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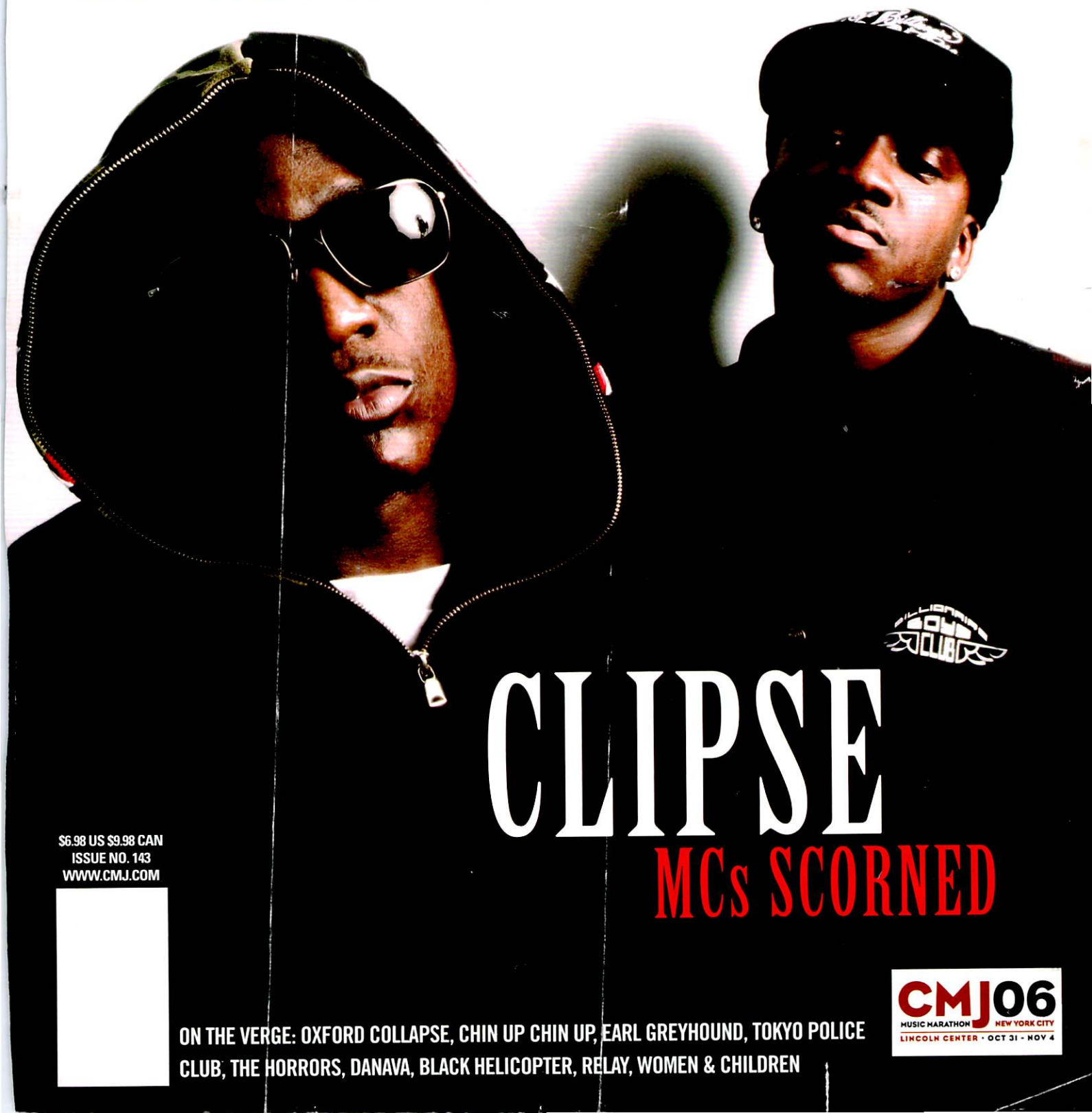
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WHAT HAPPENED TO THOSE BOYS

CLIPSE UNLOADS ON THEIR LABEL AND RAISES HELL ON OTHER MCS

STORY BY JESSICA SUAREZ//PHOTOS BY NOAH KALINA

"Voila," announces Terrence Thornton, aka Clipse's Pusha, seconds after the final track on *Hell Hath No Fury*, the best hip-hop album that may or may not come out this year. Leaning back in a chair inside Jive Records' Manhattan offices, his eyes move to the ceiling, where one story above this listening session, a floor full of label employees are deciding his record's fate. "I hate every inch of this room, this building," he says.

