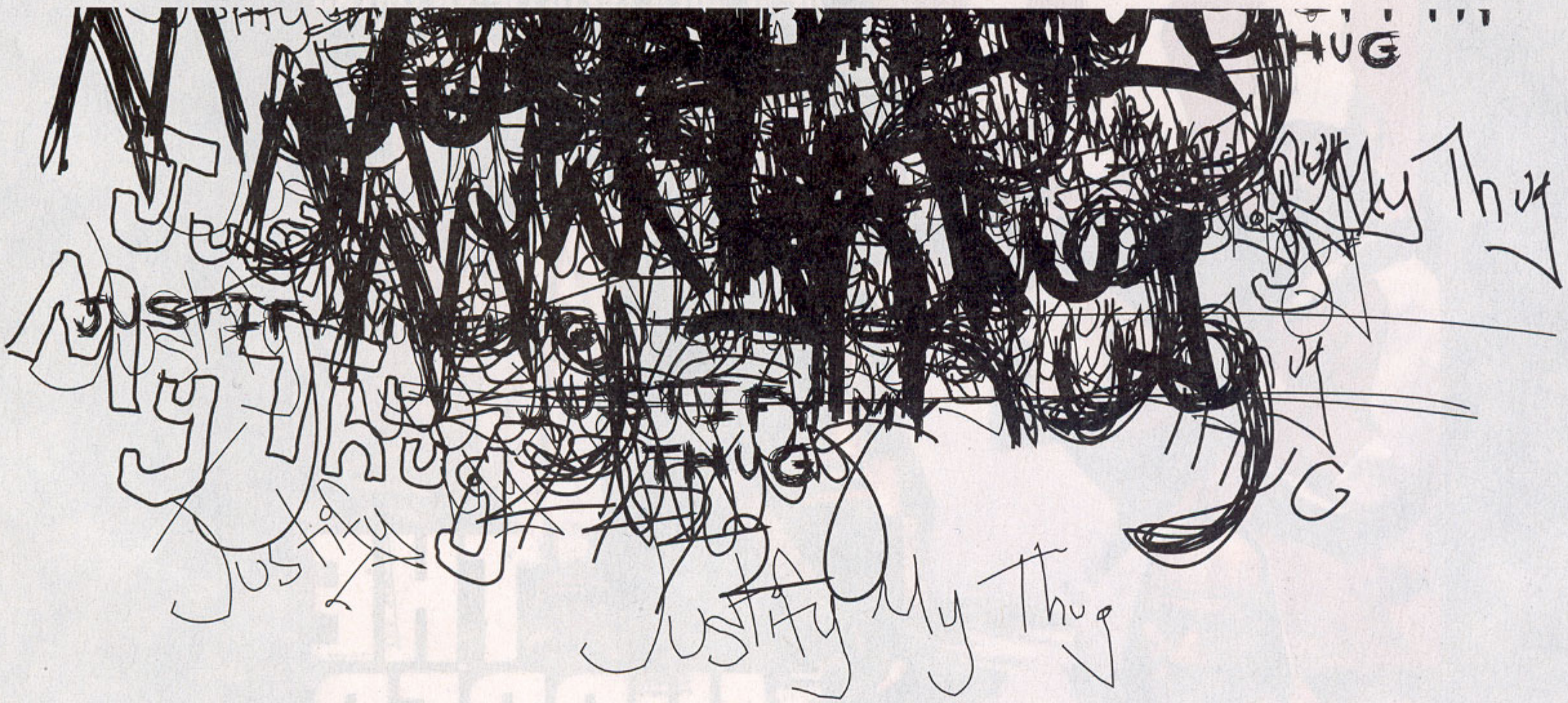


JUSTIFY MY THUG



WHETHER IT WAS BEHIND PRISON BARS OR RHYME BARS,
SAIGON HAS NEVER MINCED WORDS.
BUT NOW THAT JUST BLAZE AND HBO
HAVE GIVEN HIM THE ULTIMATE PLATFORM,
WHAT IS HE GOING TO SAY?

STORY JERRY L. BARROW | PHOTOGRAPHY JASON GOULD



The story begins in the most unlikely of places. A little boy calling himself DJ Cogswell (yes, after the Jetson's character) was living with his mother in Hyenga Lake, a small community in Spring Valley, NY.

"This was the worst place for a human being to live at," remembers Cogs. "They weren't really apartments, they was all wood. When it rained, it rained in our living room. We ain't have mice, we had rats. You slept with one eye open in that motherfucker."

Back then the only escape for the 11-year-old was hip-hop. A friend of his sold him some old belt drive turntables for \$100 and the aspiring mix master would attempt to do his best Ron G impersonations. "Real hood shit. I was trying to make these DJ Cogswell tapes, but no one else knew they existed. I got so many beatings over them turntables. Everybody would be asleep and I'd turn them on late at night and my mom would flip out. I loved the music, but I loved the streets more."

