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WORLD PREMIER

Gang Starr's man of few words, DJ Premier, resurrects hip-hop's most seminal studio.

Words: Jesse Serwer
Photos: Rayon Richards

When New York City's D&D Studios closed its doors in early 2003, it marked the end of an era. An often rat-infested space amongst the sweatshops in Manhattan's stoically unrefined Garment District, D&D physically embodied New York City hip-hop for more than a decade.

Nas, the Notorious B.I.G. and Jay-Z came through D&D while making their seminal debuts *Illmatic*, *Ready to Die* and *Reasonable Doubt*, respectively, and Smif N Wessun's *Dah Shinin'* and Jeru the Damaja's *The Sun Rises In The East* were among the underground classics conceived between its walls. Until the day of its closure it remained the destination of choice for artists looking to get that gritty New York flavor into their mix: Showbiz, Diamond D, Evil Dee, Just-Ice and Craig G were D&D regulars, but more glamorous artists like Ludacris and Mariah Carey have stopped in when they wanted to get that down and dirty New York sound.

It's no coincidence that most, if not all, of the aforementioned figures were brought into the D&D fold by DJ Premier, who, ever since Gang Starr's 1992 breakthrough *Daily Operation*, had worked exclusively from D&D's "B" room.

"I just like the sound I get there, never mind them rats running around," the man born Christopher Martin once said (in a 2002 *Strength Magazine* interview) while defending his decision to not work anywhere else. And with the results he'd gotten over the past 12 years, no one ever bothered to argue.

For 15 years, Gang Starr's DJ and producer has been a soldier of blue-collar, hustling man's hip-hop. He's created instant credibility with his tailor-made beats created from clipped samples, crisp, tightly-matched hit-hats, snares and kicks and DJ scratches that cut the artist's name into the mix. While hip-hop has continued to veer from its B-boy roots towards what Premier likes to call "Tinkerbelle music," his ever-expanding roster of freelance clients has continued to grow.

BECOMING THE BOSS

When he got the news that D&D was closing while Premier was in the midst of completing Gang Starr's sixth album, *The Ownerz* (Virgin, 2003), his world was effectively rocked.

"It put me in a mental freeze for a moment," the Houston native recalls, nearly two years later, in his husky Brooklyn-via-Houston drawl. "My man Headquarterz had just passed away. It was a rough little road and things were coming one after another."



After completing *The Ownerz* at nearby Avatar Studios and leaving town with Guru for a Gang Starr tour, Premier decided to buy what was left of the studio from D&D partners Doug Grama and David Lotrin, who had been forced to sell after the demise of major clients like Loud Records and Rawkus and the proliferation of home ProTools setups had effectively ground business to an all-time low.

"We had to say, 'Can we afford to do this?' because money is fucked up with everybody right now," Primo says from the newly revamped studio, which has been re-dubbed Headqcourterz after his fallen comrade.

"Stepping up [and doing this new studio] had a lot to do with Headqcourterz passing away because he was loud in a good way," the producer adds. "When he died, his moms told me to dress him, make him look hip-hop. It was a responsibility I'd never had. That made me really buckle down and say 'You know what, I got to get serious and step my game up.' Musically, I have never changed but I bug myself out because I am not a take-responsibility type of person. I was always the knucklehead having fun, not wanting to take responsibility. But I have that boss mentality now because I have to."

WORDS ARE HEARD

By the time Primo and Charles Roane, a commercial producer who goes by The Mixologist, were able to move in last winter, the studio was in the process of being demolished and most of D&D's equipment had been sold off. "As long as I had those speakers I was good," Premier says, pointing to the vintage Urei [vintage studio sound] system salvaged before it was ripped out of the old "B" room (now the "H" room; the odd-shaped "A" room has been re-dubbed "Q").

"Those things are so key; they are designed to take the beating that I put into them. If you're making hardcore music you got to hear it loud. Urei's are hard to find but when you get a batch, you save 'em. It's like a Corvette Stingray. They don't make 'em the way they used to make 'em no more. I'd rather have a Stingray now than get a new fast car."

But progress at Headqcourterz has been slow, with the studio just reaching the fully functioning level this summer. On a balmy September afternoon, however, the space is seeing a flurry of activity under the direction of Gordon "Biggest Gord" Franklin, Premier's brother and partner in Year Round Records, the label he started in 2002. Floors are being mopped, and furniture is being put in place. Premier's man Black is passed out on the couch in front of a Dave Chappelle DVD, awakening to share a joint with his friend.

Primo, wearing a t-shirt bearing the Year Round logo and the question "Do you Want Hardcore?" is juggling his usual bevy of projects, prepping his Friday night mix show on Sirius

"I am 37 years old and I still fiend for hip-hop every day."

Satellite Radio, and preparing to sit down with Ludacris to discuss beats for his new album. Foremost on the artist's mind, however, is *A Man of Few Words*, his very first producer/solo album, a much-talked about project scheduled to be released through Terror Squad and Atlantic Records that has become a sort of hip-hop version of the forever-delayed Guns N' Roses project *Chinese Democracy*.

