

TO PUT IT BLUNTLY

HOUSTON RAPPER DEVIN THE
DUDE SMOKES IN THE KEY OF LIFE.
WORDS JESSE SERWER PHOTOS JACK THOMPSON



It all started with a race.

Devin Copeland was in the sixth grade, chilling with his friend Boomer after school when the other boy pulled out a joint.

"I'm not gonna smoke weed!" Devin the Dude remembers telling his friend, mimicking the breathless speech of a 12-year-old as he recalls his life's turning point. "I was like, 'I'm gonna play football and basketball and... I don't need to be smoking, it makes you slow.' So he said, 'Make you slow? I can beat you running.' He smoked cigarettes, too, so I was like, 'You're crazy, let's go.' Well, he shot right past me. So, after that, I was like, 'Let me hit that.'"

As the boys got to smoking that J, Boomer told Devin how his father and his uncle hid their pot habit from his mother by referring to their frequent disappearances outside as "coffee breaks."

"I always remembered that story and when my group Odd Squad started recording, we did a song called 'Coughee' on our album," Devin recalls, forcing a cough to emphasize his preferred spelling. "We just kept saying 'coughee' all the time, and eventually we became the Coughee Brothaz. Now everybody who comes through the studio to work or to smoke with us becomes a coughee brotha. It's a state of mind—you don't even have to smoke weed."

Twenty-five years after that first (presumably mind-blowing) joint, we're at Coughee Brothaz headquarters, a studio in a small industrial park in the Houston suburb of Bellaire. Though it's only a few hours after his late performance the previous night at local spot Club Rio, Devin is already seated at the mixing console. Bud Light and bud-filled Swisher Sweets at hand, he cues up "The Real Thing," a freshly recorded track intended for an upcoming Coughee Brothaz compilation. While the Brothaz that are present—Devin's longtime DJ and veteran producer Domo, Jugg Mugg of Odd Squad, E-Rock of H-Town O.G.s 5th Ward Boyz, and a few other associates—have presumably heard "The Real Thing" before, the song's hook instantly cracks the room up. "It might swing but it don't swang," the chorus complains. "It might be hung, but it don't hang."

Far from a traditional sex rap, "The Real Thing" tackles a very modern problem: What happens when your woman discovers she can get more pleasure from her pocket rocket than your manhood. It's classic Devin the Dude: X-rated, goofy, and completely original.

What other rapper is writing songs about losing to a dildo?

WAITIN' TO INHALE

For someone who's recorded with just about all of Houston's platinum-selling rappers (Mike Jones,

Chamillionaire, Paul Wall) and can count both Dr. Dre's *The Chronic 2001* and the Jay-Z/R. Kelly album *Best of Both Worlds* on his resume, Devin the Dude remains relatively unknown to mainstream rap audiences, even in his hometown. Which is why it's strange to hear "What a Job," a track from his latest album, *Waitin' to Inhale*, on the radio while en route to his studio on this Monday afternoon. Nine years and four solo albums into his solo career, the closest thing to a breakout single Devin has had was "Lacville '79," an ode to his trusty Cadillac Seville from 2002's *Just Tryin' Ta Live*, which, at best, got a few video spins on *Rap City* before fading away. But "What a Job"—with its guest verses from Andre 3000 and Snoop Dogg and a cathartic, perfectly paced beat produced by Chaka Khan's nephew Chuck Heat—is Devin's most accessible, radio-friendly song to date.

In typical Dude fashion, the song started out as a lark.

"It was a skit at first, a PSA for people who want to be rappers, telling them about the job," Devin explains. "I did one verse, the hook came in and it faded out—that's how I had it but people were saying 'It oughta be a whole song.' But I didn't want to just do the whole song myself—I wanted to kinda have different points of view. [My label, Rap-A-Lot] asked me, 'Who would you want to get on there?' and I was like, 'I don't know, maybe someone like Andre or Snoop.' I always wanted to work with Andre and I loved working with Snoop on Dre's album. A lot of phone calls were made and those guys ended up blessing me with their verses and sending them right back. That was real cool of them..."

THE DUDE

The story of how Devin became The Dude—everyman rapper, lovable scoundrel, self-deprecating motivator—begins in St. Petersburg, Florida, where a young Devin used to stay up late at night sneaking listens to dirty records by Richard Pryor and Blowfly, as well as R&B like Quincy Jones ("That's where 'The Dude' comes from," he says. "I loved Quincy Jones' record *The Dude*. My first album was called *The Dude* by Devin, but after that, people just started calling me Devin the Dude").