Those same streets would guest star in his life for almost a decade. A kick to a girl's eye during a school bus brawl would land our protagonist in St. Cabrini juvenile facility at age 13. Three months after getting released from the group home, he'd be right back in the system for almost six years.

"I shot some people in a club," says the former Cogswell, now known as the rapper Saigon. "I snuck in through the back [door], 'cause I was too young to get in. I snuck everybody's guns in. I got into an altercation and ended up shooting this innocent bystander."

If Saigon's recollection of that night sounds stiff and starchy it's by design. He doesn't want to glorify these past deeds or use them for marketing campaigns, so don't expect to hear them documented on his upcoming debut album, *The Greatest Story Never Told*. "I spoke on all of that in my mixtapes," he says flatly. "If you didn't hear it already, you missed it."

What you will hear on this much-anticipated album is the ghetto's story, as narrated by one of its native sons. Overseen by super-producer Just Blaze, the album is an ambitious attempt to reach the streets, clubs, radio, and the "conscious" set without sounding forced. Not since Ice Cube's *Amerikkka's Most Wanted* has an artist been able to pull off such an expansive mix. Maybe the title should be *Mission Impossible*.

"People don't know how to distinguish me yet and that's good to me," says Saigon. "I can do a song with dead prez and it don't seem like a reach, then do a song with Kool G. Rap. I can come into [NY club] S.O.B.'s with a fur coat on. I did it before. The Bohemians was ready to attack a nigga and burn me wit' a incense."

It's this uncompromising wit that has helped make Saigon a star in the streets. Asking questions no one has the balls to ask, like, "What is the gayest line Biggie Smalls ever wrote?" earned him a following amongst cities' top DJs and producers.

"There was a lot of love early on—Kay Slay, Absolut, Cocoa Chanelle, Whoo Kid, Sickamore, Enuff," Saigon remembers. "Chanelle played 'Come Again' for two years straight." Those accolades spawned several mixtapes, including *The Yardfather* parts one and two and *Abandon Nation*.

Just as impressive were the A-List produc-

ers like Alchemist and Buckwild who laced Saigon with beats pro-bono. He knows the favors are going to come back fast and furious, but he's not worried.

"It's all love because I wouldn't be here without them. Al, Buck, EZ Elpee, Scram Jones. Me and Scram did over 35 records and I ain't give him a dollar. All I had to bring was the smoke. I'm definitely a product of producers and DJs. Without them there'd be no Saigon."

Maybe Sai has a greater appreciation for the art of production because he's had to do it himself out of necessity. With the help of a good friend named Cocheeks, Sai got behind



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the MPC and produced "Favorite Things," his first underground hit.

"They were playing Julie Andrews' [version of] 'My Favorite Things' in a hotel elevator in Cali and I thought it would be ill to rap about all your favorite shit," he says of the song's unlikely inspiration. "The beat is probably four tracks. There's no sample in there. I just followed the melody. It's a good first record because people feel like they know you a little bit. It personalizes you with the fans. It's funny because it's my most popular song. I do that at shows and the crowd knows every word. It got me a publishing deal, all kinds of shit and I can't even clear it."

After landing a 12-inch deal with Rawkus Records for the Alchemist produced "Say Yes" the label passed on signing him.

"They told me I was too underground... for Rawkus?" he says laughing. "How the fuck you too underground for Rawkus? But yeah, I was walking around with the razor blade on my shirt. I was Rawked out."

Unfortunately, that wasn't the only sharp object Sai walked around with. After handing out a buck 50 he violated his parole. Looking at a long stretch, that night a DJ saved his life.

"I was about to go back to jail for a long, long time. I called Mark Ronson out of sheer desperation and he didn't lecture me, he just asked what I needed. I told him I want to turn myself in but I need an attorney. So he paid for my lawyer and I beat the case. Six months later he said he was starting Allido Records. I wanted to sign with Kay Slay 'cause he had me so hot in the street, but at the time I felt obligated because Mark helped me out so much."

"We were friends," Mark says modestly, referring to his assistance. "I knew it was serious shit. If he'd asked me for \$5,000 for a Jacob chain I'd have been like, 'Hell no.'"

The partnership with Ronson spawned the Ghostface collabo "Ooh Wee" and gave Saigon much needed studio experience. "I'd spit for five minutes straight without stopping and he

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was like, 'Nah, you gotta break that shit up. You got five songs in that one verse.'"

