

XXL

GOI
LERAY

JOYNER
LUCAS

FRIDAYY

LOLA
BROOKE

KEY
GLOCK

DESTROY
LONELY

IS MEMPHIS
THE NEW
ATLANTA?

SIX
RAPPERS
X
SIX
DECADES
OF HIP-HOP

LIL DURK

STARTED FROM
THE TRENCHES.
NOW HE'S HERE

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THE BIGGER PICTURE

INTERVIEW
ALEIA
WOODS



IMAGES
JOHNNY
NUÑEZ

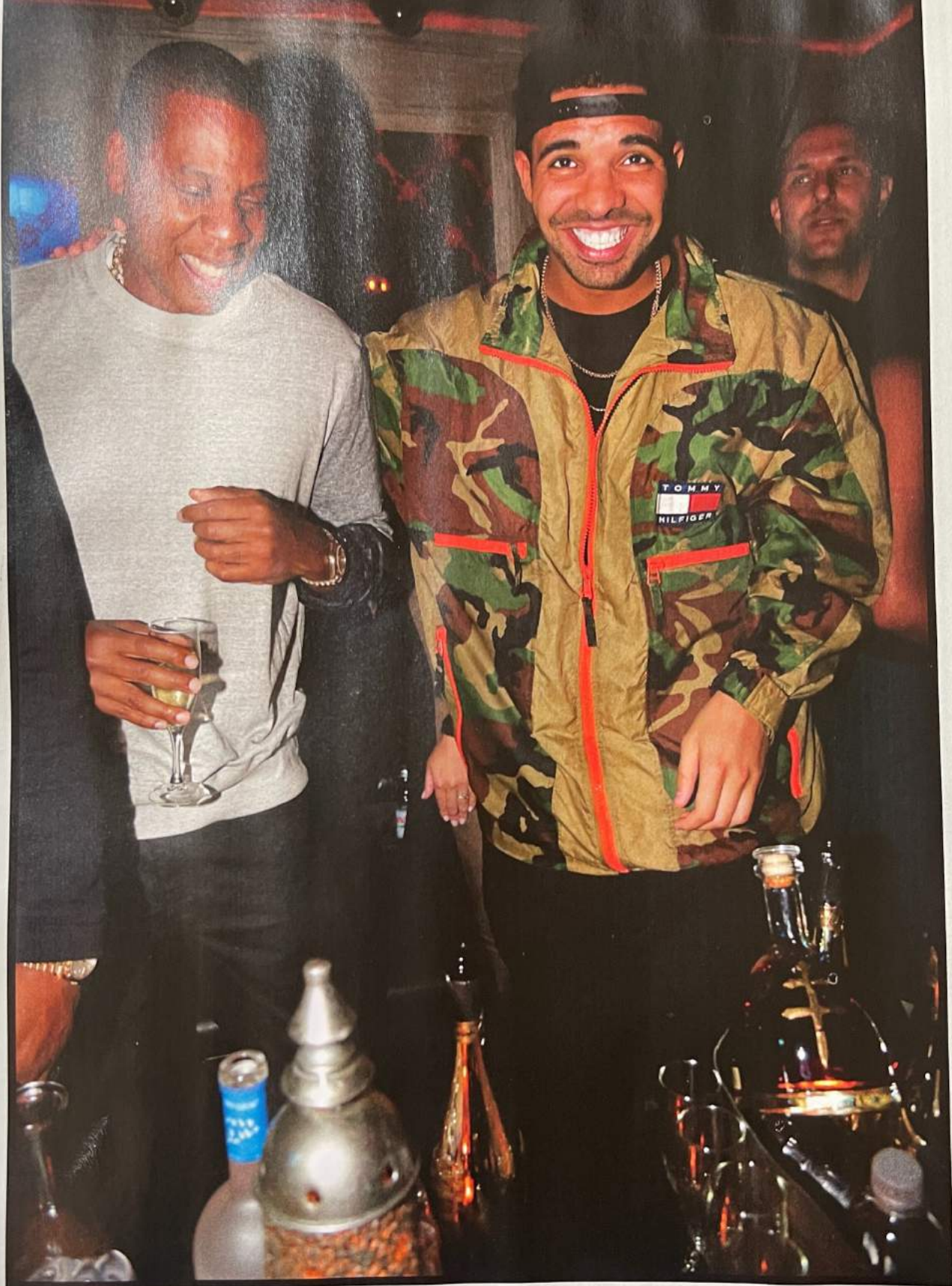
Nearly three decades into his career, photographer Johnny Nuñez's eye for freezing moments in hip-hop history continues to bring forth breathtaking images that speak more than a thousand words.