Whether or not it sees light, *Hell* is the album that Clipse—the partnership Pusha shares with his brother, Gene "Malice" Thornton—needed to make. It's complex but not overdone; it bears their anger and frustration but none of their anxiety. It sounds effortless, even though they've been working on it for three years. As of presstime, the album's release date has been pushed back yet another month (to Nov. 28). In fact, just a handful of people even have copies of it. Their publicist claims Pusha sleeps with it under his pillow, which sounds ridiculous, but their paranoia is justified.

"A photographer did try to take the album," says Malice. "Matter of fact, someone stole the album out the airport before, one of the baggage handlers, and we got it back. A leak right now would be bad. It would be horrible for us." Here's the problem: Their fans may never get to hear *Hell Hath No Fury*, even though its masterminds have been put through hell to get it out. But hell hath nothing on the Clipse.

The group's problems started in 1999, when Elektra released their first single "The Funeral," but gave it no promotional support, before shelving what was to be their debut album. Their second LP, *Lord Willin'* (Star Trak/Arista), fared better, mostly on the strength of the single "Grindin'." That song's beat, courtesy of longtime Clipse collaborators the Neptunes, sounded and felt like a cannon going off—traces of it have reverberated throughout hip-hop in the four years since. But then Arista folded into Jive, who continued to push back the release date for *Hell Hath No Fury* until the Thornton brothers demanded to be let go from their contract. They stayed quiet

while their lawyers went to work, but in the end they were trapped. "We've had four years worth of delays. We've had enough delays," says Malice, eating some pasta that his brother turned down ("Carbs, yo"), while Pusha stays glued to his Sidekick.

The brothers Thornton kept relatively quiet during that period, but it was hard, especially with lesser rappers dominating the landscape. In 2004, the pair teamed up with MCs Ab-Liva and Sandman, created the Re-Up Gang and released the mixtape *We Got It 4 Cheap Vol. 1*. In 2005 they released *Vol. 2* and took on their peers, eviscerating their beats, turning other rappers' songs into their own. Take the Game's "Hate It Or Love It": The original is about their experiences growing up—50 Cent recalls walking in on his mom kissing another woman; the Game thanks his grandmother for taking care of him. The Re-Up Gang's version sticks closer to the present. It's about the people who, like them, got into the drug trade in Virginia Beach. Here Malice names names and runs down the

history of a southern dynasty faster than Faulkner, and with better flow, too. The Game—and Faulkner—should be ashamed.

"See, that's what mixtapes were to us though," explains Pusha. "I don't know what the mixtape is now. Like, on the streets of New York, on 125th Street, I don't buy those things. Never. Brooklyn? I don't buy those, 'cause that's not what I know as a mixtape. I don't know if guys really put these mixtapes together and say, 'This is gonna be the hottest shit in the streets.' I think they say, 'This is gonna give me a presence in the streets, and I'll put a pretty cover on it and we can present it really good.'" He finally puts down the Sidekick he's been checking every 10 seconds. "Twenty songs and two are decent. They're not crafting."

The duo was equally uninspired by other artists' interpretations of "Grindin'." All attempts at either riding or ripping the song were so weak that Clipse simply wasn't being challenged. "Beat-wise, we've seen everybody try and replicate it. Lyrically, every rapper rhymed over the 'Grindin' beat and nobody made their mark," says Pusha. "Nobody did what we did in *Vol. 2* to other people's beats. No one." Pusha returns to his Sidekick, so Malice continues: "I don't wanna sound too cocky, but it's about competition, definitely. It's just being obnoxious, and that's what hip-hop is. It's about bragging. It's about being the best."

Something else unexpected happened for Clipse during the last couple of years. They were so focused on keeping their presence on the streets that they didn't even recognize their appeal to a whole other group of hip-hop fans. It first hit them while playing at New York's Knitting Factory club.

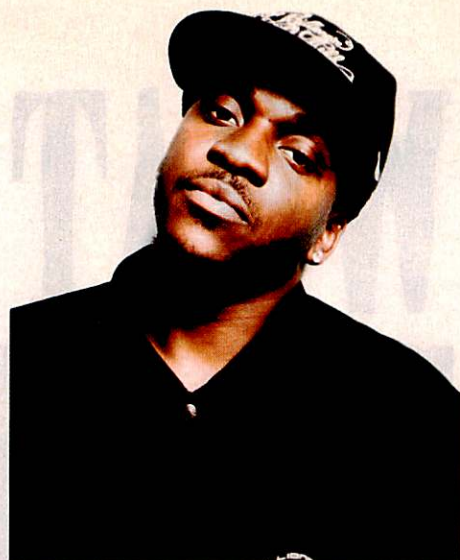
"It was sold out. Jam-packed. I had no fucking idea what the Clipse fan looked like. No idea," says Malice, leaning forward in more animated fashion. "I mean, it was white college kids, and they were adamant and passionate about singing the words and rapping and... white college kids! Rapping. With Bape or Ice Cream [T-shirts] or with signature tees on," he says. "I was like, 'Oh, shit.'"

