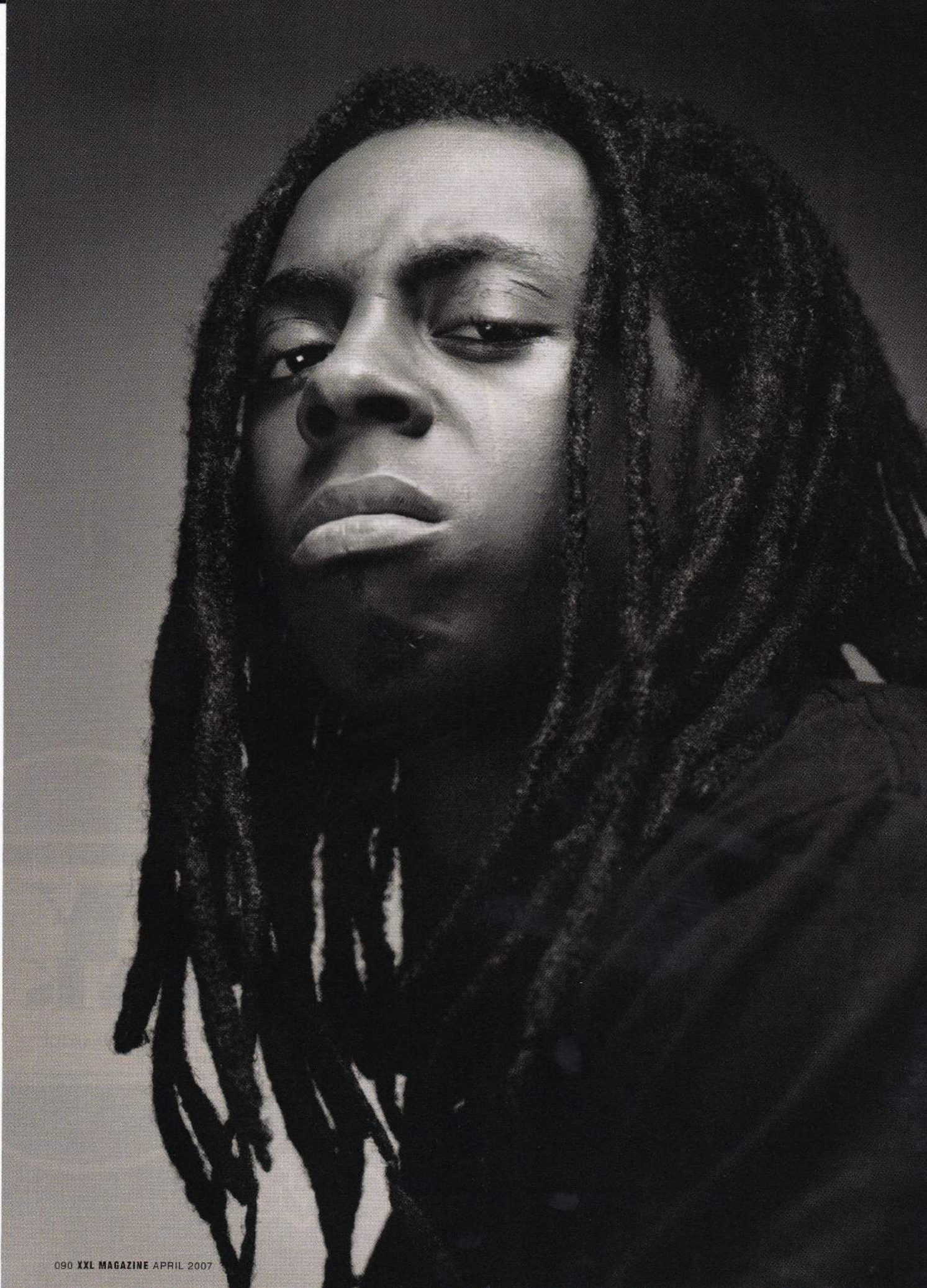
LIL WAYNE

MONEY IN THE BANK

HE WENT FROM NOT MENTIONED AT ALL TO TOP 10.
IN FACT, HE'S CLAIMING THE NO. 1 SPOT, AND WE'RE NOT HERE TO ARGUE.
BUT, DAMN, HOW DID LIL WAYNE GET SO GOOD?