→ A LIFE-CHANGING CAR CRASH on the exact day The Notorious B.I.G. was assassinated, March 9, 1997, was the day distinguished hip-hop photographer Johnny Nuñez, 51, took his then-hobby of snapping pics seriously. Following that moment, Nuñez utilized the earnest strategies he acquired from his mother, an Avon cosmetics seller, to secure photography placements in publications by handing out roses, cigars and miniature bottles of Hennessy to staff members in hopes of embedding himself in their minds. Now 26 years later, the Greenpoint, Brooklyn native has captured some of the most iconic photos the rap game has seen. From pre-billionaire Jay-Z and pre-Grammy Award-winner Nas, to Bronx legends Fat Joe and Big

Pun, and much more, Johnny Nuñez's lens has witnessed it all. Nuñez's gift of photography even got him name-dropped in Nas' record "27 Summers": "Premiere movies with my man DeNiro/And Johnny Nuñez got all the pictures."

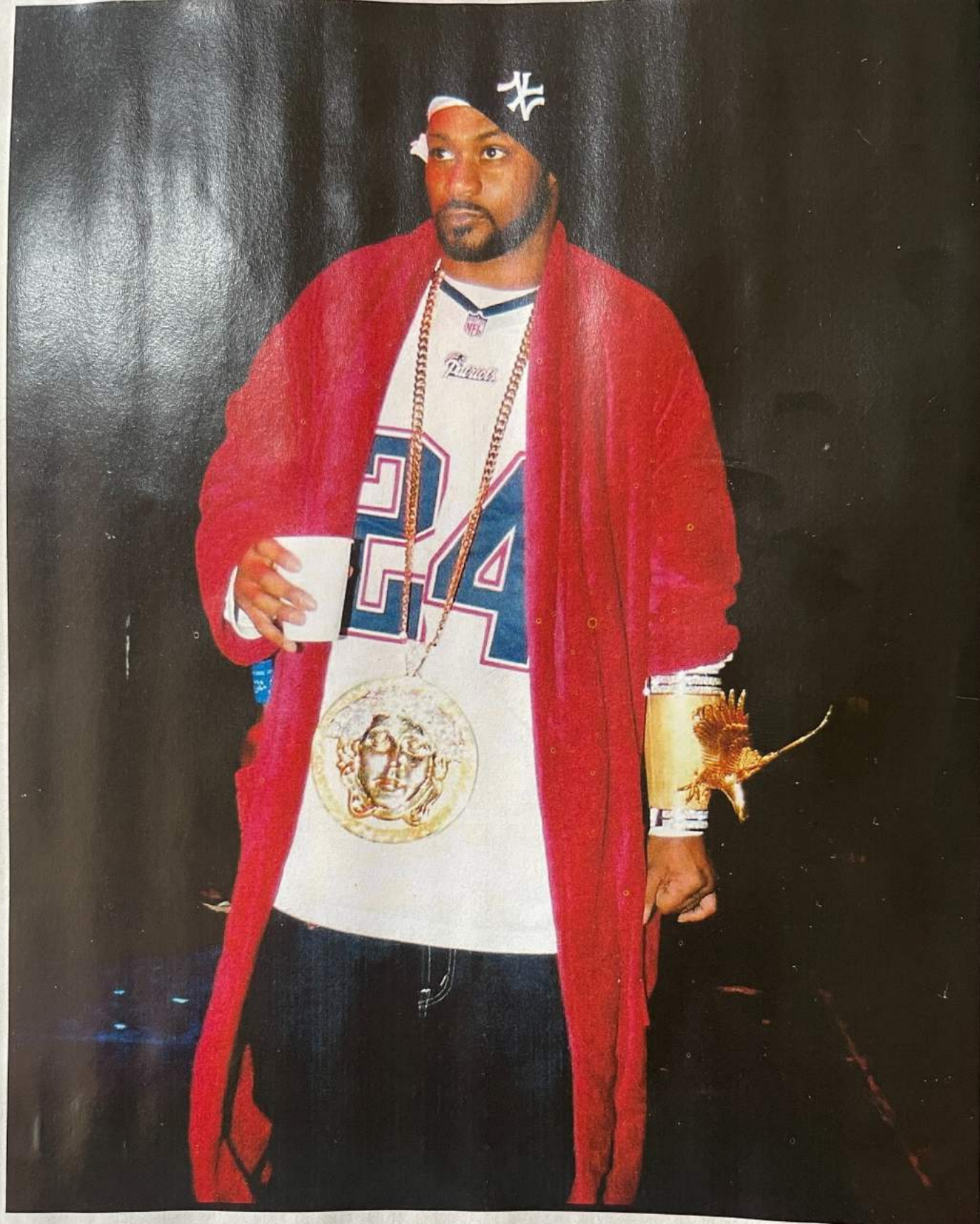
In honor of the 50th anniversary of hip-hop, the sublime photographer is also launching his own immersive hip-hop photography experience this year to showcase never-before-seen images, videos and more that he has taken over the years.