Although Fat Joe and Terror Squad's deal through Atlantic no longer exists (he's since re-emerged on Universal), Primo's record will still see release through Atlantic. Still burning with frustration over what he perceives as a lack of proper promotion of *The Ownerz* by Virgin Records (though now on indefinite hiatus, Gang Starr has exited its deal with the label), and hostility towards major labels in general, Premier promises he will "make Atlantic very happy for waiting so long."

While he is protective of the album's details ("I don't say nothing until the 'i's' are dotted on the paperwork"), the course of conversation reveals a guest roster that includes Nas and Ghostface Killah.

PRO WITH THE TOOLS

As Premier goes to work on an *A Man of Few Words* track featuring Boy Big, a St. Louis-area singer who appeared on *The Ownerz*, one major change in his studio equipment is immediately apparent: Hip-hop's most die-hard analog purist

OUT OF THE BOX: PRIMO ON PRIMO DJ PREMIER DISSECTS SOME OF HIS MOST POPULAR PRODUCTIONS.

"Dwyck" Gang Starr featuring Nice N Smooth (1992)
"Dwyck" was the first song I did in the 'B' Room at D&D—*Daily Operation* was all in the A room—because that studio was booked that day. I was like 'I'll try this room since I'm just doing a simple little song.' It turned out to be one of my biggest records. It was fun because we weren't trying to make a hit. I was like 'Let's put it on *Daily Operation*. Nice N Smooth can eat, we can eat,' but everyone was like 'Nah.' We put it on *Hard To Earn* (1994) but by that time it was too late."

"N2Gether Now" Limp Bizkit featuring Method Man (1999)
"I didn't want to do a record with Limp Bizkit—they're not my style—but Fred Durst asked if he could stop by and meet me. He came over and I told him straight up I wasn't interested. Then he said 'I got your *Crooklyn Cuts* (early 90s Tape Kingz mixtape series) tapes.' I was like, 'Damn, if you got that, then you know what we going to do. Give me five minutes.' The tape was rolling and we did the damn thing. It turned out alright."

"Giantz Ta This" NYG'z (2002)
"You got to know how to play around with things. I always wanted to flip 'Seven Minutes of Funk' by The Whole Darn Family because it's a dope record, but also because it's so sampled and I've loved the way everybody's done it. EPMD 'It's My Thing' was dope, and I loved 'Ain't No Nigga' by Foxy and Jay-Z. I wanted to do the same thing I did with the New Birth record from 'Player's Anthem' by Junior M.A.F.I.A. I flipped that one on Jeru's 'Ya Playin' Yaself.' It sounded ghetto, and I wanted to do it again."





"I was always the knucklehead having fun... But I have that boss mentality now because I have to."

is working an entirely digital setup with ProTools.

"We still don't have a tape machine so in the meantime, I have been going straight digital," Premier says, adding that, despite his recent baptism into the world of digital recording, a tape machine is on the way.

"This is all brand new to me. I am used to coming in and threading the reel. I was having my little tantrums [with ProTools] for a week or two where I would get mad and go home. I finally stuck it out and just said 'I am going to stay here one day and learn.'"

To anchor his jump to digital recording, he bought Control/24, an integrated front-end console by Digidesign and Focusrite that adjusts manually while altering levels digitally.

"It's dope because it is designed to act like it is analog," he explains. "Everything you do, you can do the old-fashioned way. That way I don't feel like you took away my toy. I got my toy, it's just an updated version."

Having conquered his digital hang-ups, Primo seems primed for a new era of productivity. He's in discussions with Nas about producing his entire next album, and when the next Year Round release, a full-length debut by NYC's *Pros and Cons*, drops sometime next year, it will bear production entirely by Premier.

STAY IN THE CUT

A day after our interview, as Premier headed to Germany for a DJ tour, a three-judge panel ruled in federal appeals court that rap artists would now have to pay for unrecognizable samples used in their songs, superseding a lower-court ruling that it is legal to use notes if the sample isn't identifiable.

Almost immediately, hip-hop pundits speculated that no one would be affected more than Premier, who has made a career out of creating new songs by chopping obscure samples into unrecognizably short bits. While Premier has yet to weigh in on the subject, it is doubtful the ruling will inhibit his beatmaking.

Back at Headqcourterz, he declares, "I am 37 years old and I still fiend for hip-hop every day. You got to be a student of the culture to know how to do it right: hip-hop is experimentation. You're on your turntables, scratching, and your mother calls out and the record goes rr-rrr-rrr (*simulates scratching sound*). That is what happened: Grand Wizard Theodore stopped to hear what his mom was saying."

A Man of Few Words will be out in the first quarter of 2005 through Terror Squad/Atlantic Records. "DJ Premier Presents: Live from Headqcourterz" airs every Friday night from 8-10 p.m. on Sirius Satellite Radio's "Wax" signal, 42. For information on Year-Round Records, visit www.yearroundrecords.com.