Images: Anselm Samuel

Images: Ben Baker



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hampions, it is said, are not made. They are born. Still, there are times when people seem to speak things into existence. Take the boxing legend Cassius Clay, better known as Muhammad Ali or, simply, "The Greatest." Certainly, his achievements—his Olympic gold medal (Rome 1960), his professional record (56-5 with

37 KOs), his three times winning the heavy-weight championship of the world—speak to great natural ability in the ring. But his status in history probably has more to do with his overflowing well of charisma and bravado. Ali is the greatest for one overriding reason—he told us he was. Repeatedly. And we believed him. Not at first, but eventually, because his actions lent truth to his words.

Lil Wayne, born D'Wayne Carter in New Orleans in 1982, finds himself at a similar point in his career. Originally perceived as just another materialistic MC from the South, the Cash Money Records star has spent the past few years building a strong case for being the "best rapper alive, since the best rapper retired" (a reference to Shawn "Jay-Z" Carter, no relation). Initially uttered on the closing refrain of his 2004 hit "Bring It Back," the statement raised its fair share of eyebrows. By the end of the following year, Wayne had upped the ante and flat out said he was the "best rapper alive." Period.

Yeah, the kid has an impressive scorecard—over five million units sold as a solo artist, another two million counting his work with Juvenile, B.G. and Turk as a part of Cash Money's since-splintered supergroup the Hot Boys—and his skills have grown considerably since his start as a young teen. But to claim he's the best? Surely someone twisted his locks too tight.

However, after a marathon 2006 that saw Wayne's critically acclaimed fifth solo album, *Tha Carter 2* (released in late '05), top a million in sales (while most rap albums could barely crack 200,000), two stellar *Gangsta Grillz* mixtapes with DJ Drama, a gold-selling collaborative effort with Cash Money co-founder Brian "Baby" Williams and a slew of standout guest appearances, naysayers are beginning to sing a new tune. Through pure grit and determination, the kid called Weezy has positioned himself as a franchise player/coach at the label that raised him and has finally earned respect as a lyricist in hip-hop circles. He even snagged the highly coveted No. 1 spot on XXL's 10 Most Anticipated Albums of 2007 list—*Tha Carter 3* is tentatively due this summer. Those proclamations of greatness aren't sounding so outlandish anymore.

With that in mind, it seems fitting that Wayne would return to his hometown of New Orleans on this early January afternoon to re-create a famous photo of Ali surrounded by \$1 million in cold, hard cash. (The image originally appeared in the Feb. 24, 1964, issue of *Sports Illustrated*).

After baking under the photographer's persistent flash, Wayne invited XXL onto his tour bus to talk. Speaking openly and easily (putting to rest recent rumors that his jaw had been broken in a fist fight), he gave us his take on his upgrade in artistry, his resurgence in popularity, Hot Boys love lost, Cash Money love lasting, why he's still better than your favorite rapper and what lies in the heart of a champion.

You displayed a dramatic maturation in style between your 2002 album *500 Degreez* and the first in your *Tha Carter* series in 2004. Can you explain how that transition came about?

Ain't no transition. I ain't worried about what people realizing, 'cause if I start worrying about when they gon' realize, then I'd be crazy. It ain't about that. I told you who I am. I'm the nigga that creatively do the stuff I want and make y'all realize it. And I don't give a fuck if y'all realize it or not. I'ma keep doing me. That's what I am, that's who I am and that's why I'm the best.

There has to be more to it, though. How'd you get so good so fast? What about people saying you got better because Gillie the Kid was ghostwriting for you? Who that is?

You know, the dude from Philly who was signed to Cash Money for a little bit. He says he used to write for you.

[Laughs] I don't get it. How you could write for me and I don't write? I'm rich as a mutha-fucka, and you wrote for *me*? Then why aren't you rich? If I wrote for a nigga and this nigga's on top of the world right now, I'd be like, "Where's my fuckin' money? Where's my benefits?" I heard this nigga do an interview and say he got like \$30 thousand a song. Show me one of them \$30 thousand checks you got from writing for me. Show me, 'cause I don't know what you wrote for me. I don't write nothing, dawg. The only time I touch the pad is for someone else.

But something had to have changed, 'cause you weren't rapping like this back in the Hot Boys era.

Oh, yeah. When everything fell apart, I had to become that. Coach let me know we lost a lot of players from the team, a lot of players got traded. "You know what you gotta do this year. The ball is in your hands. What are you gonna do?" That was the transition right there.

Mannie Fresh left the fold, too, in 2005. In hindsight, how does the departure of your label's in-house producer affect your work?