On a March afternoon via Zoom, Johnny Nuñez takes XXL on a trip down memory lane, explaining the stories behind 10 of his most notable photos featuring rap icons Jay-Z, Lil Wayne, Nas, Drake and more.



**DRAKE AND
JAY-Z AT
KEVIN
DURANT'S
BIRTHDAY
PARTY**

This was taken at the Avenue, which is a nightclub on 10th Avenue [in New York City]. Here's a funny story. After I took this picture, a very dear friend of mine named Johnny Marines, who was the manager of [singer] Romeo Santos, he said, "Johnny, umm..." I said, "What's up?" He said, "I don't know Drake, but I need you to introduce me to him." I'm like, "Sure, no problem." I'm like, "Drake..." I call over Drake. "This is Johnny Marines, Romeo Santos' manager. He would like to talk to you." And Drake's like, "Yo, just introduce him to Future." [This Future] is one of Drake's managers and DJ, but really the day-to-day guy. So, Future's like, "Oh, give me your number." They exchange numbers and whatever, and next thing I know, [Romeo Santos and Drake's] collaboration ["Odio"] went [diamond]. Anyway, Drake and Jay-Z were just laughing with each other, having a good time. Everyone came to Kevin Durant's [25th] birthday [in 2013]. And on the far, far right is a gentleman named Rich Kleiman. [Rich] is the confidant, the liaison to Hov. He co-executive produced [Jay-Z's *Fade to Black* documentary]. And now, he co-manages, aside from a lot of other people, Kevin Durant.



**GHOSTFACE
KILLAH
GETTING
READY TO
PERFORM**

He was on stage, walking, about to get on the mic. I wanna say, the year [1995] [*Only Built 4 Cuban Linx...*] album came out. It was when Raekwon and Ghostface came out with their mixtape together, *The Purple Tape*. I would like to say I took this at the Manhattan Center, which is also [Hammerstein Ballroom].

Tony Starks, Ironman, Ghostface Killah. I love everything about Wu-Tang Clan. I was a friend and also a lover of the whole Shaolin clan. I was constantly playing "Protect Ya Neck," the whole thing. You got the Medusa chain right there. The Versace Medusa symbol.

