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# THE KING'S REDEMPTION

*Following a year of very public legal woes, platinum-selling artist and actor T.I. knows what he's doing on his summer vacation: getting back on top with a new album, launching his new all-star film *Takers*, and reclaiming his title as "The King"—with some very exclusive cigars in tow. → By Evan Dashevsky*

In this first decade of the new millennium, few musicians can boast the success or the controversy of Atlanta's Clifford Joseph Harris, Jr. The rapper, actor, and one-man brand has been known by several names over the years. Growing up, his family nicknamed him "Tip" after his great grandfather, which he adapted to T.I.P. as his *nom de rap* when he started rhyming as a teenager. In 2001 his first record deal landed him on the same label as veteran emcee Q-Tip, so to avoid confusion with his more senior labelmate, T.I.P. was asked to alter his name to the two-letter moniker that he is best known by today: T.I. With the release of his first album, T.I. was christened the "Jay-Z of the South" by bespectacled hitmaker producer Pharrell, but it wouldn't be long until T.I. promoted himself to a more select role: "King of the South." Modesty and the rap game have never been great friends.

But unlike the deafening self-aggrandizing of the hip-hop echo chamber, where a lot of loud barking comes from a lot of little dogs, T.I. had the resume to back his new, elite title. A short rundown: he is the founder and CEO of his own Grand Hustle Records; he is the recipient of numerous Grammy, Billboard, and BET awards; he's recorded hit songs with true super-duper stars like Kanye West, Rihanna, and Justin Timberlake; he's managed to go platinum in the era of file-sharing, numerous times; and according to the ladyfolk I had in asking distance, he's not too hard on the eyes. T.I. has also made the move into the world of acting, landing roles in the film *ATL*; appearing alongside Denzel Washington in the great *American*

*Gangster*; and is executive producing and acting in this summer's *Takers* where he rounds out a true all-star cast that includes Matt Dillon, Idris Elba, and Hayden Christensen, among others.

When making the transition into new ventures in life or business, T.I.—who sometimes sounds more like a self-help book written in the first person than the thug persona he's more famous for—is always open to advice. "I never thought I knew it all," he describes to *Smoke* with his syrupy drawl and unmistakably southern emphases ("business" is pronounced *bee-iz-ness*, the word "is" is mined for a extra syllables that few other accents could muster). "So, whenever I have the opportunity to be around people who have made it to where I am trying to be, I take their advice—sometimes even when I don't agree with what they say. Because I know somewhere in there is the key to get to where I'm going. In regards to acting, Denzel was cool enough to sit down with me and chop it up on *American Gangster*. One thing I took away from him was when he told me 'Do the thing that made them call you for the job. Do you.'"

Of course, this art of the "do you" wasn't exactly new to T.I. It's that subtle mixture of biography and personal mythologizing (with just a twist of embellishment) that hip-hop empires are built on. T.I.'s story begins in the Bankhead neighborhood of Atlanta where he was raised by his grandparents. He soon found himself on the wrong side of the law as a small time drug dealer who by age 14 was already weaving in and out of correctional facilities. Eventually he turned his attention to rhyming and began to make



photo: Jonathan Mammion

...❖ T.I. still mugging for the camera even with a top-of-the-line smoke in hand. The cigar become a symbol of sophistication and achievement in a hip-hop world where image is everything.

his mark as a mixtape bard of Dixieland street life. Along with a few other notables, T.I. was one of the leaders of the new southern hip-hop explosion, a phenomenon he describes as being “more about the skills behind the words than the words themselves. In New York, it’s about actual articulation of lyrics, but in the south it’s about feeling the vibe. It’s like, I ain’t even saying this correctly but you know what I’m saying. You get a fix on what I’m feeling.” And millions of fans have gotten a fix on what T.I. is feeling. Such as on 2006’s Grammy certified smash “What You Know” featuring an epic synth hook underpinning T.I.’s signature brand of slangy braggadocio, backed by an overdubbed chorus of T.I.s—an army of T.I.s—chirping in with *Eh-OHs* and *Yeeeahs* throughout the track. It’s one of the best hip-hop tracks of the aughts.

Fast-forward to today, T.I. can be found at A-list gatherings clinking glasses with glitterati and industry movers, gracing the covers of various magazines, or hamming it up on the talk show circuit with Larry, Ellen, and Howard. But what this former hustler is most notorious for is the part of his life he now wants to get farthest away from.

Even as this neighborhood troublemaker evolved into a genuine global superstar, he would find the destructive parts of his past were

never too far behind. A close friend of his was shot and killed outside a post-concert show in 2006. And with hip-hop’s recent history, T.I. took understandable (and what would become regrettable) decisions to protect himself. In 2007, just hours before the BET Hip-Hop Awards in his hometown of Atlanta, T.I. was arrested on federal weapons charges after his bodyguard purchased automatic weapons and silencers from an undercover federal agent. After submitting a plea bargain, T.I. agreed to a fine and a reduced sentence. So, in May of 2009, one of the biggest stars in rap began his sentence of a year and a day in federal prison.

