

Anthony "AZ" Cruz had all the ingredients for a successful music career. As the only guest on Nas' instant classic *Illmatic*, the unsigned MC's superb flow and vivid lyricism had the streets buzzing and every major label from Def Jam to Interscope intrigued. Eventually signing with EMI, AZ released his critically acclaimed debut *Doe or Die* in the fall of 1995. Though spearheaded by the gold single "Sugar Hill," the album has only

In 2000, AZ was supposed to make his comeback with the highly touted *S.O.S.A. (Save Our Streets AZ)*, but the project was heavily bootlegged and eventually got shelved. His next two, '01's *9 Lives* and '02's *Aziatic*, didn't fair much better. Released on Motown, which has a rep for poorly marketing and promoting hip-hop releases, neither project hit the 250,000 mark.

"My goal was to be the nucleus of Motown as far as hip-hop," explains AZ, of his time on the legendary label. "I was like, 'Oh, this Motown! Smokey Robinson and Stevie Wonder,

acquaintance had passed AZ the number of a kid named Nasir from Queensbridge that could rap pretty good. From time to time the two aspiring MCs would trade verses over the phone. Eventually, Nas landed a deal with Columbia Records and invited AZ to the studio to check out some of his new material. As they ran through different tracks, AZ began mumbling a verse he was working on. Nas liked what he heard and told him to lay it down. That verse ended up making Nas' album on the song we all know today as "Life's a Bitch." "I wasn't even thinking about no

conquer. I don't know if he feels a ways about the Jay-Z situation or not, but he know I'm a stand-up dude. So whatever bitterness that's making him not step up for us to do it is in his mind. For the record, and you can put this on paper, Esco, if it's a problem, let ya boy know. If not, let's get it poppin', nigga. Fuck the money, let's just do it for hip-hop."

After years of ups and downs, AZ decided to take his career into his own hands by signing a distribution deal with Koch last year for his indie label, Quiet Money Records. But as his luck would have it, things didn't get off to a smooth start. Constant release-date changes and bad reviews (including an M rating in this magazine) of his album *Final Call* caused Sosa to scrap the record altogether.

"It was just so much shit going on and back and forth about singles, and it just fucked up the whole shit," says AZ. "But with any business, you have to get to know the people that you dealin' with and they got to get to know you. I guess that was the trial period for them to get to know me."

Now that things are squared away with his new business partners, a reenergized AZ hit the studio and emerged this past fall with his latest collection of lyrical gems, *A.W.O.L.* Featuring production from beatsmiths like DJ Premier, the Heatmakerz and Buckwild, as well as guest appearances from Raekwon, Ghostface and C.L. Smooth, the album has the rap vet feeling like his career is finally back on track.

"I feel I'm in the best position ever," says AZ, with a cocky smile. "I'm gettin' \$7 an album [with Koch], and it's a good look. I'm on my own label, I'm independent, and I'm still a free agent, which means at any minute anybody could holla at me like, 'Yo, A, we got \$2 million for you over here. Let's get it poppin'.' I feel like I got the fame and the notoriety, I just gotta grind right now. 'Cause there's a saying that I tell everybody, 'As long as you stay down, you gotta come up.' I been down since '95, but ain't really pop off through the game. So as long as I keep puttin' in work, I know my time is gonna come. It's destined, man." Maybe, even written. ♠

WHAT I REPRESENT

Eleven years ago, AZ earned himself number-one-draft-pick status and a record deal with a single verse.

Since then, his career has been a fluctuating journey with more lows than highs. More focused than ever, he's now ready to change his course.

WORDS ANSLEM SAMUEL // IMAGE STEVEN BRAHMS

sold 350,000 units to date. And in the 10 years plus since the release of that LP, AZ's career has had more stalls than a '78 Buick stuck in a Siberian blizzard.

It all started in 1997 with the much-hyped supergroup the Firm, which included AZ, Nas, Foxy Brown and Nature. Executive produced by Dr. Dre and the TrackMasters, the group's star-studded LP was supposed to be the album of the year, but ended up being panned by critics and selling only a million copies—a commercial failure, considering the expectations that were set. Despite the disappointment, Nas, Foxy and Dre all went on to have greater solo careers. AZ wasn't as lucky. Although critics continued to hail his lyrical skills, the Brooklyn native's sophomore disc, *Pieces of a Man*, was released on Virgin Records in 1998 with little fanfare, and all of his subsequent albums suffered a similar fate.

baby! If I can bring hip-hop here, I'm going down with some legends.' But they was so stuck in that neo-soul vibe with Erykah Badu, it's like they didn't know what to do with me. I don't think it had anything to do with the music; it's just my muthafuckin' luck."