**"WE'LL BE IN
BLACKFACE. NO
RADIO SINGLE.
NO VIDEO."**

It wasn't like they tried to get white college kids to like them. In fact, between legal battles, mixtapes and prepping *Hell Hath No Fury*, it appears they may have returned to old habits, ones far removed from the lives of their new fans. For example, on "Eghck," Pusha rhymes, "When times get tight/The coke game, like riding a bike," a line that he assures is not about a fictional character. And though the "I'm a hustler, not a rapper" trope has been played many times, most effectively of late by Young Jeezy, it applies well in Clipse's case. During their listening session, before the CD plays, Pusha looks bored, tired. He turns to his publicist and says, only half-jokingly, "After this, I'm retiring. I'm done." He knows he has another kind of life to fall back on, and even if it's less glamorous, he can get paid just as well. "That's all in there, it's all in the album," Malice explains. "I mean, the last four years is all in the album. Feelings about the industry. Feelings about the shit going on in the street. That's all the album is."

That said, it's also much more than Malice lets on. The two announced singles, "Mr. Me Too," and "Wamp Wamp (What It Do)" are the most radio-friendly of an essentially unfriendly album. Clipse

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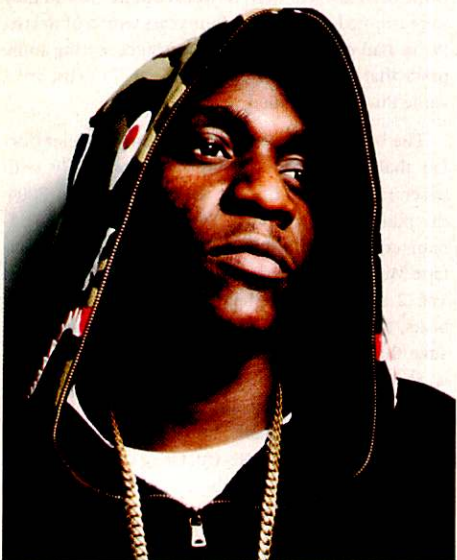
scrapped the original version of the record because it didn't feel right anymore—they were a lot angrier now.

"They're still hot songs," says Malice of the tracks they abandoned. "But then, with all the drama and everybody hearing what's going on, it wouldn't be a true album to put out, to represent us." So they went back and crafted something darker. They challenged the Neptunes in the studio, and since they've worked together so long, the Neptunes pushed them back. They've been doing things this way since they met in high school.

"Pharrell just thinks so far outside of the box," Malice says. "He comes up with some wild shit, but we gotta be like, 'No man. That's not it right now. Save that for Gwen Stefani.'" Their discernment paid off. *Hell Hath No Fury* is, as they desired, darker than *Lord Willin'*. The Neptunes layer island drums, xylophones and organs across its 12 tracks. Songs like "Trill" don't just hit you, they slide down you, with reverb for blocks. Horn lines churn, grind, then reverse with nauseating speed, though sometimes, as on "Mr. Me Too," they give the MCs more breathing room.

Clipse mixtape fans who've been trading the pair's similes like *Magic* cards won't be disappointed either. "I yell Re-Up till I'm locked like Mumia," they spit on one track, while on another it's, "I make all of her twist like Dickens." It's not just the boasts though—there's paranoia on tracks such as "Nightmares," apologies for past mistakes, Pusha's urgent delivery contrasted with his brother's earnestness. ("The good and the ugly," according to Malice.) The Neptunes also drop the beat for a couple bars on "Mr. Me Too" so Pusha can be clear. "I'm sorry to the fans, but those crackers weren't playing fair at live," he rhymes—but he's not whining.

It's too bad fans may never hear all of *Hell Hath No Fury*. And at this rate, a follow-up could take the rest of their lives. But they already know how they'll deliver their final live salvo. "We'll be in blackface. No radio single. No video. We're gonna mime it. Marcel Marceau," says Pusha, putting his hands up and miming being trapped inside a box. He even has a title: "*We Got The Last Laugh, Honky*."





BEAST MEETS WEST

Boris Brings Their Monster Doom To SunnO)))'s Studios

STORY BY KORY GROW // PHOTO BY ROSE KALLAL

Bicoastal, neo-doom metal duo SunnO))) and Japanese stoner-droner trio Boris have built reputations for mysterious, if exacting, experimentation. And with the release of their first collaborative album, *Altar*, both have budding careers at stake.

"This may be the record where we drive everyone away and no one is interested anymore," admits Greg Anderson, one bearded half of SunnO)))'s rumbling guitar troupe. It's a difficult realization for any artist, and one that first donned on Anderson last winter in the middle of tracking *Altar*, which he is now releasing on his own Southern Lord label.

