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# G e t l i f t

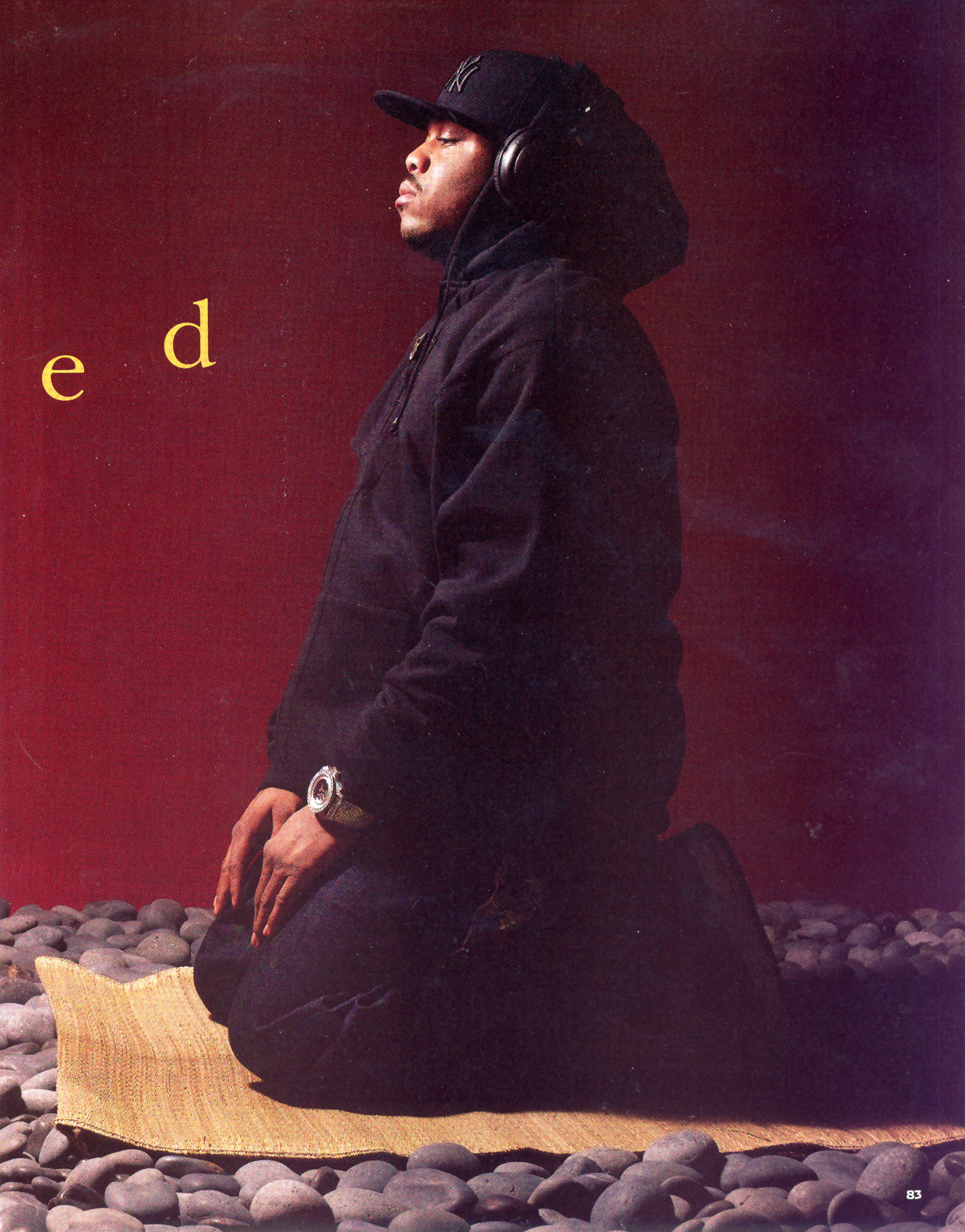
WHILE JUST BLAZE  
IS BRINGING HIS  
PRODUCTION CAREER  
TO NEW HEIGHTS, HE'S IN  
A NEVER-ENDING FIGHT  
TO STAY GROUNDED

