



BLOCK MUSIC ISSUE!

SCRATCH

HIP-HOP FOR THE RHYTHM & THE REBEL

MAGAZINE

MIAMI BEAT
RICK ROSS,
DJ KHALED,
COOL & DRÉ

ORGANIZED NOIZE
DAN THE AUTOMATOR
PRO TOOLS 7



REUNITED!
TALIB KWESI
& HI-TEK
DOUBLE LPs, WE'RE ALL EXCITED

CLIPSE
PUSH IT TO
THE LIMIT

NOV/DEC 2006
\$4.95 \$5.95 Can.
1 2 >
71486 02475 0

Recognized as a man of the people,

TALIB KWELI hopes that his new company

Blacksmith will help him sidestep

the politics of the industry.

HUSTLE & FLOW

STORY JERRY L. BARROW | PHOTOGRAPHY RAYON RICHARDS



S

afe inside a lumbering black Suburban Talib Kweli is trying to direct traffic. En route to SIR Studios, the Blacksmith CEO is on the phone with a member of Strong Arm Steady trying to quell some internal conflict. "Me and Hi-Tek just had an argument last week, y'all need to get over that," he says matter-of-factly, having just shared a meal with Tekzilla in Brooklyn. The celebrated lyricist, that Jay-Z once confessed he'd like to be, is very calm as he reasons with his signee. The music comes first. Kick the personal stuff to the side. Thankfully, by the time he arrives at the studio there are no signs of any strife. Kronon is busy burning music and selecting songs for an upcoming concert at City Hall Park. Talib's tour DJ, Chaps, is running through some unreleased Jean Grae tracks produced by Nottz. It's business as usual.

"As an artist my concern is purely art, but as an exec I'm responsible for other people's careers," says Talib. "I have to be tight for my whole company now."

After six years signed to Rawkus and then Geffen Records, Talib pulled a *Grand Theft Auto* on his own career and jumped in the driver's seat. Along with his manager Corey Smith, they founded Blacksmith Music, which is distributed by Warner Brothers Records. The first release will be his fourth solo album, *Ear Drum*. With production from Madlib, DJ Khalil, Nick Speed, Just Blaze, Kanye West, and several others, it has the potential to be his most complete CD ever.

"I recorded most of it in my crib with my engineer, Dave Dar," he says of his cost-cutting efforts. "We got Pro Tools and the M-Box. I had some things happen in my personal life where I had to take over the crib I grew up in, so I'm actually creating this album in the basement that I spent my adolescence in. The posters of Flavor Flav and Queen Latifah are still on the wall. But we have the good mic [a Rode NTK] and the good laptop, and that's how we did those vocals. We're still mixing in the big studios because I want that right sound, but we kept a lot of stuff we recorded in the crib as reference because it had that feeling."

One song that is a perfect bridge between Talib's ethereal roots and his commercial potential is the Madlib-produced "Soon The New Day" which features multi-platinum jazz vocalist Norah Jones singing the hook.

"Madlib has so many beats and we listened to 400 [of them] during the Breed Love Odyssey Tour," says Talib. "We recorded the song on the bus and the sample sounded like some real folk shit. Then my manager said we should put Norah Jones on it. At first I was like, 'Naw,' 'cause he's

just thinking Norah Jones sold a shit load of records. But Ahmir [Questlove of the Roots] overheard that and said, 'Here's Norah Jones' email.' So I emailed her and asked her to be on it. I put the record in the email and she said, 'Sure.'"

The chemistry between Talib and Madlib was so strong that they are recording an entire album, *Liberation*, that will be given out to fans for free. While the news of that will have the Internet goin' nuts, there is still one collaboration that fans of Talib are waiting for just as badly. "More or Less" is the sole Hi-Tek production on *Ear Drum*, and even that was recorded for a previous album, which begs the question: Why hasn't there been another Reflection Eternal album?