Ronson and Sai would eventually split amicably amidst the drama of Elektra Records (who was distributing Allido) folding and he became a free agent. In May 2004 he was on his way to a recording studio when he got a call from DJ Sickamore asking if he'd sign with Just Blaze's Fort Knocks label. After a quick U-turn Sai was in Baseline playing Just every record he'd ever made.

"When I first got his material, I was like, 'Who did this beat? How did you get these beats? Who did a tape for him?'" remembers Just. "When he had so much support from producers and DJs I had a lot of respect for, it just blew me away."

Once the ink was dry on his contract Just Blaze had the enviable task of taking this mixtape phenomenon and making him the lead project on his fledgling label. All of the ducks were in a row. Lyrics? Check. Beats? Check. Street cred? Without question. Boasting a family tree that includes most of Roc-A-Fella's catalogue, an early version of *Detox* and *The Documentary*, success was just a matter of time...

PATIENTLY WAITING

Saigon has a mind of his own. "I wish I knew you were coming," Just Blaze says humbly, but his discomfort bubbles beneath the surface. It's late January 2006 and his artist has scheduled a private listening session of his

very rough album. Just is busy in another studio reworking "The Champ" for Ghostface [Ed note: see page 98] but Sai is eager to show off his new baby. They go back and forth between studios A and B gathering songs that are scattered throughout.

"Me and Just fight a lot. We clash but I think that's what makes it work," Sai says with a mischievous grin. "There's a method to the madness. A lot of times we'll disagree on things and all I can say is, 'I was hot on the mixtapes.' But all he gotta say is '*The Blueprint*.' He's a genius and it's good to be in his presence when he's working."

When the discs are finally lined up the sounds are quite frankly, incredible. Even with Sai singing hooks for reference, or key scratches missing, the music more than lives up to the hype, even in its infant stages. While Saigon's flow is formidable untouched, you can hear Just's coaching.

"I learned how to work on my cadences. A lot of time it's not what you say it's how you say it," Saigon explains. "Even just fuckin' with my voice, the pitch, going high and low. Sometimes you wanna body a beat and you aint gotta do that. You have to make your voice an instrument in the beat. You could ruin a dope beat by trying to out-rap it."

"There was one point where he was doing his vocals over and over," adds Just. "Because he was trying to get the vocals he did in one room to match the vocals we did in another room. And I told him no, we do that in the

mix. We realized we had to communicate a lot more."

Recording began in March of 2005 and has spawned upwards of 40 different songs. Alchemist, Scram Jones, Buckwild, and Just have handled the majority of production duties ensuring a sonic juggernaut. But the glue that holds it together is a caustic mix of holy water and gunpowder sprayed by a contrite ex-convict who's as book smart as he is street smart. Are we ready?

"I want my album to be a chronological tale of the average black man in America," Saigon begins. "Temptations in the ghetto. Stealing your first car, smoking your first blunt, robbin' your first cab driver—[stuff] that supposedly make you a man. These things still exist. Niggas still get burnt. The last song I heard about STDs was Kool Moe Dee's 'Go See the Doctor,' no... Ice Cube did 'Look Who's Burnin'.' I was gonna try to do 'Self Destruction' over for my album and they told me I'd never pull it off because everybody's at war with each other."

To call the work conceptual is an understatement. The murky "Enemies" finds Saigon speaking to the streets embodied as a person. He's chastising the fair-weather friend for being a bad influence peddling misguided loyalty as a code of honor.

"We believe the streets is our friend, but it's these streets that have us out here getting drunk and getting fucked up," he explains. "We scream it's our hood, but you rent this apartment. We'll die for our hood. People say where they from more than their own name. What is that doin' for you?"

"Preacher" is a familiar rant against one of the most profitable businesses in the hood. Being born in Rockland County, NY and bounced around from relative to relative, Saigon got to see "Pastor Offering" do his work in many places.

"I understand you gotta keep the lights on, but you need three offerings? Ain't that many lights in here. My father is Catholic, so when I was a shorty I went to Catholic church. I was used to going to church where they shouted and got the ghost. But the one thing they had in common was that money."

What is probably the one song that will bake most people's noodles is "The Invitation." It's a raucous club number that features Fatman Scoop and Greg Nice as carnival barkers doing what they do best, calling everyone to a party. But it's clearly deeper than a rump-shaker affair.

"Everything they put in the hood is an invitation to prison. I've had the luxury of living in the ghetto and the suburbs. It's easy to get a gun in Brownsville, but in Westchester

and Rockland County... it's 20 times harder. Is that by chance or design? I think it's by design. All these things, the guns, the drugs, it's all an invitation to jail."

THE FINISH LINE

Everyone who has toiled with an album knows that even the greatest collection can be stalled by one entity: the label. But it seems that the wait is close to being over. In 2005, Saigon landed a small role on HBO's popular series *Entourage* as an auto mechanic with aspirations to be an MC. For the second season Saigon's role has been expanded along with the presence of his music. Seeing a valuable opportunity, Atlantic Records has signed on to produce the show's soundtrack.