WORDS BY JERRY L. BARROW  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY ADAM WEISS





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IT'S ABOUT A WEEK AFTER VALENTINE'S DAY 2005, and a massacre is about to take place inside New York City's Knitting Factory. The huddled masses yearning to be free of lazy loops and weak bass lines nod their heads in unison at an installment of Beat Society, a somewhat monthly celebration of instrumental prowess that is rivaled only by Fight Klub in its cult status in underground circles. Let's just say that if this were an arena, jerseys for Pete Rock, DJ Premier and Large Professor would hang from the rafters. Hardly a place you'd expect a bejeweled multiplatinum producer to show his face. Which is exactly why Justin "Just Blaze" Smith, Mr. "Oh Boy," makes an unscheduled appearance on this night.

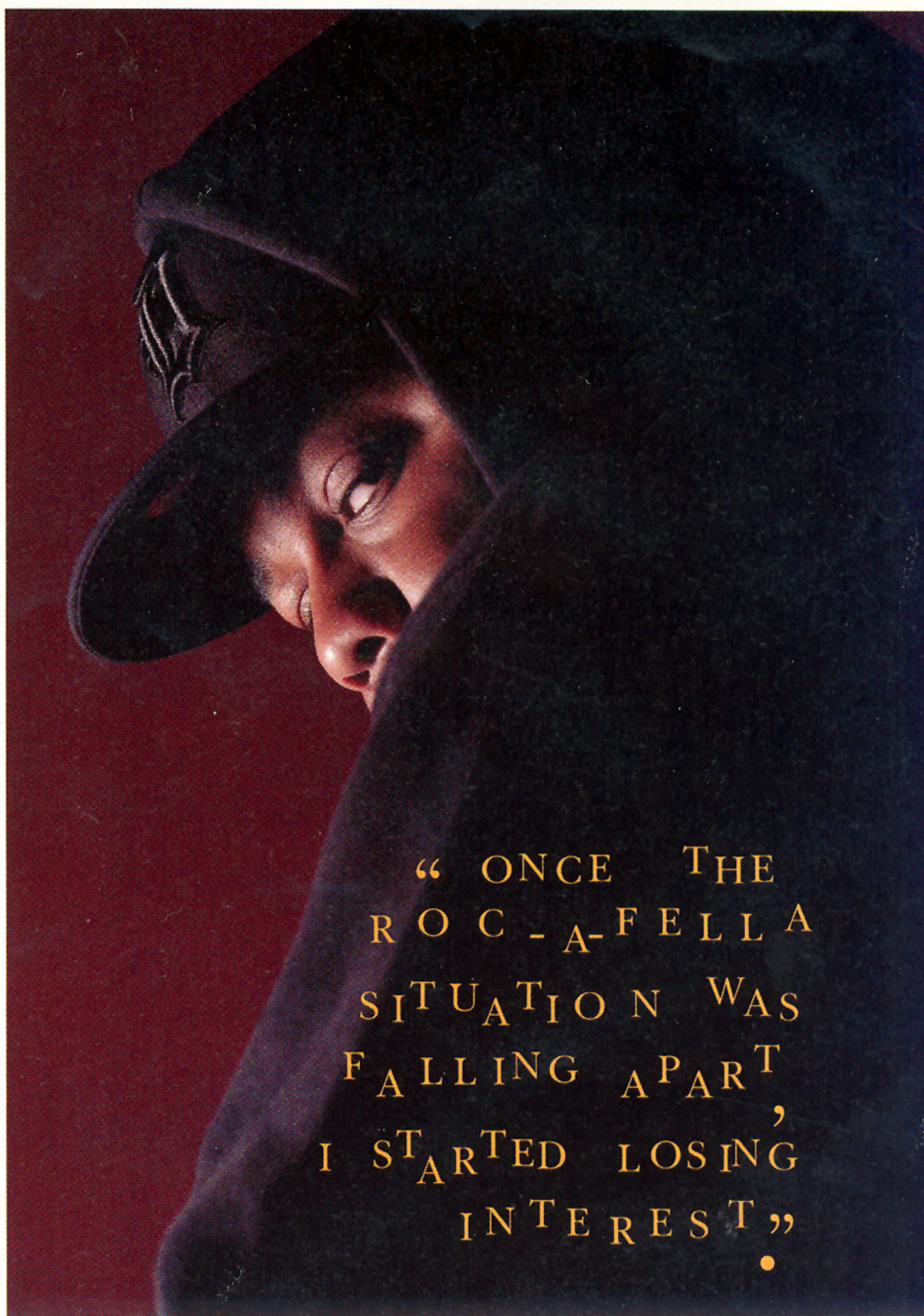
Armed with a stack of breaks and a gold foil T-shirt that reads "King of NY," the mastermind behind Jay-Z's "U Don't Know," Fabolous' "Breathe" and Fat Joe's "Safe 2 Say (The Incredible)" draws gasps and screw faces alike as he takes the stage. But when the laser drops on his CDJ1000s he launches a volley of sonic booms that would give M.O.P. and Busta Rhymes seizures, and leaves his peers on the stage—including fellow Roc producer Chad Wes—shaking their heads. While it's not billed as a competitive event, Blaze clearly won this crowd.