If the sonic agitator wasn't considering his audience then (having felt that doing so could "ruin the creativity"), he surely must be now, as certain songs offer traces of accessibility. While the album as a whole isn't entirely a departure from their respective signature sounds, some tracks, "The Sinking Belle (Blue Sheep)" in particular, defy expectations. With Seattle-based, alt-country songstress Jesse Sykes lending whispery, sultry vocals, "Belle" has more in common with slowcore groups like Low and Bedhead than with either camp's obvious shared influences, Earth and the Melvins. Anderson, for his part, doesn't see it as such a dramatic shift.

"It would be different if Decide came up with the track," he says, maintaining the song was just a symptom of the moment: Boris guitarist Takeshi played some chords, which SunnO)))'s Stephen O'Malley in turn played on a grand piano, and then they gave Sykes free reign over the lyrics and vocals. For Anderson, these free-will collaborations rest heavily on two words he often employs: "aesthetic" and "organic." He concedes that in order for SunnO))) to collaborate with a band, they must already appreciate that artist's "aesthetic," and the best partnerships lead to an "organic" recording that should only require a couple of tries in the studio.

Anderson describes the aesthetics in Sykes' music with her own group, the Sweet Hereafter, as "stark and deep," qualities he felt he could relate to. After meeting through Sykes's bassist (and Anderson's mutual friend), Bill Herzog, and despite Sykes breaking Anderson's beloved "Ozzy hand" toy early in their friendship, they discussed joining forces, even though Sykes thought their proposed marriage of opposites was a put on.

"Basically, they gave [the song] to me months in advance, and I kind of just kept blowing it off," says the longhaired brunette from her Seattle home. "I kept thinking, 'Nah, they're fucking with me; I'm not gonna waste my time.'" When she did tackle the lyrics for what would become "The Sinking Belle," she felt moved by the sound of Boris guitarist Wata's baby daughter crying, and with that as inspiration, origi-

"Who cares if it's cheesy or whatever, we're gonna have a fucking killer drone jam!"

nally meant for it to be a lullaby. But when she heard the finished version, the crying wasn't there.

"There was so much source material to work from that we really had to whittle it down to what it actually was," says Anderson. Inspired by stories of how Miles Davis edited *Bitches Brew* from several takes, Anderson, O'Malley and Boris drummer Atsuo found themselves making plenty of cuts, including the background crying, to retain an organic feeling.

They made similarly significant alterations on songs featuring Earth mastermind Dylan Carlson and former Soundgarden guitarist Kim Thail, who got turned onto SunnO))) and Southern Lord after playing on the label's Dave Grohl-lead Probot project. Thail, in fact, was left with just a few solos on the album's final song, "Blood Swamp."

"Kim was a little disappointed just because he was so into what we were doing, and he was really excited, and I think it was something for him—it was a new opportunity," says Anderson. "He understood that the thing that I keep on saying, that what we created was so in-the-moment and so organic... that putting something else on top of it was a real tricky affair."

Or as former Earth/Melvins bassist Joe Preston, who also contributed vocals to a track, describes the process, "It always builds itself from the germ of an idea over the session and continues to grow."

As for Carlson, the bands had asked him to add some guitar to "The Sinking Belle" because of his recent forays into cinematic alt-country with Earth, but they cut this during mixing as well. Ultimately, Carlson's lone contribution lies on the limited-edition version of *Altar*'s bonus CD, where each member of SunnO))) and Boris take round-robin drone solos, with Carlson getting two.

"It's kind of like we cannot not do that," explains Anderson. "Who cares if it's cheesy or whatever, we're gonna have a fucking killer drone jam!"

And it was the bands' connection in the studio that rendered any communication gaps moot, despite Boris' poor grasp of English. Their conversations happened primarily through music and metaphor. *Altar*'s opener, "Etna," is quite literally intended as a sonic volcano, bolstered by its drumless intro and bombastic middle. "Akuma No Kuma" refers to a phrase Boris has for O'Malley and Anderson: "The partying bears."

Collaboration is indeed a tricky thing, and in the end, SunnO))) and Boris wouldn't have been able to overcome its innate obstacles were it not for their mutual admiration. The fact that their sessions begat some entirely new sounds that neither group had previously attempted is even more remarkable and will either alienate old fans, attract new ones or both.

Ironically though, the most enthused parties seem to be the collaborators' collaborators, regardless of how their additions were trimmed down. Sykes even hopes to join them on stage one of these days.

"I'd like to sport one of those robes," she says without a hint of sarcasm. "But I don't know, I haven't been asked yet, so we'll see. I know that I'm starting to get dudes with names like Thor friending me on my MySpace, and that's pretty cool."