"I've only been sleeping an hour or two a night," Just says one late night in mid-April. "This is the first time we're having a meeting [with Atlantic]. And he's been signed since November 2004. Now that the second season of *Entourage* is coming out they're trying to capitalize."

If everything goes as planned Saigon will have two singles in rotation, one from his album and one from the *Entourage* soundtrack, to set up the late summer release of *The Greatest Story Never Told*. At the behest of Atlantic's Chairman/CEO Craig Kallman, one of the label's biggest stars may be in the studio with Saigon very soon to complete the synergy.

While the label brass is pleased with what they've heard, there are still some things to be worked out. For example, one of Saigon's favors is running into red tape.

"I had this song 'Shot In Ya Booty' and Mariah Carey heard the beat," Sai reveals. "Scram was like, 'You know Mariah wants to use this.' I was like, 'Get your money.' But when they took it they changed the whole sample and the beat is different. So we might still be able to use it."

Whatever the final outcome, the world is in for something special. The title track was the first song recorded for the album and Sai new from that first moment that he had something to prove. He'd come too far to be wack now.

"I was like, wow, it's really going down," he says remembering that first day of recording like it was yesterday. "Just is at the console and I'm in the booth and he's looking at me like, 'You ready?' The whole vibe of being in such a legendary studio and me trying to take my career to the next level... it was almost surreal. I'd done everything you can do on the mixtape circuit. I hit a glass ceiling, so now it's time to really go in and show the world what I can do. I've been in jail seven years, so for me to be out here working with a producer who's beats I used to listen to in my cell is like a dream come true." *

FIGHT MUSIC

From T.I. and Kanye West to Ghostface and Rhymefest, Just Blaze keeps our heads ringing. But how does he do it?



ONE OF THE PROBLEMS I USED TO HAVE is that people would love the beat and tell me that it sounded like the intro to a movie, but they couldn't rhyme to it. So you have to leave room for the artist. One of the keys to records like "PSA" and "Safe 2 Say (The Incredible)," is you gotta make sure your drums match what is happening in the music. You have to have drums that fit the mood of the sample. You can't have this blaring horn with a light kick and a rim shot. A lot of people miss the syncopation between the drums and the music. And don't be afraid to let it distort.

My engineers like Young Guru and Ryan West, they know to keep the vocals clean but let the beat distort if it sounds good. We're digital now, so you don't have to worry about your kick on track one in Pro Tools bleeding into track two. If it sounds good when you're making the beat, record it exactly the way you have it. Don't turn your snare down because you see it breaking up. I track everything at the exact level that it's at on the MP so in Pro Tools it sounds exactly as I did it on the MP. The old method, people would record individual tracks and adjust the volume for each one so that it doesn't distort going into the master. But when you hit mute, bring all the faders up to zero and hit play in Pro Tools—it will sound like a completely different beat. Then you gotta go do a whole rough mix just to recapture the essence of what it sounded like when you made it. It's like trying to dissect an atom and put it back together. So I try to keep it as raw as possible. I used to compress the life out of everything. But once you get some experience you learn what everything is for.

I don't quantize, but most of my stuff could be set to a 1/16 quantize. When you quantize you are locking your

rhythm to what the computer says it should be. What if the first half of a bar is a 1/16th triplet and the second half is a 1/16 straight? You can go back and program it, but you'll lose the human feel. Funk had a free-flowing, human feel. When you just go and let it flow it might not be perfect. The ability to bang on the MP is what separates the pros. On RZA's beats, the turnarounds had a stutter on the kick. He didn't loop it perfectly, but it felt good. If you can't do that you should keep practicing or this just isn't for you. If you can't program a drum machine somewhat on time, this may not be the style of music for you.

There are so many producers who are stuck on their drum machines, but the computer makes sense for a lot of reasons. I'm toying with the idea of a software company that will translate these drum machines to computer. People want to just pick it up and do a beat like they do on an ASR.

The Roland people came to me about the Roland MV-8000 and I trashed it. Because I told them if you want to bite the MPC look, go further. Make it like the MP then. I don't want to have five options of how to sample. Give me five algorithms to apply the sample. That's why the SP-12 was a success, because it was easy. The SP-12 wasn't made for hip-hop. It was made to be a virtual drummer, but hip-hop took it. Do some research on how it's being used, don't alienate people. Akai made the MPC4000 so different that people who bought them were scared of them and returned it. Now it's becoming more common, but it took a few years to be accepted. If you can't afford a 4000, the 2500 will give you everything you need. For bedroom studios, the 2500 is a great place to start.