This is where hip-hop is now reflecting fashion. And because Tony Starks, Ironman, he had this chalice in his. I forgot what you call that. Even the weight, I heard him in an interview, Ghostface said something about when he had that made, the weight of the bird was so much. That's pure gold, by the way. It's like 24 karat gold. The jeweler really had to put in work to get it right and I just remember saying, "Yo, I gotta get the eagle, that, whatever, that hawk."



Q-TIP,
PHARRELL
AND MOS
DEF AT
NYC'S SOHO
HOUSE

This is at the Soho House [in New York City]. Not only are these three my favorite artists, what's so funny is that, in my world, I should probably dress better, but taking from the three of them right here, the artists that don't really care about swag. Look at Pharrell now. He's the house of Louis Vuitton, but these guys are very creative.

This is right after the Soho House in the Meatpacking District opened. They had a movie theater and [and there was a screening of the] movie called *City of God*. And lucky, because back then, now you can't take no photos in there. I was just permitted.

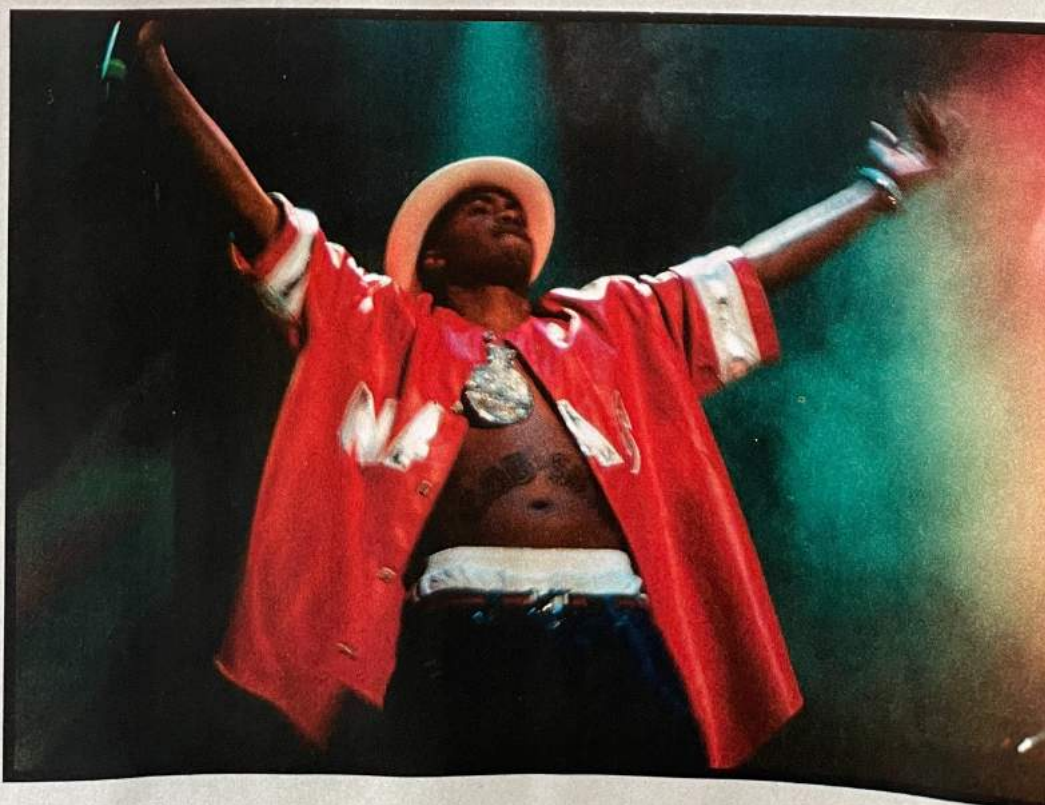
Luckily, I knew all three of them, too. Look at the cell phone in Mos Def's hand. It's the flip Motorola. Actually, right behind me was that famous short person [actor Peter Dinklage]. He was right behind me. He was like, "Yo, I'm a big fan of y'all."

