

ME 'N' MY

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With a cultlike fan base waiting a patient three years for the lyrically inclined yet drama-plagued brothers' third album, the **CLIPSE** are finally putting the finishing touches on their project and possibly putting the chaos behind them.

Left to right:
Malice and Pusha T



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t's a cool evening in downtown Norfolk, Virginia, and the Clipse have just arrived at MacArthur Center Mall. After a long day filled with photo shoots and driving around town, the sibling duo of Malice and Pusha T cuts into Kincaid's Fish, Chop & Steakhouse for a few drinks—none of the alcoholic variety.

Malice, who's nursing a migraine, orders a cup of Earl Grey tea with honey and lemon, while younger brother Pusha opts for his favorite Kincaid's beverage, strawberry lemonade. Their divergent drink selections are repre-

sentative of the group's career. Hot and cold. Bittersweet.

Over the course of the past 11 years, the Clipse have had the distinct displeasure of calling several labels home. They were originally signed to Elektra Records, in 1998, but got dropped after their debut single, "The Funeral," failed to catch on commercially. Four years later, the duo inked a deal with Arista Records, which then got absorbed by Jive Records in 2004. After an extended and public battle with whom Pusha T describes as "them crackas" that weren't playing fair at Jive, the brothers were finally released to join the Columbia Records roster in 2007.

By the time all the label logistics were settled and they had found a new home, the Clipse had released only two official albums. Talent certainly wasn't the issue. In addition to being praised by hip-hop purists and critics alike for their crisp lyricism, undiluted crack rap and classic mixtapes, Malice and Pusha earned a platinum plaque for their 2002 debut, *Lord Willin'*, and a classic, XXL rating from this magazine for their 2006 opus, *Hell Hath No Fury*. Despite the critically acclaimed LPs, the Clipse always seem to find themselves in the midst of label drama, but somehow they've managed to keep a positive outlook.

"Anybody else that went through the red tape that we went through,

they would of fell out to the wayside," says Malice, 36. "I say this because I see it and believe it. It's about having the product. You can't always control what happens within the label, but if you—and this should serve as a lesson to anybody that does this—if you keep your craft right and do what it is that you're supposed to do, fans will keep you around. It don't matter what's going on. We was gone for four years, and fans was still asking about us, and it's because we have that integrity with our music every time."

Finally aligned with a label that they can see eye to eye with, the Clipse have spent the past two years crafting their latest offering, *Til the Casket Drops*. Set for release this November via their Columbia-distributed Re-Up Gang Records, the album is a potent mix of raw street records ("Kinda Like a Big Deal," featuring Kanye West), cocksure cuts ("Back by Popular Demand," featuring Cam'ron), inspirational darts ("Champion"), radio-ready singles ("I'm Good," featuring Pharrell Williams) and 100 percent reality raps ("Doorman").

"The energy around this album feels more like *Lord Willin'* than *Hell Hath No Fury*," explains Pusha, 31. "*Hell Hath No Fury* was a real dark, linear album. [It was] awesome, amazing, classic, but, at the same time, it was really angry... It was just handcuffs on that *Hell Hath No Fury* album. Lyrically, I think it was a beast. Beats, we feel it was a beast. But it was like it honed into a certain individual. We went directly for the purists' neck with that album, and we got that, period. But *Til the Casket Drops* let us expand creatively.

"Also, it's like we're finally on a playing field that everybody else is on," adds Malice, rubbing his temple to ease the pain. "We were [on that level] at first with *Lord Willin'*, then all the tie-ups, delays, setbacks and all of that [happened]...and we couldn't play on that ball field with other people. Now, like Pusha said, to have the handcuffs off, the playing field is even, and the company [Columbia] is actually working now. Everything is going in order. It just feels a whole lot better."

Well, not exactly. This wouldn't be a Clipse story without a few hiccups. The first came in September 2008, when news broke that



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Philadelphia rapper Sandman had split from their rap crew, Re-Up Gang. Composed of Malice, Pusha, Ab Liva and Sandman, the four-man collective kept the Clipse's name hot in the streets between major-label releases, with three volumes of their critically acclaimed mix-tape series, *We Got It 4 Cheap*. Problems arose that July, when the group's debut album, *Clipse Present: Re-Up Gang*, on E1 Music then Koch Records, failed to live up to expectations.

Sandman publicly voiced his disappointment with the LP and Koch's handling of the project, and he split from the crew a month after the album's release. The Clipse maintain that there's no beef, and they have only the best intentions for their former and present artists. "Sandman just basically wanted to try his hand at his solo career," says Malice between sips of tea. "He ready to get it, and with us understanding how it feels to be tied down, where you feel you could do something quicker... or better, we honored that. It's no problem with us. You want off and you wanna go and do your own thing, we definitely not gonna hold you back. I'm not about trying to babysit or watch after anybody that's not happy. I wouldn't dare hold anybody back."

With no plans for replacing Sandman in the Re-Up Gang roster, the Clipse refocused on completing *Til the Casket Drops*, as well as an Ab Liva solo album tentatively scheduled for a 2010 release. Everything was moving along great, until more drama.