It's different for me, of course, because I'm rapping on different beats, and I gotta come up with different melodies, different subjects, and that kind of stuff. But it's better, because you're not hearing the same me. My old albums would be all put in one category. I don't care if I had a song about saving the world, a song about shake your ass, a song about my jewelry, I'm killing, whatever—it was all one category, 'cause it was one sound. Now

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“I'M 24 YEARS OLD, IN MY 14TH YEAR IN THE GAME, ON MY 10TH ALBUM, A SELF-MADE MILLIONAIRE, GOT MY OWN COMPANY, AND

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 AND I’LL BEAT ’EM. I
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 ”

own company, and I’m still in my prime. You name a nigga, and I’ll beat ’em. I will kill ’em with my words. They shouldn’t have created words when they thought of me. For real, dawg. Real talk. I am the illest, my nigga.

It’s kinda weird that Jay is such a big influence on you. Being that you’re from the South, most people would figure you’d be inspired by someone from your region. What exactly is it about Hov you respect?

’Cause he don’t care what nobody like. He cares about what he cares about, and he puts it out that way. There’s a lot of artists that entertain and just do what people will like, but there’s others who do it creatively and it comes from them and they make y’all love it. That’s what I do.

I know it’s your last name and all, but why’d you decide to call your albums *Tha Carter*? You had to have known that people were gonna think you were sweatin’ Jay.

Yeah, but you know, I wasn’t trippin’ on that. ’Cause it ain’t too bad trying to be him. That wasn’t no bad person for me to try and be. And you don’t ever worry about what nobody say. You gotta care about what you do. That’s always what’s been important to me.

So that probably explains your openness in discussing the picture of you and Baby kissing on the mouth that’s been circulating on the Net. You mind talking about that?

That’s how we get down. Ain’t nothing wrong with that. There’s nothing wrong with you asking me.

It’s supposed to be like a Mafioso crime family type thing, right? How’d all that start?

Baby came one day and was like, “Everybody gon’ start rockin’ like this.” He only did it with the Hot Boys, but once everybody left, it was just me and him still [doing it], ’cause he’s like my father. So it became sort of a father-son thing.

So all of y’all did it? B.G., Turk, Juvenile...

I ain’t never said Juve did it. At the time when we all was doing it, it wasn’t everybody.

Okay, but being that hip-hop is so homophobic, you were never worried about people questioning your manhood or whatever?

I think it makes it better, because if I wanna similar voice or certain opinion about a certain situation, I can get a different producer that can get that point across.

Cash Money was like a family, though. It had to be painful for you to see everybody leave.

I been shot twice—that’s pain. Anything that ain’t physical is not pain for me. Pain has a definition in the dictionary. Like when a muthafucka says, “I hate you,” and you say, “Oh, that hurt.” But that don’t fit that definition. *Bow! Bow!* That hurt. That’s pain. A nigga walkin’ away can’t hurt me.

What about reports that you got into a fight with somebody in your entourage recently and got your jaw broken? Something like that has gotta hurt.

[Laughs] Nah, man ain’t nobody break my fuckin’ jaw. Come on, man, you gotta break everything else after that, dawg. You ain’t gon’ hear that. You gon’ hear Lil Wayne dead. ’Cause you ain’t gon’ break my jaw and I’m just leave it like that. It’s gon’ be, “What happened to the nigga who broke his jaw? He gone? *Shiiiiieeeeeet.*” I got \$100 thousand worth of work up in this muthafucka. If you broke my jaw, nigga, you done broke the bank.

You caused a bit of controversy a few months back when you were quoted in *Complex* magazine saying that you’re better than Jay-Z. How’d you go from “best rapper alive, since the best rapper retired” to being better than him?

I’m glad you brought that up, ’cause I wanna apologize to Jay and his family and friends, because I was asked that question and they put it in there like I was just feeling like, “Oh, you know what, nigga? I’m better than Jay!” They came at me like, “So you say you’re the best. Can you say that you’re better than everybody? Would you say you’re better than Jay?” I was like, “Yeah, nigga, I’m better than everybody!” But I’d like to throw that apology out there ’cause of whatever trouble I caused, I ain’t want that to happen.

What exactly are you apologizing for?

’Cause I know I caused a stir-up. Just period for the media jumping on it like that. For it coming out like that. I didn’t like that.

So what are you saying? You’re not better than Jay?