NAS WEARING
HIS RARE
QUEENSBRIDGE
CHAIN

I wanna say that's Summer Jam. What year, I don't know, but I think that was Summer Jam, I could be wrong. It would probably be in the era of 2000 'cause he has his QB medallion on. That QB piece he had was very particular to one to two years. He only rocked it for a year or two. I was a Nas fan since day one, man. So, to see him on stage and now be a friend of his, just quite an amazing image to me because, for me, it was a testimony to myself.

When I was living in Brentwood, Long Island, out of a Mazda 323, and just God putting the seed in my head that you will be a photographer and me having faith in God and following this thought, an idea doesn't mean you're going to become what you want, but having the thought that you believe that God placed in your mind. And now, here you are with one of your musical idols: Nas, the Godson. Right there in the flesh, this close, it was just a good feeling.

I just love the shot. It's a little soft, but it's in motion. It's raw, uncut. Ain't no Photoshop here. This is just smoke and fancy lights on stage. It's something special.



**BOBBY SHMURDA
AND ROWDY
REBEL AT
106 & PARK**

This is [backstage] at BET, the BET office on 57th Street [in New York City], which is technically the CBS office. Rowdy Rebel, I didn't know he knew me, but he knew of me from the photos. He told Bobby Shmurda that, "This is Johnny Nuñez. If he takes your picture, that means you've made it." Sometimes, a lot of artists will say that to another artist that's coming up or whatever and it's an honor to me when I hear something like that.

Long story short, they were going to be on *106 & Park*. A lot of people don't know that these are gang signs for their set, representing Crips out of Brooklyn. They're [GS9]. So, in this picture, I caught them. What you don't see behind me is like 400 goons. I just took this picture to represent this is Brooklyn. Unfortunately, not too long after this photo was taken, they all got locked up.