"When we were doing that album, that was all that was going on in our lives," he begins, choosing his words carefully. "I would go to 'Nati for three months, he would come to New York for three months and we'd just work on the album. We argued a lot in the process of making that album. Not on some 'fuck you' thing, it was like, 'That ain't good enough.' We wanted that album to be perfect, and I think we did a good job. But you get tired of a nigga after a little bit. When you're constantly in somebody's face and on the road. Ever since then, I go to Cincinnati when I get the time. While that works for me, I don't think that works for him. And he's expressed that to me, where he feels that I don't spend enough time. But I tell him I'm 30 years old; I got kids and a career. I'm not 17 years old taking Greyhound to Cincinnati."

What made things more difficult is that while Hi-Tek was pivotal to Black Star and RE in the studio, on the road his presence and paycheck were more diminished. So, rather than tour in support of *Train of Thought*, he opted to stay home and make beats.

"Me and Kwe' kind of grew apart as opposed to growing together," says Tek. "We still cool, but we have different visions for what we want to do with the music. It's not two different directions, but it's two different feels. I think it's just the business. Our hustles are a little different. If the management at the time had accommodated me with a beat machine on the road, I'd have did it. People expect me to make it hot. For me, being on tour and the management is not making sure I'm in the studio in every city, I can't do it. I think [Corey] was a good manager for Kweli, but for me he wasn't good. To me it was more about being comfortable. If I could create on downtime, I would have. I was never trippin' off the money like that. It was about staying active."

For now they'll keep working together whenever time permits, even if G-Unit is getting some of Tek's best beats to date.

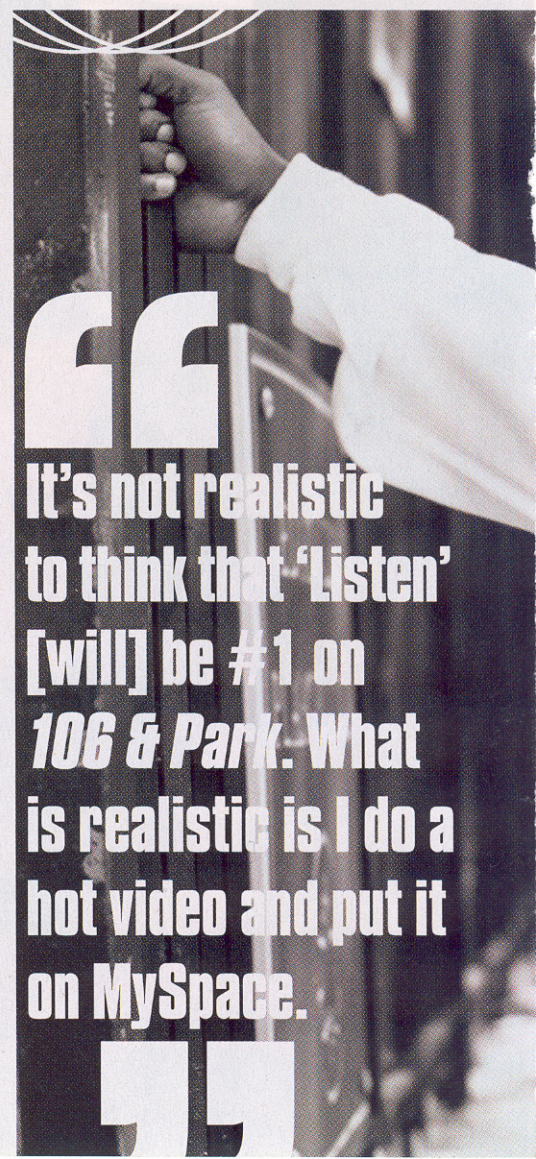
"This is a producer-driven music. I can't feel salty in my heart because I have to respect

the producer hustle," says Talib. "There are songs that we did and I felt my version was better, and he sold it to somebody else, but how else is he supposed to eat?"

