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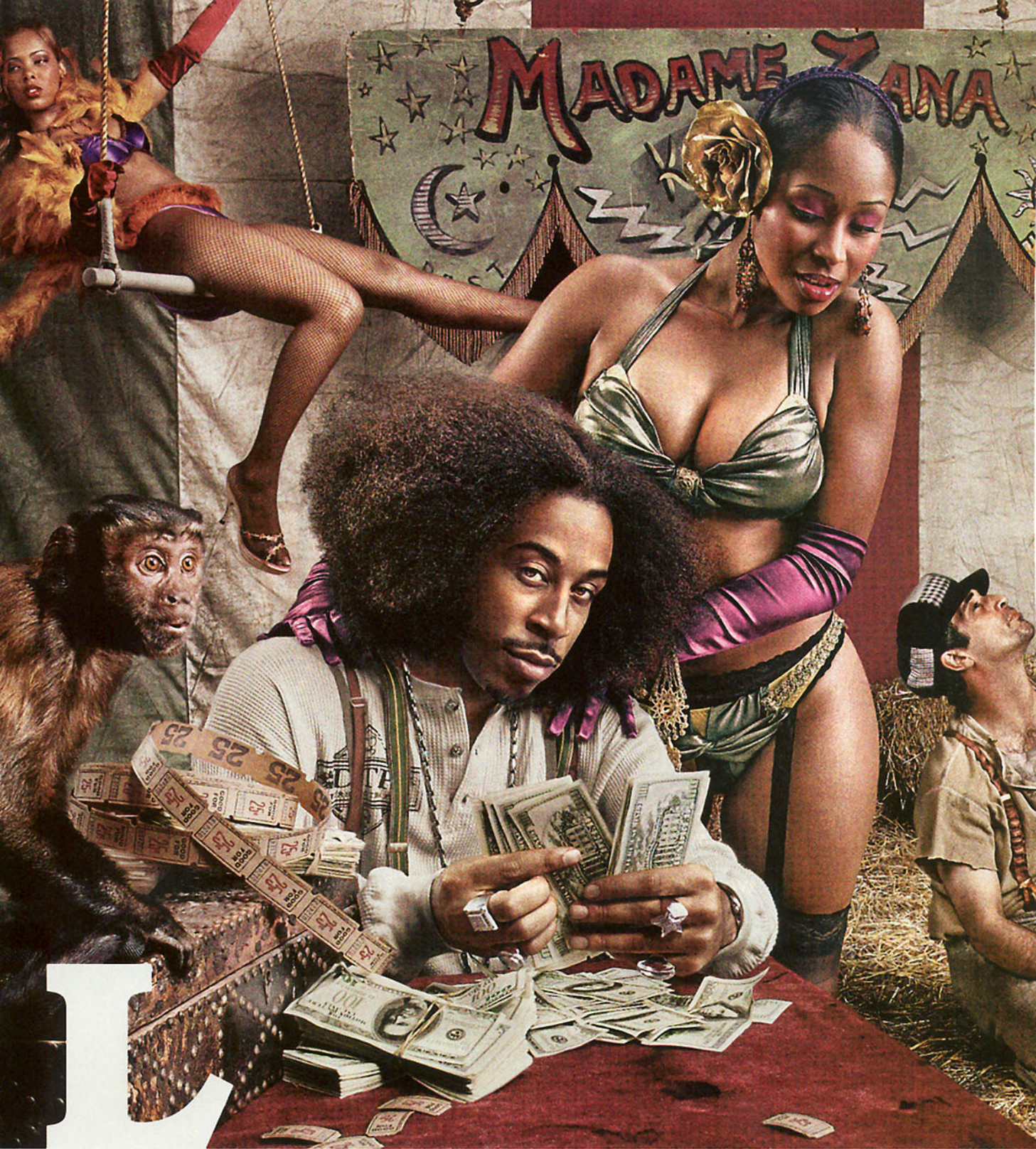




CONTROL FREAK

LUDACRIS CAN JUGGLE WOMEN, KNIVES AND YOUR FAVORITE MCS. BUT WHEN IT COMES TO HIS FAMILY, INDUSTRY RUMORS AND CONSERVATIVE HATERS, THIS RINGMASTER DOESN'T CLOWN AROUND.

WORDS BY JERRY L. BARROW
PHOTOGRAPHS BY JIM FISCUS



Ludacris prefers mixed company. "I'd like a dirty red slut," he says before glancing around his table. "Six of 'em."

