





WORDS BY ANSLEM SAMUEL

# LIL' BIG MAN

AFTER  
A JAIL  
SENTENCE  
HALTED  
LIL' TROY'S  
CAREER,  
DOES  
HOUSTON'S  
UNOFFICIAL  
MAYOR  
STILL  
WANNA BE  
A BALLA?

PHOTOS BY DANIELLE LEVITT

“**M**an, I gave away about a thousand dollars that night—\$20s, \$50s, just throwin’ it out. I was ballin’ for real, you know?” Houston’s own Lil’ Troy remembers about a fashion show he did in Miami Beach two years ago. Troy brought the house down that night—partly because of the fistfuls of cash he threw into the crowd, but mainly because of the popularity of his hit single, “Wanna Be a Baller,” which played in the background as he strolled the catwalk.

Troy had it all that year. He had his own label, Short Stop Records, distributed through Universal Records, and a hit record under his belt. So what if he didn’t even spit a verse on the song and his boys rhymed on the majority of his debut album, *Sittin’ Fat Down South*? He didn’t seem to care. (“I ain’t the best rapper. Shit, I can’t wrap a Christmas present the day before Christmas.”) What did matter to him was takin’ care of his five kids (all of whom, despite having different mothers, live with Troy and his wife, Dee), havin’ a good time and stayin’ out of jail. Two out of three ain’t bad, right?

See, in an effort to keep food in the mouths of his shorties, Troy lived out the chorus of his song a lil’ too well. “I got caught up with a bunch of keys, travelin’, makin’ money the fly way,” he confesses. “That was my thing for real. When the song says, ‘Makin’ money the fly way,’ that’s how I made my money, on the highway goin’ in and out of state. That’s what I did.”

After fighting the case for a year, Troy eventually ended up doing a nine-month stretch in a federal prison in ‘99—at the height of his popularity. “Man, havin’ a hit record and knowing you gotta go to jail is some scary shit,” he says over a plate of catfish and fries at his wife’s restaurant, Dee’s Drive-In. “I ain’t know if my girl was gonna be beside me. But I served my time and came back with more than I went in with.”

While incarcerated, Troy realized he needed independence. Not only from his cell but from Universal Records. Despite his success with the label, he felt it was better for

him as an artist and businessman to go the indie route. “Everyone thought I was crazy for gettin’ off Universal,” he says later from behind the desk of his new Short Stop Record offices. “But I figured I could make more on an independent label sellin’ 400,000 records than I could sellin’ a million on Universal.”

Given the lucrative distribution deal he recently inked with Koch Records, Troy has already proven his theory true. “Universal did their job; they blew me up, made money. But now it’s time to move on to something bigger, something better.”

**Back in ‘89, a young Troy Birklett** was still heavy in the dope game and was trying to get Short Stop off the ground. At that time, he kept hearing about a 16-year-old kid named Brad who could rhyme. After tracking the kid down to hear him spit, Troy got him in the studio, recorded a maxi single and started selling it out of the trunk of his Caddy. The song became a street hit and the kid would go on to take the name Scarface—and become one-third of Houston’s notorious Geto Boys on James Prince’s Rap-A-Lot Records.

“I didn’t know nothin’ about the [music business back then],” confesses Troy, his clunky Short Stop medallion and diamond-studded watch glistenin’ in the light. “So when J was like he wanted Face to be in the Geto Boys, I was like, ‘Fine, no problem.’ He never paid me; he just gave distribution to my other groups and helped me in any way that he could.”

Troy extended that same Southern hospitality to Scarface early in his career. He even claims that Face lived in Troy’s mom’s house at one point. That’s why Troy felt so hurt when his former artist sued him for copyright infringement. Seems Face was upset that some of his old lyrics were used on *Sittin’ Fat Down South*. “I put them songs I done with Face on my album to let people know I ain’t no new jack to this shit,” defends Troy, his voice slightly raised. “I seen him out there in the club when the songs was playin’ and he ain’t say nothin’. But I go to jail and receive some papers

sayin’ he gonna sue me for \$500,000. I’m in the fuckin’ feds and y’all talkin’ ‘bout suin’ me?”

