

I DON'T

>> **D12 has sold more than 4 million albums** since they first broke the only group member to achieve solo success. Now the rest

Words ANSLEM SAMUEL >> Images BRYCE DUFFY

L to R: Kuniva,
Bizarre, Swift,
Eminem, Proof,
Kon Artis

NEED 'EM

nationally but have been overshadowed by Eminem,
of D12 is ready to break out and get their careers in gear.

It's hard enough getting one rapper to be somewhere on time, let alone a group of six MCs with split personalities. But that's the daunting task D12's management has decided to tackle on this steamy June afternoon in Birmingham, Mich. With Eminem unavailable because of scheduling conflicts and Bizarre overseas promoting his solo debut, one would think gathering the remaining four members of the group for an interview would be somewhat easy. Think again. After waiting patiently for an hour, management makes a few follow-up calls and finds out that Swift can't make it because of an unexpected family emergency. Now the quartet has been whittled down to a trio.

The first to arrive at the Townsend Hotel's ritzy boardroom is Kuniva, a soft-spoken cat with cornrows who speaks with a heavy Midwestern drawl. Proudly sporting a white Pistons jersey and jeans, he grabs a seat at the end of the long conference table and joins in the waiting game. About 15 minutes later, Proof strolls into the room and greets his homie. "What up, baby boy?" he says in a raspy voice. "They woke me up out my sleep like, 'You know you got an interview today?' I'm like, 'Whaaat?'"

While Proof appears fully recovered from his early wake-up call, a sleep-deprived Kon Artis wishes he could have hit the snooze button a few more times. Up 'til 6 a.m. working on tracks, the other rapper-producer of D12 is still rubbing the sleep out of his eyes when he arrives a short while later.

But who could be mad at the crew? It makes sense that they're catching up on sleep now. With the Anger Management Tour 3 just a few weeks away and various side hustles on everyone's plate, it doesn't look as if sleep will be on D12's agenda anytime soon. "I think me, Proof and Bizarre are probably more busy than Eminem right now," says Kon Artis while in mid-yawn. "Being a producer, I'm always in the studio. I can't just sit at home and do nothing. Until I catch up to what everybody else is doing, I'm always working. 'Cause our thing was, once we get in the game, everybody go and do what you do to the fullest."

From the outside looking in, it would appear that Eminem was the only D12 member working to his full potential. In addition to being a multi-platinum solo artist, he's CEO of Shady Records, which is home to one of the game's biggest stars, 50 Cent. He produces hits for some of hip-hop's top artists (Jay-Z, 'Pac, et al). He starred in the 2002 blockbuster flick *8 Mile*. And he took home a Best Original Song Oscar for "Lose Yourself," the chart-topping single off the film's soundtrack. So, after playing the back for a few years, the rest of D12 are finally ready for their individual time in the spotlight.

"We been spittin' since spittin' was startin' to spit," says Proof. "We spit hotter than Satan with a chest cold. But I guess we gotta get out in front some more and let Em play the background, 'cause it's our time to really jump through the forefront of the game. Like, it's cool D12 is over here and running. That's great, but I wanna exist over here. It ain't about wanting to be apart from something. It's just we want to exist on our own."

If you haven't noticed by now, it seems as though you can't read a D12 story without all roads pointing to Eminem, although he was not the first member of the Detroit rap crew. It's a classic example of the "gift and curse syndrome." While the bleach-blond MC's proven star power and defying-the-odds life story make for an interesting read, the five MCs that round out the group often end up obscured by Em's multi-platinum shadow. But what if Eminem was never a part of D12? "I think we all think about that," answers Kon Artis, almost in a whisper. "I wonder what kinda music would have came out [if Bugz was still alive]."

For those who don't know the D12 history so well, Bugz was a local rapper from the mid-'90s Detroit battle circuit. He was also an original member of D12, which was founded by Proof (a.k.a. Derty Harry). In 1993, Proof was hosting designer Maurice Malone's famed open-mic showcase at the Hip-Hop Shop, a local clothing store that transformed into an MC battleground every Saturday night. "The Hip-Hop Shop is the nucleus for Detroit's hip-hop scene," says Kuniva (a.k.a. Rondell Beene). "It brought us all together in one common cause to do hip-hop, 'cause there's a lot of other shit we could have been doing on

them Saturdays, like getting into a lot of dumb shit."