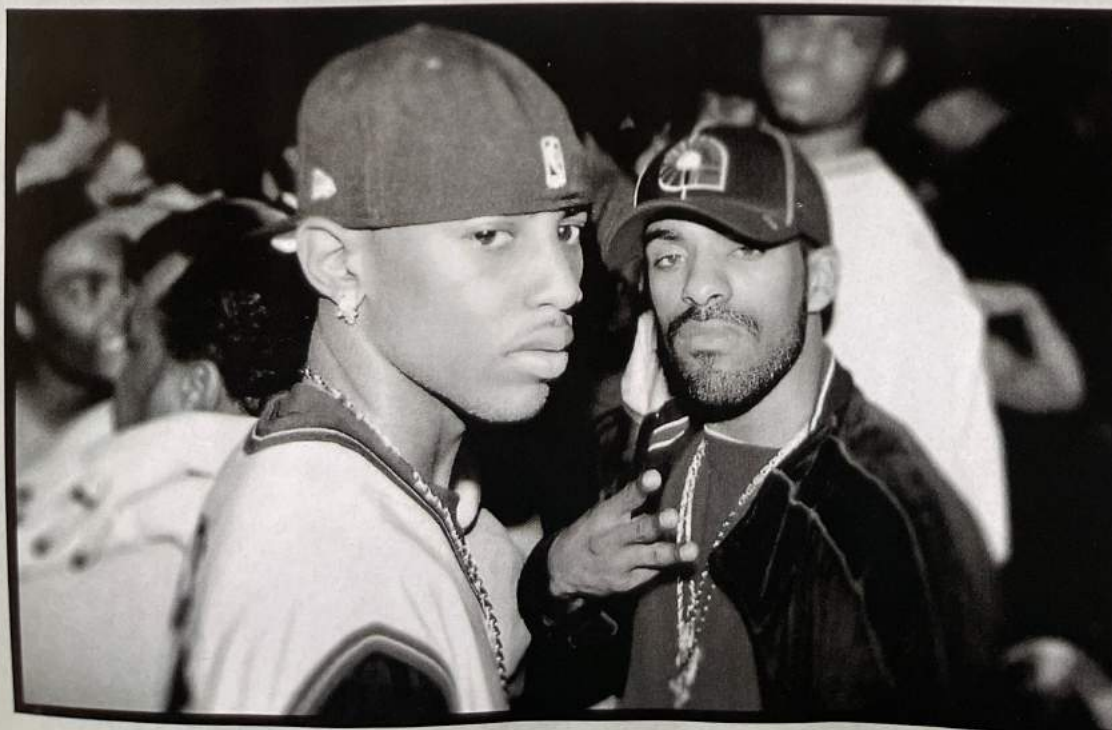


**FABOLOUS
AND DJ CLUE
AT NYC'S
ESSEX**

There was a nightclub called Essex [on] Essex and Houston [in New York City]. I feel like someone got killed in there, but I feel like there was a lot... just like the Tunnel [nightclub]. I think Fab was so young, he wasn't even supposed to be in that club. Fab was definitely a minor. He was probably 16, 17 in this photo. No facial hair. No mustache.

But Clue hit me on the shoulder and said, "Yo, Johnny. This is my new artist. F-A-B-O-L-O-U-S." I'm like, "What's up? How you doing?" If you look at Fab, he looks a little shy, but he was a beast. If you don't know Fab, he always looks curious and his demeanor is serious. Even as a kid, you see he's got that seriousness around him. This aura of don't play with me. Don't play with me, don't play with me.

He was a sleeping giant. Because he didn't know, no one knew he was gonna blow up to be a big artist. Clue, he was already an established DJ and made his own market and his own brand. Clue! Cluemannatti! This was actually color, but it may have been convert-