I’m just being me. That’s just the reality of what it is. I’m 24 years old, in my 14th year in the game, on my 10th album [including the Hot Boys catalog and his recent collabo with Baby], a self-made millionaire, got my

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I think people can tell from my attitude that I don't even care about nothing like that. You cannot hurt me, slander me or slaughter me. I'm from New Orleans, dawg. This is the murder capital. We just beat Compton three weeks ago. Swear to God. Nobody don't say nothing to you. They kill you, and that's that. You can talk all that shit, but I don't be trippin'. Soon as we see each other, if you ain't got your pistols out or you ain't coming toward me, fuck you, you ain't real. I ain't about to talk back to you. I ran into plenty of niggas that you hear talkin', ya dig? I know what's real. That pussy shit, girl talk, he say, she say. "I done this." "He phony." I don't do that. My game? Murder. Real life. You're phony. I saw you, and you ain't do nothing. You ain't even say what you saying when I saw you, ya dig? So words'll never hurt me.

We always hear about your father-son relationship with Baby. But you mention your mother a lot on record, too. Are you two really close?

That's my sistah. That's my dawg. We ride and die together. We'll strap up and come to your house and murder you together. Straight real talk. That's my mama. Ms. Cita Carter. Don't fuck with her. That's my dawg.

How she feel about her son being a big-time rap star?

How she feel now? *Shiiiiieeeeeet!* Nigga, you know how she feel. She's the shit. Her son that nigga. Look what she made. Now I got a little brother. He's four, trying to see what he gonna be. He bad as a muthafucka, though. He might be a boxer or something.

Last year was a real good look for you. Platinum solo album, gold album with Baby, two classic mixtapes, got voted No. 1 Most Anticipated Album of 2007 by

XXL. How'd you feel when you saw you landed at the No. 1 spot on XXL's Most Anticipated Albums of 2007 list?

Me? It fucked me up. I might break a nigga jaw, boy. [Laughs] Dawg, I'ma tell you now, as soon as people start accommodating me, I'm gon' go crazy. 'Cause they ain't never respect me for nothing. Not in school—I been making A's all my life, and the teacher never told me I was smart. She just thought, "You gon' be hangin' with the bad boys." You start giving me awards and No. 1s, you gon' fuck me up.

Do you feel like you've been underappreciated until now?

Nah, dawg. I love everything I get. I don't feel like it's supposed to do nothing. I don't feel like another person or human being is supposed to do nothing that has nothing to do with me. You ain't supposed to listen to my shit. But if you do, and if you accommodate me, then I appreciate it. I never feel like I'm underlooked. When you feel like you're underlooked, then you're expecting. That's the only way you feel underlooked, 'cause you expecting a nigga to do something. Man, I don't do that, never. My moms been told me to never expect, since I was a kid.

That's a surprising outlook, considering you spent the past three years braggin' about being the best rapper alive.

I gotta have that. That's the rappin'. That's what hip-hop is about. That's what they created and what they taught us. From Run-DMC to people I don't know, that's what they done. You gotta have confidence, in rap. That's what rap is about, confidence.

Tha Carter 3 is due out this summer.

What's the direction right now? Where are you going with it?

Tha Carter 3 is supposed to be my foundation. What makes them say, "Okay, that nigga is that nigga." That's all. It ain't nothin' serious, like, "Oh, I want it to do this, I want that with the album, I want it to sell..." I just want people to respect what I do with this album and know what to expect from the next album.

Anything else you got lined up for '07 that people should be on the lookout for?

I Can't Feel My Face, the album. That's epic, man.

That's a joint project with Juelz Santana, right? Is that gonna be through Cash Money or Dipset?

We don't even know, and we don't even care. We know it's so major, it's epic, it's gonna be the biggest hip-hop album for a long time. Not the biggest, 'cause we ain't worried about it being big, but it's the best hip-hop album lyrically, creatively and effortwise. When a muthafucka listen, they gon' know niggas put in their time on this one and be like, "Them niggas care about what we listen to." That's that.

What do you think the culture is missing right now that has people saying hip-hop is dead?

Remember when hip-hop was fun? The only reason why it ain't fun no more is because everybody by theself. It was fun when it was Biggie and Bad Boy, with Puff, Ma\$e, Junior M.A.F.I.A. and Lil Kim. You had Jay, Amil, Memphis Bleek and all that shit. Everybody had a clique. Now it's just Lil Wayne, T.I., Busta, The Game, and that's it. People don't think it's fun no more. I just want you to know, and anyone reading this interview, that I have fun every time I step in that muthafucka. You ain't gotta have fun, but I just want you to know I'm having the best time of my fuckin' life. ♦