It was at the Shop that Proof would hatch the idea for the Dirty Dozen (D12 for short), a rap collective consisting of 12 of Detroit's dopest MCs. The idea was eventually winnowed down to just six MCs, each with an alter ego. Although membership fluctuated in the beginning, the group's core remained mostly intact: Proof and his childhood friends Eminem (a.k.a. Slim Shady) and Kon Artis (a.k.a. Denuan Porter), who was initially the group's producer before becoming an official member. Kon Artis was also half of a rap duo called Da Brigade, with Kuniva. And Bizarre (a.k.a. Red Headed Rapist), a horror-core rapper whom Proof met at the Shop, had been recruited early on and brought Bugz in.

"Every man that's in D12 was brought in by another member of the group," explains Proof. "It wasn't like no put-together we-don't-know-each-other type shit. Like, Denaun asked for Kuniva to be there, Bizzy asked for Bugz to be there, and Bugz asked for Swift to be there. So, that made it six right there."

Actually, that made seven if you count Eminem. But by the mid-'90s, Eminem was experiencing his fair share of success outside the group, releasing two independent projects, 1996's *Infinite* and *The Slim Shady EP* the following year. With the buzz growing, Em captured the attention of Dr. Dre, and by the end of 1998 the Caucasian sensation signed a deal with Dre's Aftermath Records. Given his budding solo career, Em officially left D12, opening up a slot for Swift (a.k.a. Swifty McVay) to round out the sextet. But Em made a pact to come back for his Detroit homies once he got on.

After releasing the four-times-platinum *The Slim Shady LP* in 1999, Em founded Shady Records and immediately signed D12. Sadly, Bugz was murdered a few weeks later over a dispute at a local picnic. His death left the group in shambles. Not only had they lost a dear friend, but if the D12 concept was to still work, they needed to find a replacement. "Once the demise of Bugz came, Em was like, 'Do you want it to be D12 featuring Eminem or D12 with me in the group?'" recalls Proof. "And we was like, 'If you in the group, then you in the group.' It was as simple as that."