"I usually just go to watch and see what the new cats is doin'," he says months later from behind his desk at Baseline Studios, which he bought two years ago. "It was like how back in the day KRS would just jump on a stage unannounced and rock a whole show then break. Sometimes you gotta do things like that for the love of the art, especially [with] that audience. That's the audience that really keeps your legacy. I was more nervous playing on stage at Beat Society than I was during the [Madison Square] Garden show in front of 30,000 people. At Beat Society you can see their faces."

While it appeared to be spontaneous, Blaze's performance was very calculated, right down to his choice of attire. For years he's endured rumors about jacking breaks and his supposed lack of respect for the underground. So the DJ from Paterson, NJ had to set the record straight once and for all.

"I went and threw on the mainstream artist costume because a lot of those kids have this perception of us," he says. "They think we don't know they exist, and they treat us like we don't exist. There is such a separation. But you can't have a mainstream without an underground. Jay-Z used to go to the *Stretch & Bobbito Show* with Big L. I remember meeting Peanut Butter Wolf and asking him why he changed the vocals on MF Doom's 'All Caps.' I told him, 'I been rockin' the bootleg for a year and then y'all drop the album and the vocals is different.' He was shocked, because not only did I know who he was, but I knew his work extensively."

According to Blaze, the underground/commercial schism occurred in the summer of 1996 when Nas's *It Was Written* was released on the same day as De La Soul's *Stakes Is High*. "That's when I noticed cats arguing which album was better and why," he explains. "*It Was Written* had no Premo, Pete Rock or Large Pro, so those people gravitated toward *Stakes Is High*." Hip-Hop hasn't been the same since, and Blaze has been fighting to bridge the gap with every project.