The half dozen shots of Jagermeister, Amaretto and cranberry juice are a lubricant for fellowship, fried food and industry rumors. The kind of rumors that inspire hits like "Rollout" and become the seeds of urban legends. His manager, Chaka Zulu, and his stylist, Princess, sit in attendance. Luda invites the two non-drinkers to partake. But they know better. In his three years in the limelight, Luda has developed

an unusually high tolerance for both liquor and hearsay.

"The craziest one I heard was that I was dating Trina and broke up with her, so she gained weight," he says with a raised eyebrow. His towering fro is constricted into a bushy ponytail by one rubber band. But his trademark sideburns are punch-line sharp. "And now she's dating Chingy to make me jealous." The entire table falls out with laughter because it's—well—ludicrous. Especially since there are better tall tales out there with actual bases in fact.



"There is talk of a Ludacris and Missy album," he says of his "Gossip Folks" and "One Minute Man" co-star. "That nigga Missy can drink her ass off, that's why me and her—we here," he says waving two fingers at his eyes for emphasis. "Every video we do is gonna be fuckin' ridiculous!"

If Luda had his way, he'd have his oversized sneakers stompin' with Missy's choreographed Kangol kids tomorrow. Control is very important to Cris and he's used to working on his own schedule. And not waiting for anyone, even Timbaland, has made him very



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wealthy. But when opportunities like this Missy collabo come along, he'll fall back for a minute while things get worked out. "Timbaland needs to get the beats together and make this shit happen."

Six million records ago, Ludacris appeared on "Phat Rabbit" from Timbaland's *Tim's Bio* LP in 1999. Though the teaming didn't result in a deal with Beatchub, Luda transformed himself into a one-man marketing team—for his one song.

"I printed up T-shirts that had 'Ludacris' on the front and on the back it said 'On the Album, Tim's Bio, Track Number 11, 'Phat Rabbit' in stores now.' I was promoting the fuck out of myself from this little bit of leeway Tim gave me." Having grown up an only child, 25-year-old Chris Bridges is accustomed to doing things his way. His pager is a remote control to his empire. "I have to be involved in every aspect of anything that involves me or reflects on me," he says. "When it comes to this music, trying out for movies, writing video treatments, I don't want anything done for me."

MICROPHONE FIEND

If anyone can claim responsibility for Luda's independent spirit, it's his parents. As undergraduates on the University of Illinois campus, Chris's folks taught their future MC how to move the crowd. As a toddler in the late '70s Luda was that dancing baby in the "Stand Up" video.

"For some reason, they would take me to parties [to] be the little man dancing," he recalls. "I was born into a life of entertaining people. Other people wouldn't bring their kids to a damn college party. It's crazy."

Luda's time in Illinois is a blur to him now. After spending numerous summers in Atlanta with his father he moved there permanently right before he started HS. He battled MCs for lunches at Banneker High, but it was the talent showcases at places like the Warehouse, the Sand Castle, Club Illusions and the Gate that tested his mettle. A teenage Chris made his way through the scene with his partner DJ Ghost as the original Disturbing Tha Peace crew. They didn't net a lot of wins at the open mics, but it wasn't due to a lack of talent.

"They never put rap in its own category," Luda explains. "And there would be dance groups and girls singin', hittin' high notes, which is in a completely different category than a nigga bussin' raps."

Unfortunately, Ghost was sent to jail for armed robbery and is still serving out his sentence. "It fucked me up 'cause that was my dog. I still write to him and talk to him to this day."

Chris's pops might have taught him a thing or two about partying, but wasn't too keen around the kitchen. So Luda took a job at a local Pizza Hut to earn some money and free food. He and his co-workers would flip pies and verses into the wee hours of the night. Even while taking classes at Georgia State, for Luda, rapping was his true major. Through persistence he landed an internship with the *Morning Show* host at Atlanta's Hot 97.5, Felicia Love. (Hence the name Chris Lova Lova) and became a fixture at the station recording drops and voice-overs.

"That was real grind time," he remembers. "For a whole year straight, I got up at 5 a.m., did the whole *Morning Show* and got off at 10. Went to school after that. Then worked at Pizza Hut at night, only to get back up at 5 a.m. I was tired all the time. I didn't quit Pizza Hut until the *Morning Show* started paying me. That's what I have to remind myself of when I feel guilty."

THAT'S RIGHT. There are moments when the man who once snapped, "I got permission to put ya mama in a headlock" actually feels guilty about his success. Most urban entertainers lack the sense of entitlement that someone born into money has. So an abrupt lifestyle change is wrought with doubt.

