



**TIME OF THE PHAROAH**  
 Monch is back with his first album in eight years.

## Burning Desire

Rap monarch Pharoahe Monch channels Elvis and Chuck D. on his first album in eight years.

By **Jesse Serwer**

The last time Pharoahe Monch had a new album, Bill Clinton was in office, the Knicks looked like contenders and Y2K loomed more ominously than Al Qaeda. Hip-hop was in an equally faraway place when Monch issued *Internal Affairs* in the fall of '99: New York was still the center of the rap universe, while the well-funded pseudo-indie Rawkus was spending major money on quirky (if relatively accessible) underground rappers like Monch and Mos Def. Like all idealistic times, however, the Rawkus era soon came to an end. Monch saw *Internal Affairs* pulled off the shelves in 2001 due to

clearance issues involving the "Godzilla's Theme" sample in his monster single "Simon Says," and was forced to ride the pine while his benefactors were swallowed by MCA, folded into Geffen, and then shut down entirely.

Freed from his Geffen deal in 2004, Monch—who first came to light as one half of the seminal Queens duo Organized Konfusion in 1991—took meetings with Shady/Interscope (Eminem is highly influenced by Monch's idiosyncratic delivery) and Bad Boy (Diddy employed him as a ghostwriter on last year's *Press Play*) before settling with Universal imprint SRC for the long-awaited *Desire*. While a commercially successful return from such a lengthy hiatus remains an elusive feat in hip-hop, Monch puts a positive spin on his absence.

"If pieces of this album were put out in 2003, it would have been a

piece of shit that Geffen wouldn't have known what to do with," the 34-year-old MC says via phone from London. To wit, he cites *Desire* track "Body Baby"—perhaps the most bizarre song on what might be the year's most eclectic rap album—which finds him channeling Elvis to sublime, "Hey Ya"-like effect. "I was told never to say this, but that song's over three years in the making—the hiatus enabled that, because I wouldn't have been as comfortable with it under the gun."

One tool that wouldn't have been available had everything gone as planned in '03 is YouTube, to which Monch, a self-described "frustrated filmmaker at heart," has uploaded low-budget videos for *Desire* tracks "Push," "Gun Draws" and "Body Baby." The video for the latter finds Monch battling the perception that he's a humorless, "conscious" rapper. "I'm someone who will get

heated over politics—and then the next minute, I just want to lay back with a glass of Hennessy and suck on some big ol' titties. But it's always a fight to promote myself like that," he says of the boxes created by hip-hop labels and fans. "To go one way or the other for the sake of cohesion is emotionally and psychologically such a lie."

Behind the hilarious video's conceit (a girl-crazy romp with Monch as a soulful Elvis impersonator) lies the key to *Desire*. "This album's one big Trojan horse; the whole thing's in parables," Monch explains. "Elvis ripped off a lot of black culture, so this is the reverse." Fittingly, the record also borrows from Public Enemy's Chuck D., who famously labeled Elvis a racist on "Fight the Power"; *Desire*'s "Welcome to the Terrordome" is essentially a cover of the 1990 PE

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classic, with a new second verse and references to more-recent issues like the Iraq War and the Sean Bell shooting. "I know it goes against all the rules, but I played it for some people and they were like, 'Duh, what's the original [track]?' " he says. "That's when I knew I had to put that on the album."

Several rap artists have generated buzz through straight-to-YouTube videos (see Prodigy's "Mac 10 Handle"). But Monch went further, creating a unique website, [gundraws.com](http://gundraws.com), to spread the message behind the bracing video for "Gun Draws," which also ties in with his new role as the spokesman for nonprofit Guns 4 Cameras, which gives kids video cameras if they bring in guns, no questions asked. Instead of doing spot club dates, Monch has spent much of the past few months lecturing at colleges and high schools. "We're trying to level the playing field against all the dumb shit [in rap]," he says. "And instead, teach kids to take pride in a craft [like video work]. This isn't a promotional thing—at no time do I say, 'This song is off my new album,'" he promises. "The label's tried to hand out shit [at the lectures], and I've had to be like, 'Yo, this is not about that.'"

*Desire is out Tue 26. Pharoahe Monch plays the Highline Ballroom Jun 29.*