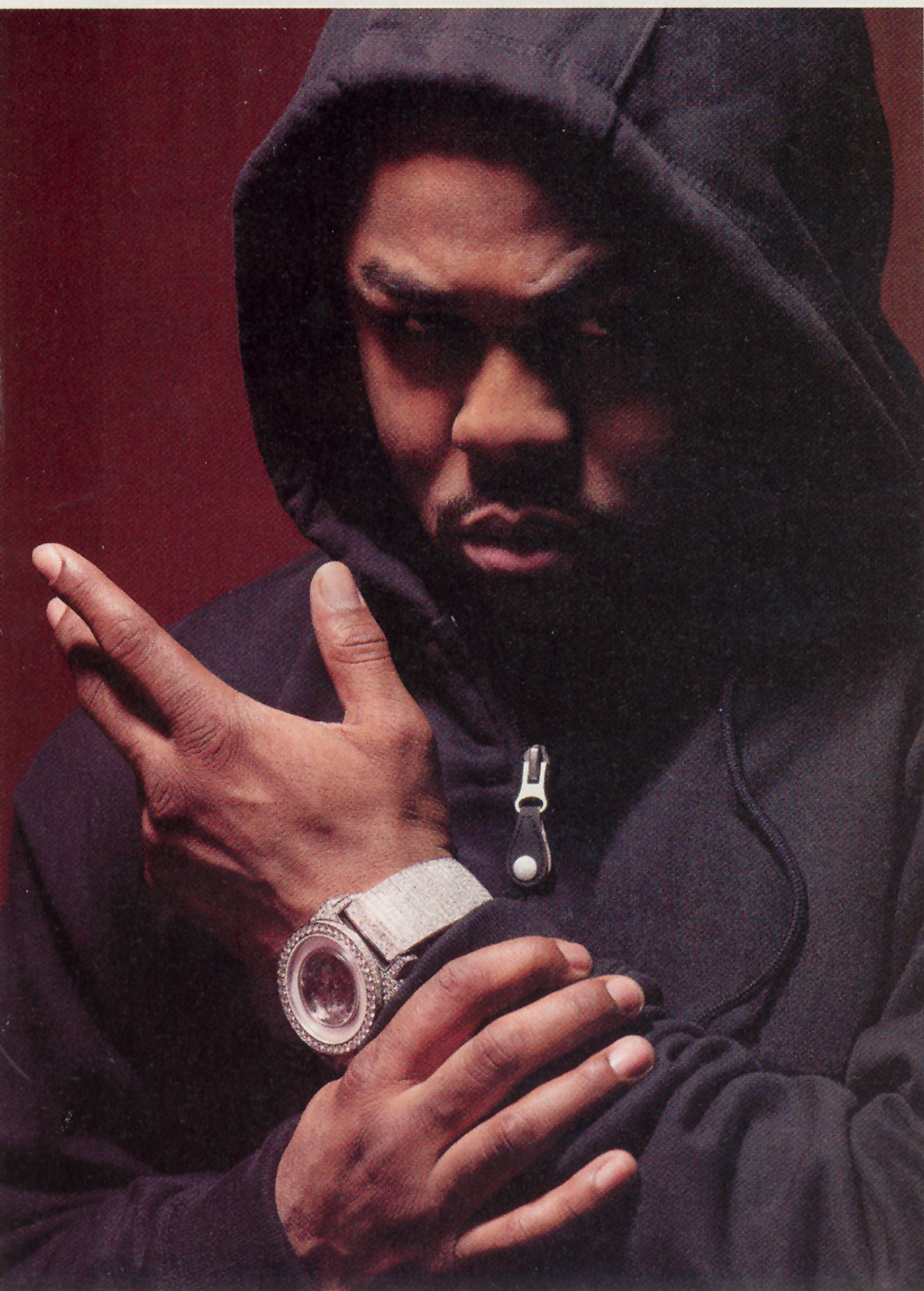
“ONCE THE  
ROC-A-FELLA  
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I STARTED LOSING  
INTEREST.”

But why is he campaigning like a Democrat in New Hampshire for the backpacker's love? Whether it was on purpose or by circumstances, Blaze has participated in a series of unfortunate events that would make Jim Carrey cringe.

First there was the conflict over the beat for "PSA," a sample of Little Boy Blues' "Sea of Love," that was used months before by Black Moon for "Stay Real." Blaze insists he only heard the Black Moon record the day he recorded "PSA" for Jay-Z and he wasn't about to pull a great song over a shared loop. The rumor mill speculated that Blaze was spiting Duck Down for allegedly jilting him on a beat he gave them for Buckshot's *BDI Thug* project.