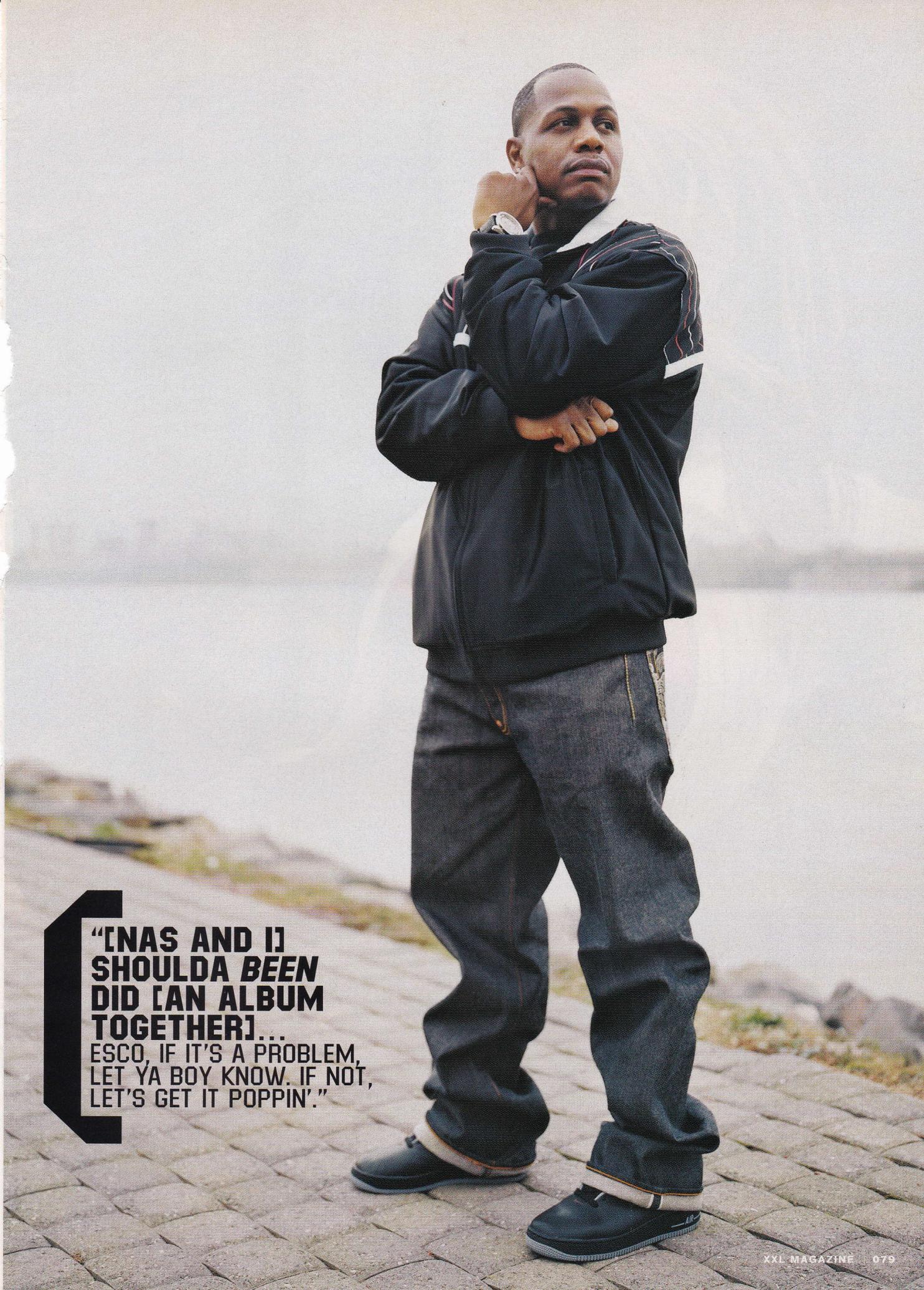
AZ's luck wasn't always bad. Growing up in the East New York section of Brooklyn without a father figure, like so many others, young Anthony turned to the streets for guidance and inevitably got caught up in the world of hustlin', among other things. "I was doing it all," he says, with a chuckle. "I'll be honest, I even tried the pimp game. I got the stomach for it, but that's not me." And after getting bagged for "some hand-to-hand shit" and serving three months, he found out hustlin' wasn't his path either. That's when AZ says, "music just fell in my lap."

Months earlier a mutual

music shit like that," AZ recalls. "I was writing my lyrics. But I was like everybody else, [thinking] it ain't gonna happen. I was like fuck it, it's a throwaway song. But it was on the album, and everybody loved that shit."

After "Life's a Bitch" came numerous other collaborations between AZ and Nas, including "Affirmative Action" from Nas' double-platinum *It Was Written*; "Mo Money, Mo Murder (Homicide)," off of *Doe or Die*; and the Grammy-nominated "The Essence," from AZ's *Aziatic*. Based on the pair's unparalleled chemistry in the studio, fans have been longing for a collaborative album for years. According to AZ, though, he's not the reason for the holdup.

"[Nas and I] shoulda *been* did [an album together], 'cause the people been waiting for a AZ and Nas album for so fuckin' long," says an agitated AZ. "Me and Nas dialogue periodically. It's no bad blood, but it's so much ground to



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