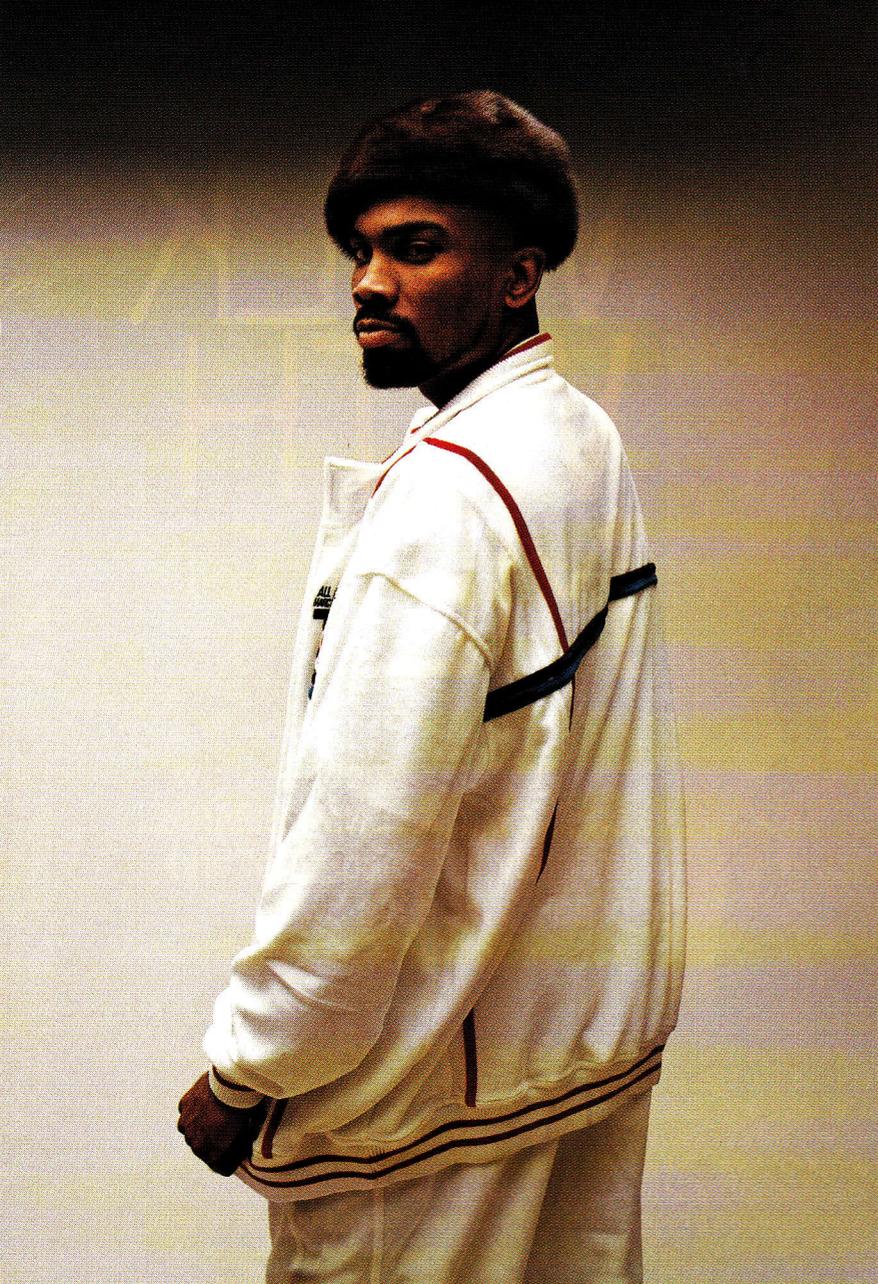
Shortly after the tragedy, the guys regrouped with Em and began working on their national debut. In 2000, Eminem released his hugely successful sophomore album, *The Marshall Mathers LP*, which sold a remarkable 9 million copies. That set the stage for D12 to drop their first group album, *Devil's Night*, the following year. Capitalizing on Em's solo success and phenomenal fan base, the album produced popular singles like "Shit on You" and "Purple Hills" and went on to achieve double-platinum status.

Most groups would consider that a success, but D12 didn't have that luxury. Despite their respectable record sales, many skeptics still viewed the group merely as Eminem's boys and not talented artists in their own right.

"I feel like we accomplished a lot but at the same time accomplished nothing at all," says Proof of the struggles the group members face as solo artists. "We appreciate the machine that backs us, but our singles were driven strictly off Eminem and not who we are as individuals. 'Cause people hear 'Shit on You' and then 'Purple Hills,' and the perception of who we are gets misconstrued."

The entire group felt the same way, so they made a concerted effort to try and define themselves on their second album, 2004's *D12 World*. The end result was "My Band," the album's hugely popular single, which poked fun at the group being overshadowed by Eminem's solo success. It proved to be their biggest single and helped *D12 World* move over 2 million units. "The record served its purpose," says Kon Artis of "My Band." "It showed that we could make a single that could appeal to the [masses]. I guess it separated us more, 'cause that shadow of Eminem is hard to get from behind. So, we were just trying to get our independence."

The guys got another quick lesson in independence when Eminem announced that he wasn't going to appear on the D12 World tour last year. Em was busy finishing up his fourth major-label LP, *Encore*, so he couldn't hit the road. While some fans were disappointed that Eminem was missing-in-action during the tour, it didn't stop the rest of the guys from putting on a good show. "We wondered how the crowd was



without Eminem. Bizarre was the first to branch off, when he landed an imprint, Redhead, with Mathew Knowles' Sanctuary Urban Records. That led to his debut solo album, *Hannicap Circus*, which came out this past June. Proof followed suit in July with his long-awaited debut, *Searching for Jerry Garcia*, which was released through his Iron Fist imprint. Swift is working on his solo disc, which he hopes to have out by next year. And in addition to producing hits like G-Unit's "Stunt 101," 50 Cent's "P.I.M.P." and Xzibit's "Multiply," boardsman Kon Artis is adding CEO to his résumé. Earlier this year, he and Kuniva launched Runyon Ave., an imprint label through Shady Records. They plan to revive their old rap duo, Da Brigade, and also have signed underground favorite Pharoahe Monch. "As soon as that kicks off, it's gonna be a big thing," says Kon. "We need that for ourselves to set the tone for us—to show that we can do something on an executive end. If you really think about it, everybody having a successful solo career makes our longevity in the game longer. Ultimately our fate lies only in what we do for ourselves."

