





# Redman management

KEITH MURRAY CAME INTO THE GAME HOSTILE. BUT AFTER AN ASSAULT CONVICTION PAUSED HIS CAREER, HE'S LEARNED THAT HAPPINESS CAN BE THE MOST BEAUTIFULLEST THING IN THE WORLD.

WORDS BY JERRY L. BARROW PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRIAN SMITH

KEITH MURRAY WAS ONLY DOING A FAVOR. A Samaritan-like gesture. He never imagined that three years in prison on assault charges would be his reward. The story has two versions. Murray's starts something like this: A promoter from Ohio named Latif Hughes called him at the 11th hour to rock a stage with the Wu-Tang Clan and Mic Geronimo in New Britain, Conn. Since Murray had worked with Hughes six months earlier, he gladly crammed into a 15-passenger van with his 10 closest friends for the two-hour-plus drive from Long Island to the club. Latif's brother was at the wheel.

After killing a few hours at the club drinking and playing pool, Murray noticed that the usually affable promoter had developed a nervous tick. Not wanting trouble, Murray went outside to speak with Hughes. His boys followed. Murray wasn't on the billing, so if there was a problem with his slot or his money, he'd gladly leave. Hughes denied there were any problems and went to find his brother. Murray and his crew tried to follow him back into the club because Latif was the only link to their ride back home. But in the time it would take Redman to smoke a roach, a fight broke out. At the sound of sirens and lights, Murray made his way to a local ice-cream shop and asked about an express bus to New York. A young

lady who recognized Murray called him a cab, and \$200 later he was back on Carlton Avenue on Long Island.

"I'm not satisfied till I'm in some kind of bullshit and I get out of it by the skin of my teeth," Keith Omar Murray Jr. admits under Miami's orange skyline. With the demeanor of an aged rodeo clown, he continues: "I was a fun-lovin' criminal and it's not cool anymore."

Murray's appetite for destruction is in his blood. His mother, a 5-foot-5-inch fly girl christened Darlene, used to steal clothing to keep her eldest son looking fresh. Her sticky fingers also fed her own unfortunate drug habit. But once her family had grown to a brood of six, she couldn't run the streets anymore and turned to welfare. Murray says he accepted her behavior as a fact of life, but when she stopped shoplifting it wasn't long before he was on the streets hustling to handle his own wardrobe worries.

As he recalls his childhood, the grade he was in at school serves as a guidepost for his scattered memories. He speaks and hangs on every word as if he's telling and hearing this story for the first time. "I started cuttin' [class] in sixth grade. In seventh grade, because of all the stress and domestic violence, they put me in special ed. I knew I wasn't retarded, but all I remember was fighting."



In high school, Murray split time between Long Island and the streets of Brooklyn, running with a crew called the Razorcons, who would travel around cutting off guys' braids with orange box cutters in some Samson-like rituals. Murray's father, a former X-ray technician at Patterson Home in Uniondale, L.I., was a heavy drinker and died of cirrhosis before Keith's freshman year. But his stepfather, a Jamaican-born drug dealer, kept him entrenched in criminal culture. A week before his senior-year finals, Keith caught his first bid.

"My moms was coming from the store and this dude that bought drugs from us kept approachin' her. I got up on him and I cut him from his ear to his neck. I did six months [with] five years of probation. I served the six in a dorm in Riverhead," he says.

After earning his GED in jail, Murray enrolled at New York City College of Technology in 1990. He peddled drugs and slung boxes for UPS to make ends meet. "College taught me how to communicate and function in society. I was in English class like *this*," he says, lunging forward for emphasis. "That shit fascinated me. My man White Rock would be like, 'Stop usin' them big words.' And I'd be like, 'What you talkin' about? I'm speakin' plain English you illiterate degenerate!' And he'd go, 'See! There you go again!'" With comedic timing that most of the hacks on *Comic View* would kill for, Murray became a full-fledged verbal problem.

With a few semesters under his belt, Murray convinced K-Solo to introduce him to Erick Sermon. After an impromptu audition, Murray was signed to Sermon's production company and laced a show-stealing cameo on Sermon's "Hostile." Murray's debut single and album, *The Most Beautifullest Thing in the World*, were released on Jive records. As his fantastic style fondled the Isley brothers' "Between the Sheets" sample, the "mad matador of metaphor" became a household name.

"WHEN I'M OUT HERE DOIN' my thing, I always feel alone," Murray confesses on the way to Miami's WEDR 99.1 Jamz radio station to promote his new single, "Yeah, Yeah You Know It," from his Def Jam debut, *He's Keith Murray*. The collection swings the gamut from the uproarious "Badunkadunk" to the heartfelt "Child of the Streets." But Murray will have to walk this road of renewed popularity alone. "The most important people in my life have never been able to see me in this element."