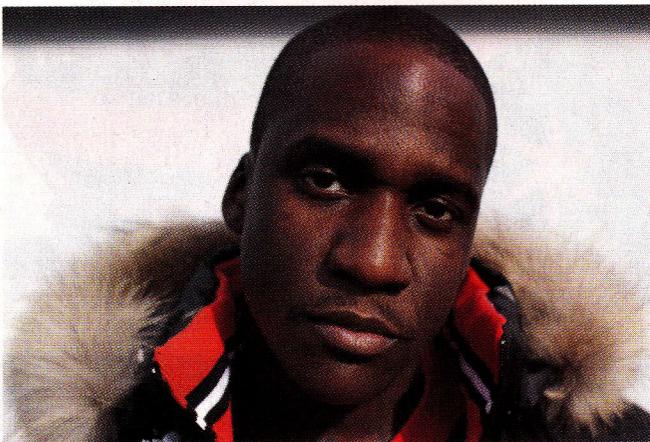
On April 28, 2009, the Clipse's former manager and longtime friend Anthony "Geezy" Gonzalez turned himself in to Miami police, after he was named as part of a \$10-million narcotics ring. Facing an 82-count indictment for drug trafficking, Gonzalez was accused of distributing more than a ton of marijuana and more than 100 pounds of cocaine out of Virginia since 2003.

"I was getting off a flight, headed home," recalls a somber Malice of how he heard the news. "[Geezy] called me, like, 'Yo, check on my sister. I heard the police just rammed her car to apprehend her boyfriend,' which is our homie... I was like, 'Okay, cool.' By time I hung up that phone, I got another call, and they [were] like, 'This happened.' By [the] time [Geezy] hit me back, it was like, 'Yo, something's going on. [It was] just crazy.'"

"It's just fucked up and unfortunate that this shit is happening,"



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adds Pusha. “We actually pride ourselves on being a team and really sticking together through thick and thin. All of us, we done been through everything together... We all learned together. We all made fucked-up mistakes. We all did everything. We won big, we lost big—we done it all. So it’s just fucked up that, here on this album, [Geezy] ain’t here with us.”

The brothers remain tight-lipped regarding the specifics of Geezy’s impending trial, but Malice does share some insight into the situation on his website, maliceoftheclipse.com. Earlier this summer, he posted a cautionary clip titled “Young Nigga This Is You,” where he spit, “Only a few get to be 50 and Weezy/The rest just monkeys, swingin’ from trees/And you can’t tell me nothing ‘bout pushing them ki’s/That’s a short road, I seen where it lead/Patty-cake, Ziploc, Anthony G./Cash rule everything around we/And the crack rap, leave that to me/Cause even rap ain’t what it’s cracked up to be.”

For all their lyrical focus on their drug-dealing pasts, the Clipse actually hate being labeled coke-rap specialists. “The first time I had heard that [label], it didn’t sit well with me,” says Malice, before popping an aspirin. “But I can understand where it comes from. It’s just that we give you so much more than that. Coke might be the bed or the canvas for it all, but it don’t stop there, man. And if that’s all you’re getting out of it, then you’re really not listening.”

During most of the Clipse’s career, fans have listened to them spit primarily over beats by the Neptunes—save for a few guest verses and freestyles on their *We Got It 4 Cheap* mixtapes. Although Pharrell Williams and Chad Hugo contribute heavily to the project, *Til the Casket Drops* marks the first time Malice and Pusha have enlisted outside beatsmiths for an album. In addition to the Neptunes—who serve as co-executive producers, alongside the Clipse—Malice and Pusha secured tracks from platinum production team Sean C & LV, as well as from DJ Khalil and Pranam “Chin” Injeti.

“Those three productions teams brought together the dynamic of the album,” says Pusha. “Sean C & LV got that soulful, boom-bap New York shit that we immediately identify with. Khalil and Chin came with that raw energy that I describe like jungle music...with this Caribbean influence in it. Then we got the unorthodox Neptunes. Not The Neptunes who Britney Spears or such and such calls to make a song... We got [The Neptunes] that you gotta ask, ‘Where the fuck you get that sound from, and why is that record playing backward?’”

According to Kyambo “Hip Hop” Joshua, the former label head responsible for signing the Clipse to Columbia, the sonic diversity is a plus. “They still have a lot of room to grow, as far as production, stuff that they’ve never even touched on before,” he says. “Doing the type of stuff they haven’t really touched on yet as a group. [That’s] intriguing to me. It’s just a big opportunity out there for them, as far as that.”

At this stage in their career, the Clipse are looking to capitalize off of every available opportunity. After four successful seasons, their Play Cloths streetwear line is continuing to blossom. Following the release of *Til the Casket Drops*, fans can look forward to solo albums from Malice and Pusha sometime in the near future.

“It only makes good business sense to me to just expand the brand,” says Pusha, downing his third strawberry lemonade. “The whole dynamic of the Clipse is that Malice has a perspective, and I have my own perspective. You hear it in the verses. Like, you might say my style is a bit more rebellious or whatever, and say Malice is a bit more conscious or insightful. People enjoy that, but if you split it up, you get two totally different books.”

Malice is actually in the process of shopping his first book, *Wretched, Pitiful, Poor, Blind & Naked*, to different literary agents and plans to release a film adaptation early next year through Re-Up Films. “I think it’s a book that’ll help and wake up a lot of people,” he says. “Sometimes you don’t have a choice. I really feel like this is a must. It’s a calling that I have to answer to.”

With his head still throbbing from a pounding headache, Malice is now answering to a different calling—his bed. Before closing out their tab and heading home, the Clipse reveal the secret to their unwavering determination in the face of countless hurdles and obstacles. “Through all the hardships, through all the pain and everything else, there are certain aspects that are 100 percent totally fun,” says Pusha. “This shit is artistry at its muthafuckin’ finest. We can laugh about it and take it all with a grain of salt, ‘cause it’s, like, damn, man, we feel like we’ve given you portrait after portrait after portrait.”

“When we got signed to Columbia, Hip Hop was a fan of the Clipse and understood where we were coming from,” adds Malice. “He already knew that we had mad headaches, so they knew if we gonna do something with them, we gonna have to do it, we not gonna play with this group. So the vehicle definitely feels like it’s moving and moving urgently. Everything is going in a certain order. The energy just feels good. It just feels right this time.”

Lord willin’. ♠