"I question myself sometimes," he admits. "What did I do to deserve what I have? I got everything and to this day, I question it. It takes people to come back and remind me of why I deserve what I have."

It's not as if Luda walked into Def Jam and got a contract. It took selling 50,000 copies of his independent release, *Incognegro*, to bring the labels to him. "We went to Atlantic, Warner Bros. Elektra...way before Def Jam," he says. "They would take us to the office and say, 'This is your marketing team.' Atlantic Records had already pressed up a single of 'What's Your Fantasy' and said, 'This is what it's gonna look like' and I [hadn't signed] shit!"

However, Def Jam played it cool and the president Kevin Liles told Luda that his music was "just aight" and that he could do better. "It wasn't that I wasn't excited 'cause I was excited as a muthafucka," Liles explains. "I just had to take my time. When I'm in negotiate mode, it's a card game. As a DJ, [Chris] was someone I used to talk to all the time. Chaka, his manager, used to work for me! So y'all already know half my cards, you think I'ma show y'all all my cards? So let's sit and play poker."

Luda eventually chose Def Jam for several reasons but mostly for the long-term financial benefits. "My contract is unheard of," insists Luda. "We got points and percentages that other artists wouldn't get because I had a leverage from what I did independently."

LUDA HAS BEEN A COMMERCIAL POWERHOUSE and a fixture on radio and video, but still feels he hasn't won everyone over. He's the first to admit that when the list of lyrical MCs is debated, his name isn't near the top, if it's on there at all. He even takes this publication to task on *Chicken & Beer's* "Hip Hop Quotable" for what he feels is a lack of recognition in that department. But when pressed, he insists that kudos will come with time.

"For people who didn't know [I'm lyrical] I have no problem with that," he says with his head cocked to one side. His stylist is tending to his fro, recently released from its cornrowed prison. "I want to be considered one of the best MCs, but I also want to be considered the most versatile MC."

If there were a hip-hop family tree, Luda would be the offspring

of Redman and Busta Rhymes: charismatic, funny, lyrical and willing to take chances musically and visually. But Luda has demonstrated a stronger ability to adapt to tracks and cameos than his forebears. Whether it's the sneaky "hurry up and wait" cadence of Fat Joe's "Get the Hell On With That" or the Viagra-charged onslaughts of "One Minute Man" and "Fatty Girl," Ludacris channels flows like the Panama Canal and rarely spits the same way twice.

"Remember the *Stung* show with Red and Meth?" Liles recalls with excitement. "I put on a bullshit track that Meth made and the nigga Ludacris flipped it! He's a fuckin' chameleon."

IN FACT, MANY AN URBAN LEGEND has been concocted surrounding Luda's prowess on the mic, particularly his killer cameos.

"Some artists will put me on before they lay their verse," he reveals. "They'll give me the concept and say, 'Rap on this.' But if it's someone else's song, you want them to carry the concept." Luda can't even seem to get props for his sales. When Jay-Z rhymed on "Excuse Me Miss" that "the only ones moving units is Em, Pimp Juice and us," Luda was an obvious omission as he has close to seven million scans to date. Was Jay just trying to make the rhyme fit, or is Luda that far off the SoundScan radar?

"I noticed that he said it, but I know I'm moving units," Luda says with a dismissive shrug. "So whether he says it or not, it doesn't matter. Everyone is supposed to brag on themselves. I do it. I respect Jay for what he do and he respect me back. It's a good relationship there. Fo' sho'."

As for the title of cameo King, Luda gives it up to Bussa Bus in '03, but the Dungeon Dragon better watch his back. "I had 2001 and 2002 on lock," he brags. "But I told him I had to take the crown back. That's something I take pride in...it shows my versatility. Who would think Fat Joe and Ludacris would do a song? I'm all about surprising people and breaking all barriers."

And for those who want to attribute his success to getting hot producers, Luda has some words for you too. If those cuts with Kanye West sounded atypical for the Roc-A-Fella beatsmith, there is a reason. "I'm coming out and saying, 'God damnit, I do a lot of behind-the-scenes work as far as production is concerned,'" he says. "I may not be touching the pads or have my sounds in the MP, but I'm structuring the beat from beginning to end. For 'Stand Up' I stood there with Kanye for every element, so I put 'Co-produced by Ludacris' for the first time."