Though he and his siblings grew up poor, his mother tried desperately to get their life in order. In 1992, she managed with state help to purchase a small home for her family. But it seemed the clan still couldn't catch a break.

"Our house burned down," Murray reveals. "She just looked at it real depressed. Then she went inside and started cleaning up, and the soot from the fire got into her lungs." His mother contracted HIV while she was using intravenous drugs. As she cleaned, the chemically potent ashes proved too much for her weakened immune system. "I was sleeping in the basement in my grandmother's house and she woke me with one cry: 'She's gone!'"

Like the memory of his mother's death, there are some things Murray can't escape. His Connecticut recollection continues as such. Upon his return to Husky town, Murray was greeted at the airport with an arrest warrant. According to Latif Hughes, Murray assaulted his brother in the brawl that night in 1995. A still-agitated Murray dismisses the case as a money scheme. "The case is in Connecticut, and we got a civil suit case in Long Island. The only one there is [the promoter's] mother. She couldn't even look at me. They got \$75,000."

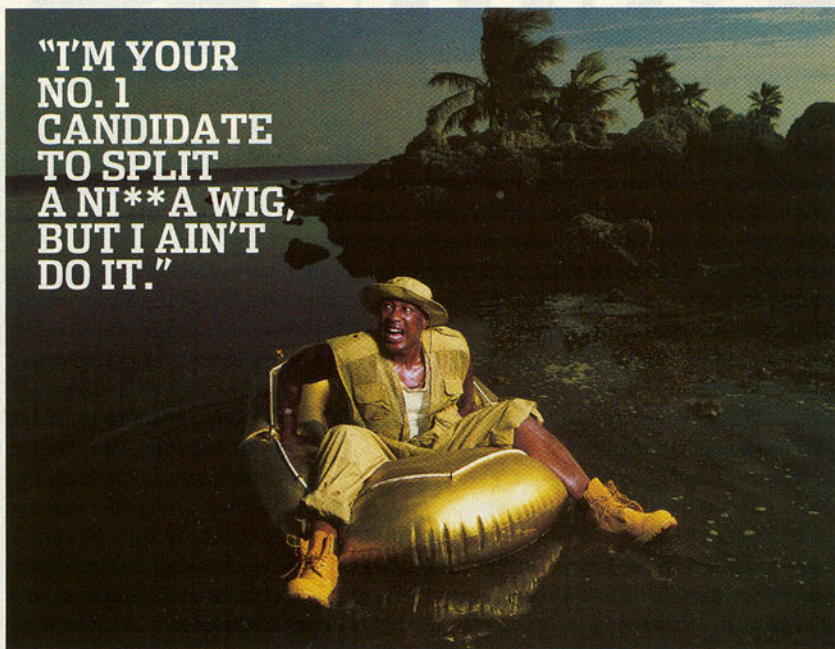
Even with the civil settlement, Murray was convicted in 1997 and sentenced to five years in prison (he was released after three). Not even a sworn affidavit from a witness claiming he was bribed by Hughes to name Murray could set him free. "They found me guilty, naturally, because of my history. Once you go to trial, they bring up your past," he says. "I'm your No. 1 candidate to split a nigga wig, but I ain't do it."

Murray's family life worsened. His youngest sister Christina had contracted HIV from their mother at birth and was growing ill. On Feb. 27, 1998, the 15 year old succumbed to the disease. Murray went into prison six months later.

"OH MY GOD, MIAMI! SUPA CINDY has a super badunkadunk!" Murray screams in homage to 99.1 Jamz's popular radio personality. Cindy blushes. But it's hard to stay mad at Murray. His mischief is more childlike than menacing these days.

"His mental state is good," offers Dr. Trevis, aka Redman. "We can all be characters to a certain extent. But when you're a grown man, you know how to work your mojo."

Murray's positive outlook is due in part to parole-mandated therapy sessions he began in 2001. "My psychiatrist diagnosed me with post-childhood trauma and selective memory," he explains. "All the things I've been through have traumatized me. It's a miracle I've made it where I am without recognizing my issues." Among those issues is guilt he feels for his own success. As his family struggles with their blue-collar existence, Murray wishes he could do more. "A day didn't go by that there wasn't some mental anguish," he explains, citing incidents like his aunt's murder in NYC's Central Park in 1989. "I



want them to do more for themselves and achieve a certain level of success. But my grandmothers tell me, 'You don't owe nobody nothin'. What you got, you got it by yourself. You can't let that drive you to drink, smoke and stay imbalanced.'"

But a month later, Murray's sobriety did little to keep his driver from hitting a highway railing in Durham, N.C. The icy roads sent their customized van into a six-car pileup. Thankfully, no one was seriously injured. He is remarkably composed about it all. "A car is a casket and a weapon. But the angels was on my side for this ride. God told the devil, 'I'm not lettin' you have my man like that.'" After all he's endured, Keith Murray has a second chance, and taking that away now would be the true crime.