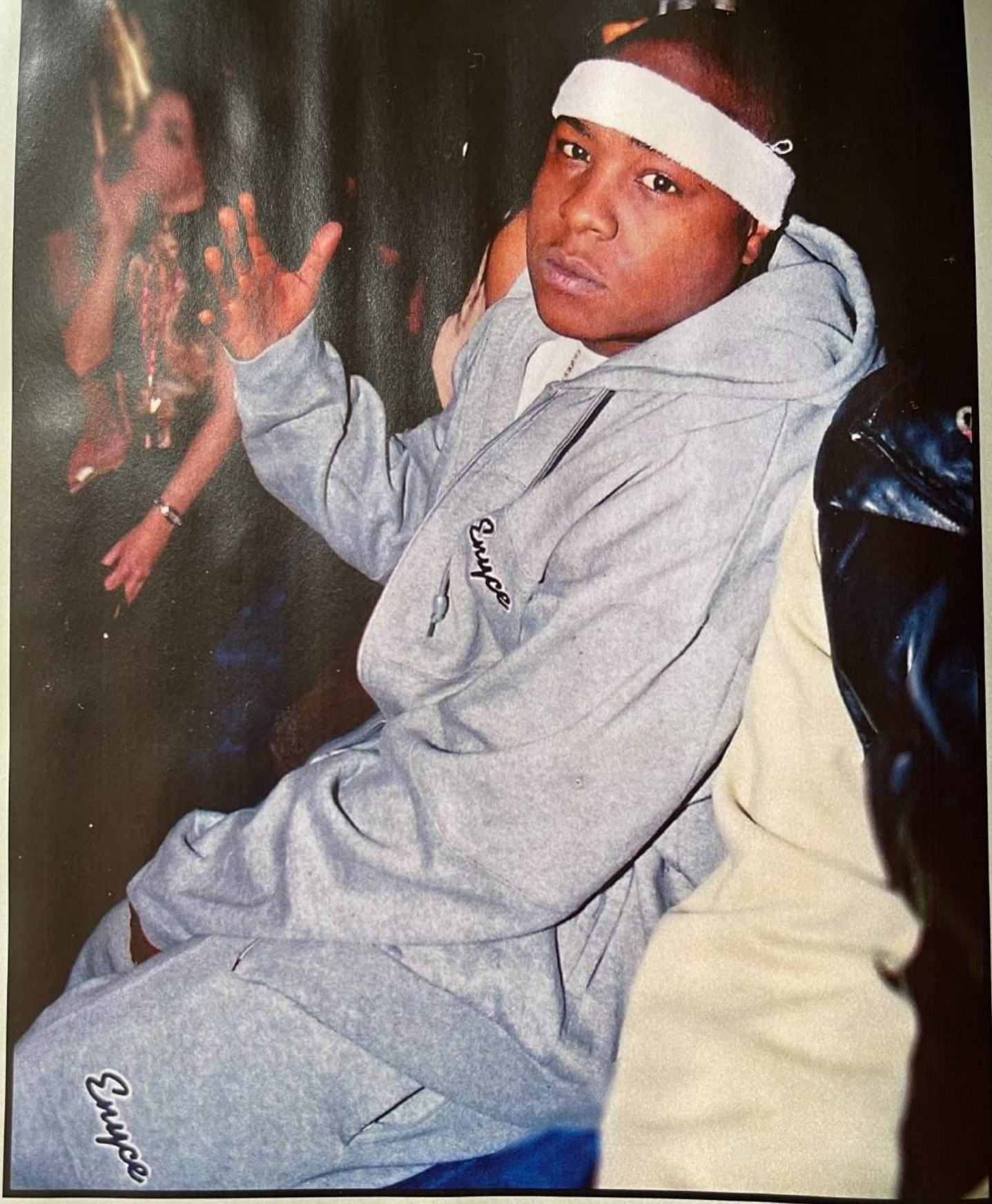


**BIRDMAN
AND LIL
WAYNE AT
BIRDMAN'S
BIRTHDAY
PARTY**

I'd like to say that was possibly '99. I believe it was Birdman's birthday and I believe Lil Wayne was 16 or 14 in that photo. He had a few tattoos, but not that many. It was New York City and I wanna say that the nightclub was Mars [2112]. This was before they signed Drake. This was before Birdman signed Drake. Before Birdman signed Nicki Minaj. This was the era of the Blackberry.

I knew that, again, the one up I had on me...now this isn't White photographers, this is Black and Brown photographers. Ain't nobody listening to the South. The photographers that were in the room were primarily older than me, so they only knew New York hip-hop. Because I was just a vast lover of hip-hop, I already knew who Cash Money clique was. I started to photograph Birdman and Slim—the brother behind him—and Lil Wayne. I knew all them, so I caught that shot.

That was important because I wanted to capture that bottle of Cristal, or whatever that was. That, at the time, was a status symbol. Cash Money, we got it. We're gonna make it. We're from the wards of New Orleans, to now, Times Square. We made it. So that's what that represents, Black elegance.



JADAKISS AT
EVE'S VIDEO
SHOOT FOR
"GOTTA
MAN"

That was at a video shoot [in] New York City, Manhattan to be exact. No facial hair. Look at him, Baby 'Kiss. I wanna say that that was actually at an Eve video shoot for one of Evey Eve's songs, ["Gotta Man"]. I was a fan of The Lox. Original-ly they were called the Warlox and then they changed it to The Lox. I was a big fan of Styles P a.k.a. The Ghost, Sheek Louch and, of course, Jadakiss. So, I was just saying, "Wassup."