Kanye agrees that Luda did help make the beat but adds, that he too is ambidextrous in the skill department. "Did he tell you I wrote the first two lines of the song?" quips West.

OTHER SIDE OF THE GAME

Luda's house isn't just big. It's 15,000 square feet of braggin' rights. From the lake ("We shoot turtles for target practice 'cause they kill the fish") to the fluorescent fountain, you really could film MTV's *Cribs* for a week. But tonight the mailbox holds more weight than the two armor suits that stand sentry in his living room.

"This is a letter from my cousin who's been in jail for a long-ass time, Darren Ransom," Luda says fondling the envelope. "That's like the closest relative I have. He's one of the hardest niggas I know, straight up. He's in a correctional facility in Illinois." After reading the first few sentences, a smile creases Ludacris's cheeks. "He says in this letter that he hopes that he

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can get the appellate judge to reverse his conviction."

Luda doesn't reveal what his cousin is in for, but is visibly excited to hear from him. "I see that other artists don't always write their raps, is there a market for already written raps?" Luda reads. The one-time ghostwriter for KP and Envy nods to himself and continues. "I know that I can write well if I can put my mind to it. Don't laugh too hard, I just gotta look for other ways to supplement my income so I can finish this appeal."

Luda doesn't laugh. Instead he begins reading the lyrics to a song called "Shoot 'Em Up Bang Bang" loud enough to echo throughout his spacious kitchen, and after 16 bars, he screams in his trademark baritone, "It's hard as fuck!" Darren closes the letter saying that the guys in his section, Menard, enjoy Chris and Chingy's videos on BET *Uncut* and asks for some flicks with females. Darren quit smoking a few days ago and is feeling a little discombobulated.

"I think that it's important to correspond with people behind bars because you need to give them a sense of hope," Luda says. "In jail people get depressed as hell and they just lookin' for a hand to reach out for 'em."

For the most part, Chris Bridges is no stranger to compassion. But ironically, the founder of the Ludacris Foundation identifies that quality as his biggest weakness. "I know how this industry can be," he says, his episode of MTV's *Jammed* playing in the background. "When it comes to rappin' verses, paying people, money,



arguing—I'll be upset at them. But I never hold a grudge."

But even he has his limits. In August 2002 conservative pundit Bill O'Reilly slammed Pepsi for having Ludacris as a spokesman, citing his so-called foul language as grounds for pulling the ad campaign. The cola company succumbed to the pressure and dropped Luda's spot, only to pick up the foul-mouthed Osbournes.

"That's been the hardest one to get over," admits Ludacris. "But I know I'm gonna be in his face for the rest of my life. He just motivated me. Even negativity

ends up being positive. It made me a better man. I understand that racism is still very much alive in America. That makes me want to prove him wrong."

Luda has summarized his feelings for O'Reilly on *Chicken & Beer*'s "Hoes in My Room" a collabo with Snoop Dogg, who was also attacked by the conservative. "Hip-hop fights back!" Cris declares. "This man said hip-hop will be dead in 10 years. He's crazy."

Even with the opposition he's faced, there are some places where Velvet Jones's dirty mouth is more than welcome. When Ludacris rolls into Hotlanta's premier gentleman's club, Magic City, you can almost see Bernie Mac ringing the money bell and Adele Givens trippin' in her stilettos to the stage. The locale for his "Booty Poppin'" video is buzzing on this Saturday night and the hosts are eager to accommodate the soon-to-be-birthday boy. (Chris turned 26 on 9/11 but insists that Virgos celebrate all month long.) Sex is a big

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part of Luda's image and the man who lost his virginity on a waterbed as a teen ("I been flowin' since then!") has documented well what piece of his love the ladies can have. But has the "king ding-a-ling-sheet smusher" ever been *in* love? "I question that myself," he says frankly. "Sometimes I think I have. I've heard that being *in* love is different from loving somebody. Being *in* love is like your heart and soul goes into them. I think I've loved a lot of people but I don't think I've been *in* love."

Between drinks and salutations, Luda enjoys the relaxed atmosphere in Magic City's V.I.P. room. He jokes that many of the dancers deserve benefits and a pension since they've been there so long. Some dancers he knows by name—their real ones, not the ones on the flyer—and the rest he treats as if he does. Contrary to popular perception it seems that lust and respect can exist in the same space.

"The second single might be 'Splash Water Falls,'" Luda shares over Belvedere and cranberry. "[Because] when women say 'Make love to me' and 'Fuck me,' they're both the same thing at the same time."