"I've sold millions of records and [been] Jay-Z's right hand for street records, why would I be worried about some bad business from five, [or] six years ago?" he says. "All I could have gotten out of that was \$2,000. I've seen dudes from Duck Down since then. Me and Evil Dee did a show together on NYU radio. We took a picture with these big smiles, and the caption was 'We're supposed to be fighting.'"





The next coincidence, as he insists it was, happened over the beat to Usher's "Throwback." The Dionne Warwick sample of "You're Gonna Need Me" was also used by Chad Wes on State Property's "Want You Back," which was released before *Confessions*. "I did the 'Throwback' beat in, like, 2001 for Dr. Dre," he says. "That was supposed to be for *Detox*. The whole concept was him telling Hip-Hop that she's gonna want him back when he retires. One thing people don't get is that the timing that a record comes out never [reflects] when it was done."

As he points to the thousands of records in his office, Blaze is quick to let any doubters know that he is no slouch on the breaks, so stealing them just isn't necessary. "I've found versions of a record that I didn't know existed online," he says. "I'm looking up Roy Ayers' 'Vibrations' and find the Buster Williams version, which is the actual version Buckwild used for Big L's 'Bring It On.' Everybody on their blend tapes always plays the Roy Ayers version. And the one I found was 12 minutes long."

For his part, Blaze is not looking for problems with anyone

even when it appears he is the "victim" of a grab-and-go. "When Alchemist did 'Hold you Down,' I was getting messages saying I should take 'We Gon' Make It' and flip it 'cause I used the same sample on the *Dynasty* album," he says, with a chuckle. "I was like, 'Why? Alchemist used it totally different, and I don't own that record, Al Cooper does. He's laughing all the way to the bank. It's just not worth it.'"

And for the record, there is no beef with Jay-Z since Blaze made a beat for Fat Joe. "That thought did cross my mind," the producer admits, acknowledging the subliminal jabs the two heavyweights have exchanged on mixtapes. "But at the end of the day, Jay is a hustler and a businessman who understands that I'm in the business of making records. Plus, I worked with Joe before on Pun's second record."

But in the midst of the drama—real or imagined—more pressing matters rested on Blaze's dreadlocked head. The label home that he helped bring to prominence was going through internal strife.

"For a long time I stopped making beats because I wasn't inspired by what was happening in Hip-Hop," he says of his limited production output in 2004. "Once the Roc-A-Fella situation was falling apart, I started losing interest. When you dedicate your life to something you start to feel it in the air, no pun intended. People started using phrases like 'them' instead of 'us.' That's how 'Breathe' came out. I just got frustrated from not making a beat in a while and I took the frustration out on that track."

Since no producer these days stops at simply making beats, Blaze used his hiatus effectively and got his own label—Fort Knox—off the ground through a deal with Warner Music Group. "People have been coming to me about label situations for years. But I didn't want to take on too much at once," he explains. "I started looking around to see who's hot and I came across Saigon. Sickamore is a friend of mine and he brought him up and that was pretty much it. There is this other kid that was in [The SOURCE's] 'Unsigned Hype,' Jay Electronica, and I started vibing with him a little bit. He's in a situation right now, so we're trying to work that out as well."

As the clock ticks into the early hours of the morning, Blaze is itching to get into a recording session. But he can't resist giving a sneak peek of some unreleased work. With a mischievous grin he clicks the mouse to his desktop and plays a few seconds of MF Doom's "Food." Then after a dramatic pause, his remix of "Food" comes in from the monitors. A drunk-sounding Cookie Monster props up the track, giving a whole new texture to Viktor Von Doom's phonics. Blaze's voice rises as he shares album cover ideas for a possible MF Doom collaboration.

"The group MFSB had an album cover with skulls on it and one of the skulls had a mask on it, that could be Doom," he says. "The album would be called MFJB."

As for the "Cookies" remix, underground heads should keep an ear to the street, or Limewire. "I toyed with the idea of leaking it on the Internet," he reveals. "They probably won't believe it was produced by Just Blaze." There may be platinum in the underground yet. You just have to know where to dig. S