The opportunity to prove themselves is all D12 wants. Hopefully, their solo endeavors will help them earn the critics' respect. Playing second fiddle to Eminem isn't how they plan to spend the rest of their careers. "For us to survive, the first two singles off our [next D12] album gotta be without Em," says Proof. "The third single could have him on it, but the songs can't be driven by him. If Em is gonna sit back and not tour [with us], then it don't make sense [for him] to be driving the records directly. 'Cause if you driving the record and you not gonna be there and can't support the tour, then that's our sales. And as a CEO, you're damaging yourself. I think it's at a point now where even Em agrees that it gotta be like that. It's vital."

As the afternoon drags on, it appears the lack of sleep is starting to catch up to the guys. Kon Artis keeps nodding in-and-out of consciousness, when out of nowhere a hyperactive Proof gets up on the table and does a backspin. "I always wanted to do that," he says afterward with a hearty chuckle. Management gives the signal that it's time to wrap it up.

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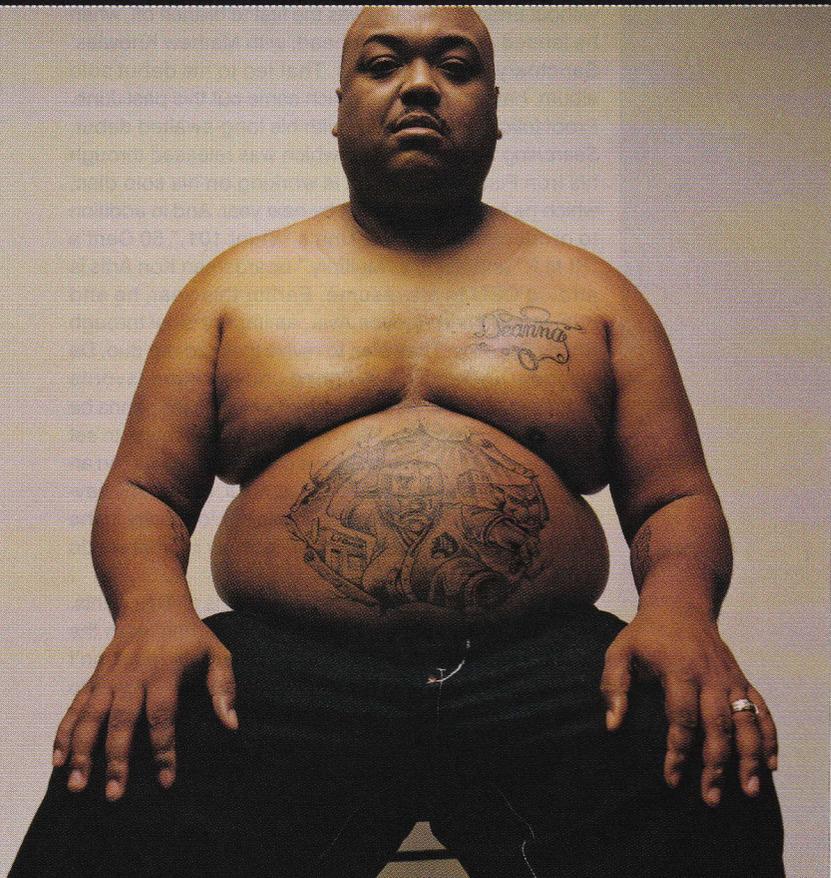
gonna be," asserts Swift via telephone a few days after this interview. "But they really embraced us and let us know that we get love with or without Em. It was the same intensity and energy from the crowd like he was there, so that made us feel real good. Now we just more disciplined as far as setting up tours without Em being there."

The members of D12 are now at a career crossroad. Each is eager to carve out his personal niche in the industry and prove he can make it

Does D12 have any final thoughts?