After his family relocated to Texas during his adolescence, he shuttled back and forth between the South Side of Houston and New Boston, a rural town near Arkansas where Devin befriended the rednecks who would later serve as the inspiration for the "Country Dude" that periodically appears on his recordings (see *Just Tryin's* "R&B" and *Waitin' to Inhale's* "Boom" skits). Along with blind rapper Rob Quest and longtime friend Jugg Mugg, Devin would form Odd Squad in the early '90s, linking with Rap-



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...You'll see when it's time to change.

A-Lot Records through DJ Screw, their part-time DJ at the time. Odd Squad's 1994 debut LP, *Fadanuf Fa Erybody!!*, sold poorly, however, and the group was put on hold. (The three still appear together on Devin songs like "She Want That Money," and plan to finally release a second Odd Squad album next year.)

TO THA EX-TREME

Urged by Scarface to make a solo album, Devin completed *The Dude* in 1998. Excellent, though much overlooked, the album was probably best known at the time for its cover photo of Devin on the toilet, reading a newspaper called the *Houston Chronic*. Guest spots on Dr. Dre's *The Chronic 2001* and De La Soul's *AOI: Bionix* soon followed, raising Devin's industry profile and introducing him to audiences outside the South. By 2002, when he dropped the now-classic *Just Tryin' ta Live*, he had settled into his role as the pot-smoking, skirt-chasing oddity amidst Rap-A-Lot's cadre of syrup-swilling H-Town Gs. While pot and pussy remained Devin's *raison d'être*, songs like "Doobie Ashtray" and "Fa Sho" showcased his sensitive side, distilling life lessons through hilarious, sometimes sad vignettes and anecdotes.

To the Extreme followed two years later, solidifying Devin's newfound hipster fanbase while pushing his music in an even more ruminative direction.

"I had a nice time doing the last album but that fun wasn't there—on *Waitin' to Inhale*, we tried to bring the fun back into it," Devin explains, referring to *To the Extreme*'s slow, woozy pace. "We smoked a better quality of weed," Devin explains. "I cut down a bit, too—I went from Budweiser to Bud Light. And we smoke out of the vaporizer now, which is much healthier—it cuts out the tobacco from the cigars."

JUST TRYIN' TA LIVE

Given Devin's proclivity for x-rated raps and juvenile humor, it's somewhat eye-opening to learn that not only is he 37 years old but he's also the happily married father of four, including a 15- and a 16-year-old. That information, combined with the success of more mature-sounding *Waitin' to Inhale* tracks like "What a Job" and "Lil Girl Gone" (the Bun B- and Lil Wayne-guested track that's the album's first single), might lead you to believe that Devin is starting to take his craft a little more seriously. Devin would beg to differ.

"I try not to look for new ways to do things because you get redirected sometimes," Devin says of his commitment to staying true to his affable persona. "You'll see when it's time to change—it'll come to you. But if you're just fitting to go make a change and do this and that, and you don't just stick to a solid plan, it's not going to work out. There will always be something where you're like, 'Did you hear that new fresh thing that they just did?' It's a matter of being yourself, doing you, being willing to change and also to accept what you can't change."

One step to the left that Devin—an avowed fan of Willie Nelson, Ronnie Milsap, and The Oak Ridge Boys—is planning is a country album with longtime collaborator and producer Mike Dean. And you can bet the redneck from "R&B" (a.k.a. "Reefer and Beer") and the "Boom" skits will be showing up.

"The paperwork ain't looking right for him—Country Dude don't want to sign shit," Devin jokes. "He's just in it for the music. Comes from the heart, he says."

Waitin' to Inhale is out now on Rap-A-Lot Records. www.rapalotrecords.com, www.myspace.com/devinthedude

Sounds of Summer

H-Town player Devin the Dude breaks down his nice 'n' smooth summer soundtrack.

1. Isley Brothers "Summer Breeze"

That song makes me think of traveling anywhere with the windows down, just smiling, feeling good and worry-free with the sun in your face, wind in your hair, music up.

2. DJ Jazzy Jeff and The Fresh Prince "Summertime"

When Will Smith came out, back in the day, sounding all proper, I remember thinking, 'This is corny.' "Summertime" was the first song he did where I was like 'Okay, he might be pretty cool.' I'll put that with "Summer Madness" by Kool & the Gang and listen to both of them back to back.

3. Frankie Beverly and Maze "Happy Feelings"

That's that picnic, family reunion-type music right there.

4. DJ Screw "June 27 (Freestyle)"

That's a summertime favorite out here in Houston. The dudes with the candy-coated cars drop their tops and just let that whole thing run—it's like 30 minutes long.

5. The O'Jays "I Love Music"

I don't know why but I just like listening to The O'Jays in the summer.