The two ended up settling out of court for \$220,000, but Troy still feels it didn’t have to come to that. “He could’ve come to me personally. He ain’t got to get no lawyers involved. We friends, or we was. I don’t know *what* we are,” fumes Troy, who just finished signing autographs at a back-to-school fair with longtime homie and other former Geto Boy Willie D. “I talked to [Face] once or twice since I’ve been home and told him, ‘Man, you ain’t have to rape me like that, dog. If you wanted some money, I would’ve gave you some money.’ He said he’d give me \$50,000 back and we’d call it even. That was several months now and I’m still waitin’ on my 50.” At press time, Scarface was unavailable for comment.

**Walkin’ into Mother** Birklett’s house, you’re automatically overwhelmed by the smell of home cookin’. A petite woman with mahogany skin and short braids, Mrs. Birklett prepares a meal that’d put Emeril to shame. Tonight’s menu: fresh candied yams, cornbread made from scratch, turkey and greens. Oh, and you can’t forget the chopped onions; Troy *has* to have ‘em for his greens.

Sitting down to a warm plate, Troy seems at ease. But he seems even more peaceful when Fifi, his pet poodle with the red nail polish, begs him to rub her tummy. He is more than willing to oblige. It’s a peculiar sight indeed. Big-time CEO tamed by—of all things—a poodle. The scene gets even more bizarre on the ride back to Troy’s six-bedroom rest as Fifi gets strapped into a seatbelt for the trip. Judging by the pooch’s cooperation, it’s a normal routine.

When Troy stops for gas along the way, he seizes a perfect opportunity to self-promote. Poppin’ the trunk of his S500 Benz, he pulls out a promo poster for his new album, *Back to Ballin’*, and puts it up in the gas station window. “I still promote my own self,” explains Troy while pumping gas. “You gotta sell yourself to the people. So, when I see people, I’m a stop and give ‘em a poster, flier or something so they know who I am. That’s how you really make fans—by being tangible.”

It’s a philosophy Troy truly lives by. Driving through H-Town, he gives off an air like that of a favorite uncle. He shakes hands, kisses babies, takes pictures and gets genuine love from the public. So when he gives a few dollars to a kid with a

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sign that reads, I'M CUTE, HELP ME PLAY FOOTBALL. DONATE, you get the feeling it's just another part of his everyday routine. "People really feel like they can come up and talk to me; they know me 'round here."

Back at the mansion, it becomes clear that Troy is a man about business in both his professional and personal life. Answering every order with a polite "yes, sir," the Birklett kids listen intently as their father warns them not to wear the gold watches that Uncle Ricky gave them to school and then explains how to catch the armadillo that keeps tearin' up the backyard. "The first thing you gotta do," Troy begins, "is get an empty garbage can. Then, you sneak up behind the critter and scoop him up in the can. If you're afraid, it'll jump out and bite you. Keep shakin' the can every so often to keep him at the bottom. After that, walk his ass *waaay* down the block and around the corner and drop it off in the bushes. Hopefully, he won't be back. But if it does, you gotta do it all over again."

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After the hunting lesson, Troy realizes it's getting late and the kids need to go to bed because the first day of school is the next day. He's kinda tired, having spent the last two days shooting a video for his latest single, "We Gon' Lean"; locking down the distribution of his new clothing line, Short Stop Wear; and finalizing a deal to open an Exotic Wings franchise in Houston. But according to Troy, all the hard work is to make sure his kids' futures will be straight.

"With the deal I got set up now, I don't have to go platinum to make more money than I did last time. The key is to have some money to take care of my kids," he says as he starts nodding off. "My family comes first. That's why all the time I was hittin' the highway, takin' penitentiary chances, I was trying to make sure that I could leave my kids something that they can run. I love my babies, man. I love my shorties."

At the end of the day, that's all that matters to Troy. So, the man who peeled off \$20s and \$50s two years before to prove that he really was a balla doesn't have much to prove anymore. "I'd be a fool not to want to go platinum again. But goin' platinum don't mean shit to me," he says mid-yawn.

"I'm not worried about that or who has more shine than me. Sometimes you can have the most shine and still not get what you really want." Somehow, as Troy heads up to his master bedroom, kids neatly tucked away in their beds, he gives the impression that he already has everything he could ever want, and it's all right there in Houston.