SKY'S THE LIMIT

The world looks very different from 5,000 feet up. The perspective is a great equalizer. Problems and obstacles seem to disappear. You can't tell a stretch Hummer from a '79 Impala. Which is probably why Ludacris enjoys flying in his personal chariot.

"Sometimes I wish I wasn't so easily recognized," he laments. "If you go to the mall and sign one autograph, it's a domino

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effect. Everyone's waiting for that one brave person to ask you, and then it's a wrap."

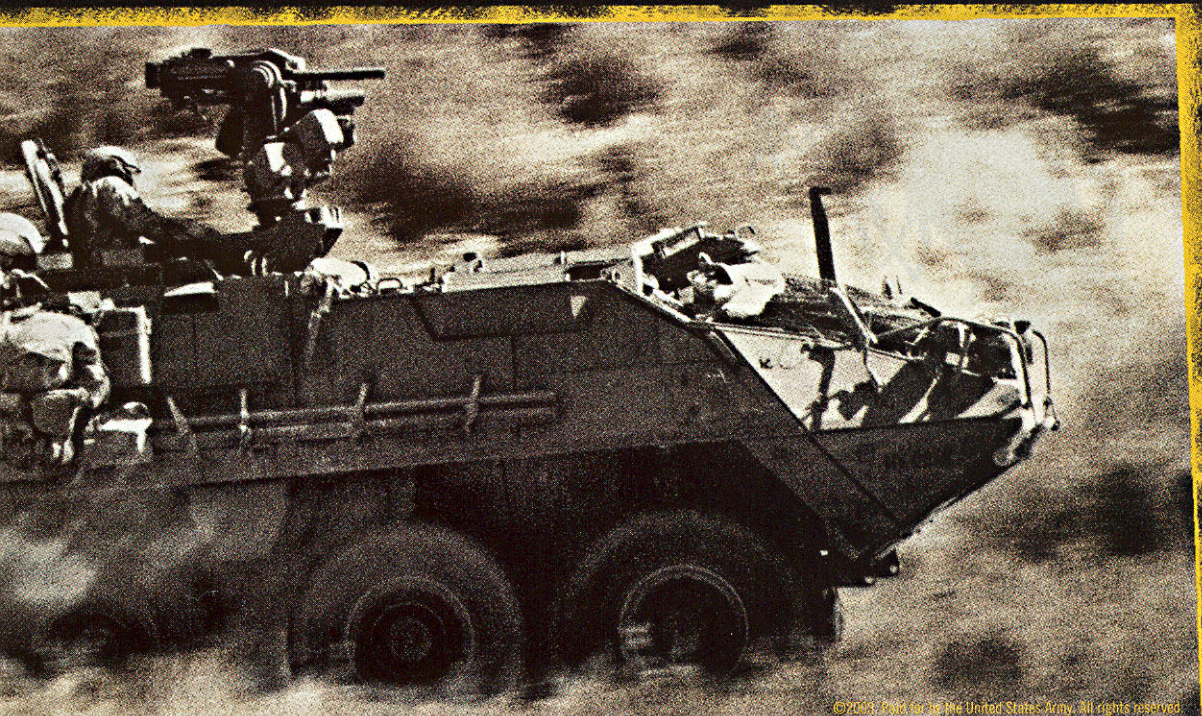
After an in-flight meal of corn dogs and McDonald's, Cris doesn't sleep. I-20 and Lil' Fate have been signed to solo deals off the strength of the gold-certified *Golden Grain* project and a studio has to be built.

"Is it overwhelming sometimes? Hell yeah," he says of the numerous responsibilities he shoulders like that platinum-covered midget. "Don't think everything is all good and dandy in my team. We brother and sister and we fight just like any other family. Me being an only child, I've had to learn how to share. I never ever had to act like I had to depend on

anybody. It goes both ways."

But his only child is the beneficiary of all this hard work. Private jets may seem like luxuries to most, but for an entrepreneurial dad, it makes all the difference in the world. "I think people are placed in your life for a reason and I value the relationship," he says of his 2-year-old daughter. "I'm on the road a lot, so being there is half the battle."

The other half of the battle is a lot more like a circus: balancing budgets, jumping through hoops and meeting the bottom line. "The whole industry is White people saying 'What niggas can I trust with this money who can turn me a profit?'" Chris says with the urgency of someone who has had to sign some big checks in his relatively short career. "The big picture is, this is my life, and if something fails, I don't want to have anyone to blame but myself." **S**



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