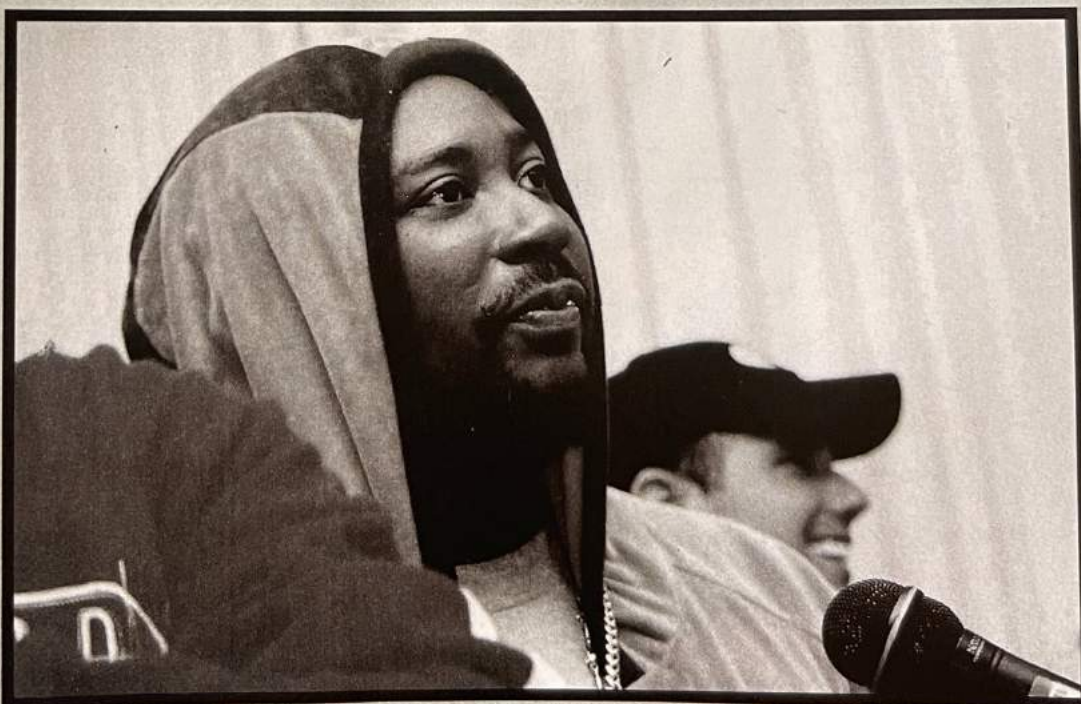
As you can see, he was getting ready to give me a pound, but as he was getting ready to give me a pound, I went back and just caught the shot. It was backstage. As the cameraman was doing the video, he was just sitting, waiting for his moment to say his verse, or whatever Eve had him doing in the video. Or maybe he was just chilling, but he was on the set. So, this is a good shot 'cause that's a young 'Kiss, you know?

FAT JOE AND
BIG PUN AT
PUN'S
CAPITAL
PUNISHMENT
ALBUM
RELEASE

This was at the Bronx's legendary Jimmy's Cafe and it was for the release of that album [*Capital Punishment*] that you see behind you. One-half face is Big Pun. Of course, you can see DJ Clue was spinnin'. The year [1998] that album came out would be the year that this picture was taken.

I developed a friendship with Big Pun because I heard his mixtape, or someone put him on a mixtape, and when I heard, "Dead in the middle of Little Italy/Little did we know that we riddled two middlemen who didn't do diddy." I was like, "What!?" He was at Hot 97, and he's being interviewed by Angie Martinez. I don't know where I was on the highway. I made a quick turn. Got off the exit. Zoomed right to Hot 97 and there he was. His interview was over, but he was smoking a cigarette, and I took some incredible photos of him with a brick wall.

I loved Fat Joe because I was a big fan of *Don Cartagena*. But again, what this picture represents to me, see how Fat Joe has his arm around Big Pun? And how Big Pun is sorta like, leaning into him? That kindred spirit, that friendship. That's how Fat Joe is with everybody.



OL' DIRTY
BASTARD AT
A PRESS
CONFERENCE
AFTER BEING
RELEASED
FROM JAIL

ODB was arrested and he was going to do some time, but I guess, for whatever it was, Mariah Carey and Dame Dash came to his defense and [said] they would pay for rehab and whatever it took for ODB to be straight, to be OK, they were willing. This was at a press conference where, now that he was out of jail, he wanted everyone to know that he was going to clean up his act and change.

Right before this picture was taken, he literally just came out of jail. From jail to the press conference, and he told everyone to please give him a minute to be by himself. He wanted to be with himself and his mom. I, fortunately, went into the room by accident where he went into and nobody else could be back in that room.

So, I was like a spy. I had my camera in my hand. And him and his mom, his mom hugged him and he put his head down in prayer. And then he looked up, and like a movie, the rays of sunlight was on his face, from the same event. And then, he came out the room, I took a few pictures. I didn't wanna make too much noise and when he came out the room, he was happy. He came out like he was ready to change and that was the picture I took.