While doing his time, T.I. realized that something had to change when one of the most successful artists of the past decade ends up locked in a cell. “One thing about prison that really touched me, that showed me that I really fucked up is: I consider myself fairly intelligent, but I still ended up in a place with bums, crack heads, and idiots. And I’m lying right here next to these people that out in the street that I wouldn’t give the time of day. So I had to look at myself and ask ‘how much better than them are you?’”

Along with the bid came 1,500 hours of community service which he mostly spends with at-risk youth. When asked if he would have been able to turn around a younger version of himself, he has a hopeful view “If Tupac came to me back then, I’d listen to Tupac—because here was a guy who started where I am and made it to where I want to be. I tell these kids ‘I’ve been where you’ve

“There’s not so many places you can [smoke cigars]. I feel like it’s a habit that doesn’t get along so well with society.”

been. I know what you’re scared of, I know what your insecurities are. I know the reason why you do what you do. I’m telling you, it doesn’t have to be like that.”

Due to T.I.’s recent incarcerations, certain limits on his movement have been set (the exact conditions of which he is hesitant to talk about). But one silver lining is that it has given him more time to spend with his family, as well as time to lay out the framework for a new life and putting in preparations for the August release of *Takers*. Before going to prison he was on house arrest, one thing he did to fill the time was smoke cigars. T.I. had been a fairly steady smoker over the past decade when he was introduced to cigars in his early 20s. As a successful musician who has become accustomed to the finer things in life and traveled around the globe, he considers himself a fan of the finest forbidden tobacco fruit that Cuba has to offer—specifically, he’s “had the privilege” to partake in Cuban Cohibas and Montecristos. But while stateside he has found some fine cigars to enjoy from other, more accessible locales, and keeps an open mind about trying brands he’s not familiar with. Although the name escaped him, he recalls a “really good” cigar he recently had, that was flavored with Cognac, tucked into a crystal tube with a wax seal, and ran about \$75 a piece. (Sounds to us like Gurkha’s flagship, ultra-exclusive and creamy-smoking Grand Reserve cigars from Honduras, aged five years and infused with Louis XIII Cognac.)

Cigars have become a staple of modern hip-hop success. Along with T.I., you will often find luminaries such as Jay-Z, Diddy, and Nas with a top-line stick in their mouths. Perhaps, with the assault the habit is under, they’ve become a new symbol of sophisticated rebellion. Even T.I. doesn’t get to smoke as much as he’d like to because “there’s not so many places you can do it lately. I feel like it’s a habit that doesn’t get along so well with society.” You could say that hip-hop and cigars have something in common.

In September of this year, T.I.—rapper, rebel, and superstar—will turn 30. What does one of the top players in a genre built on youth think about that impending date? “I’m trying not to,” he says with a chuckle. “I’m trying to get away from that. But still, I just look around me and there ain’t any more people in their 20s around me. So it’s kind of like being the last person at the party.”

At some point, every man needs to find the balance of what he’s been given on his life’s path, and what he’s found. It’s the balancing act of growing up. One of these new equilibriums he’s working on stems from his job as Daddy. It’s a role as caretaker he balances with his day job detailing some of the more raw ele-

...❖ T.I. in *Takers* as “Ghost,” a criminal who was recently released from prison and looking to a team of bank robbers with one last job. Right: T.I. with Chris Brown. Below: T.I. laying out a plan with his motley crew (left to right) Paul Walker, Michael Ealy, Hayden Christensen, and Idris Elba.

will always be T.I. to the world. But in the hip-hop game, he prefers the nickname “King.” That royal title was first made famous by another southern musician who was as controversial as he was successful in his rise from humble roots to the top of music and movies. Of course, we all know happened to that King—he ended up as a jump suit-wearing Las Vegas sideshow whose reign came to an early end on a bathroom floor. One major difference between these two Kings is that Elvis never had the control over



photo: Gezou Screen Gems, Inc.

ments of urban life. Of course, his kids will have opportunities he never did, so he welcomes them into the world of hip-hop, with all of its rebellious exaggerations, gritty details, and massive contradictions. But with clear limits. “I let my kids listen to whatever they want to. If they have a question, I tell them to come holler to me about it. And if they get caught reenacting anything that they hear, they know they ain’t got to deal with them people on the headphones, they got to deal with Daddy.”

While T.I. is happy to spend time more time in his role as Daddy, he’s still “Tip” to those who knew him growing up, and he

his own career that T.I.—as both artist and businessman—has created for himself. And while T.I.’s had some very public stumbles, he is now bringing the same fire and dedication to improving himself as he did to launching his career. In the short term, that means stepping away from the studio to cultivate the careers of younger artists on his label; pursuing film and television projects as producer; and yes, even putting aside some time to “work on making my golf game a little better.” If he keeps on this new path of molding a new T.I., whatever eventual form that may take, there’s no limit to the scope of this King’s dominion. **S**