Besides, Talib isn't above jacking a hot beat for one of the many mixtapes he's put out between albums. Most recently he kidnapped Busta Rhymes' DJ Scratch-produced "New York Shit" for him and Jean Grae to give their own view of the Rotten Apple. While he has the utmost respect for Busta and his song, some beats just call to you.

"I listen to Diamond D's *Stunts, Blunts and Hip-Hop* all the time, it's a great album and my favorite song on that album is 'I Went for Mine,'" he explains with a mischievous grin. "So I jumped on that beat because I was mad that [DJ] Scratch made that beat and I didn't hear it before Busta and that I didn't think about it before him. How is it these niggas flipped some shit that I been listening to in my crib? I should have thought of that. So I said fuck it, I'm doing my version [*laughs*]."

While freestyling is fun, as an executive Talib has more considerations than what beat



“It’s not realistic to think that ‘Listen’ [will] be #1 on 106 & Park. What is realistic is I do a hot video and put it on MySpace.”

sounds good and where to record. He's had to make some hard and fast decisions regarding the promotion of *Ear Drum* and managing his expectations. He admits that he "wants to sell as many records as possible," but he knows that the path to Gold or Platinum sales is very different in the age of YouTube.

"It's not realistic for me to think that Funkmaster Flex is gonna drop bombs on 'Listen' and it be number one on *106 & Park*," he deadpans. "What is realistic is that it's a good fuckin' hip-hop record and I get an iTunes commercial or do a hot video and put it on MySpace."

Even though he has a good personal relationship with Hot 97's assistant program director, Ebro, Talib doesn't think it makes sense to beat him in the head for radio spins.

"In order for him to give me spins, he has to justify it to his buyers, his bosses, which means my video has to be in rotation," he says. "But in order for my video to be played, they need to see the spins. It's a Catch 22. Their DJs show me love because I'm a New York artist, but I'm never in rotation. That'll never happen. There is no set for my music. They

ain't doing a Roots, Lupe, Common, Kweli set on the radio. You gonna spin my shit after Franchise Boyz? No. So if I can't get in a set, why bother trying to get on the radio?"

With a solid fan base in place Talib prefers to let the music be its own best marketing tool. From the soulful crunk of "Country Cousins" produced by A Kid Called Roots featuring UGK to "New York Weather Report" produced by Nick Speed with scratches by Jazzy Jeff and Cut Chemist, *Ear Drum* projects a very communal aesthetic without sounding contrived. Plus a few spins on his XM-hosted "Blacksmith Radio" don't hurt.

"I look at it [like] jazz artists, where cats would just gig with each other," he explains. "I like the collective [feeling]. I've been a part of many movements. Whether it be Rawkus, Okayplayer, Black Star, or Reflection Eternal, but this is the first time there is a flag to wave that unifies everything that I'm doing. There is a movie called *Things to do in Denver When You're Dead*, and one of the catchphrases in it is, 'Give it a name.' This is now a movement that you can participate in. Blacksmith." *

REAL TALK

Engineer Dave Dar made sure Talib was able to properly speak his clout on *Ear Drum*.



WE USED THIS Focus Rite Voice Master Pro mic pre. It has knobs and parameters you can mess with to get a unique sound. That's what you hear on "Ms. Hill," "Eat to Live," "NY Weather Report," and "Revolution in Sound." It was just comfortable to take it back to the basement. We had a couch and carpet to absorb sound, but it had natural reverb, it's all about getting a unique sound. I don't want our stuff to sound like everyone else's. In studio we don't EQ going to tape. I leave his voice flat. But in the basement I mess around on the Focus Rite and cut out some of the high mids. We'll blend his voice into the track because it's very unique. After all these years it's its own instrument.

His kids broke the headphone jack to the Digi 02, so we used the M-Box. We recorded "Soon The New Day" with the M-Box on the tour bus. When it's parked and off, it's quiet enough. We wanted to duplicate the rawness of *Right About Now* but with a bigger budget.