"A lot of people think that when you make [it], it's like you've made it and that's it," says Kuniva. "But there's just been a lot of obstacles that's been in [our] way. We've all been through the craziest shit together. So, given the cards we was dealt coming up, it's a surprise we even made it out of Detroit. But I'm not even gonna say we made it out, 'cause we just made it this far."

Guess there really is no rest for the weary. **45**



WALK WITH ME

D12 might be composed of six MCs, but most people know only of Eminem. Now **BIZARRE** is ready to change that and break out on his own.

Words ANSLEM SAMUEL Image BRYCE DUFFY

"Everybody thinks I'm crazy," says D12 member Bizarre. "People be like, 'Bizarre be saying all types of crazy stuff. He's bananas!' They just think I'm that crazy nigga from D12."

Knowing Bizarre's morbid lyrics and affinity for wearing shower caps and bras in public, it's easy to see why people might think the Detroit native is a bit touched. But underneath all the lyrical drug binges, midget orgies and sadomasochistic confessionals lies Rufus Johnson, a self-proclaimed "country boy that likes to fish and rap."

The fishing skills came courtesy of Bizarre's grandpa, who taught young Rufus how to cast off on the Great Lakes. As for the rap skills, they developed after some advice from his fifth-grade teacher, Mr. Johnson (no relation). "He told me I couldn't sing and should start rappin'," recalls Bizarre. "So I went and rapped for this school play for Martin Luther King's birthday. It's been on ever since."

By the early '90s, the aspiring MC fell deep into the local battle circuit and quickly made a name for himself at Detroit's famed Hip-Hop Shop. Known for his witty delivery and sick sense of humor, Bizarre eventually caught the attention of another local rapper named Proof. Proof took a liking to Biz and his style and asked the Buddha-bellied rapper to be part of

a new rap collective called D12.

"I was doing battle raps and showing skills, but I was also crazy," says Bizarre, 29. "That's kinda why they picked me, 'cause each member of D12 was like a different weapon. It was an all-star squad of MCs that was dope. Everybody had a different skill that they brought to the table, and my skills is the crazy shit."

Eminem's skills were obviously his lyrical dexterity and pop appeal. Signing to Dr. Dre's Aftermath label in 1998, Em made an immediate mark as a solo artist, and by the end of 1999 he had started his own label, Shady Records, and immediately signed D12 as his first act. With Eminem an integral part of the group, both their 2001 debut, *Devil's Night*, and last year's *D12 World* went multi-platinum. But when you're a part of a group that includes a megastar like Eminem, it's easy to get lost in the shuffle. So when Beyoncé's pops, Matthew Knowles, approached Bizarre last year and offered him his own imprint on Sanctuary Urban (Knowles' label), the portly performer jumped at the chance, knowing he could release his material that way.

"There were thoughts of [signing with Shady], but you kinda wanna branch off a lil' bit," says Bizarre, who's branched out and has already signed acts to his Redhead Records. "If I went with a major, I'd have to wait 'til everybody else came out—and probably wouldn't come out 'til two to three

years from now. But Sanctuary gave me my own label deal, so I had more control."

Bizarre locked himself in the studio for 21 days and recorded his solo debut, *Hannicap Circus*, which was released this past June. Packed with Bizarre's off-the-wall lyrics, the album also features sincere joints such as "Hip-Hop," an autobiographical tale about his love affair with music, and "Coming Home," an open letter to his wife of two years, Deanna.

"A lot of people's gonna be shocked at this album, because it's showing more hip-hop skills," says Bizarre, whose disc features guest appearances from the likes of Big Boi, dead prez and Raphael Saadiq. "It's not the same regular shit you thought it would be. It's still crazy Bizarre shit, but it shows a more serious side of me, too. But being in D12 with six guys, you really don't get to see that."

While Bizarre is excited about spreading his wings, he realizes that the path to solo success may take awhile. "I know it's gonna be a word-of-mouth thing," Bizarre says of *Hannicap's* expected success. "But if I sell 100,000 copies, then that's 100,000 of my fans. That's a step in a positive direction to get out of the shadow of Eminem and display that I can rap and put songs together. But I know without D12, there wouldn't be no Bizarre tour; it wouldn't be no solo projects or none of that. At the end of the day, D12 is the bread and butter. That's our nucleus." **45**