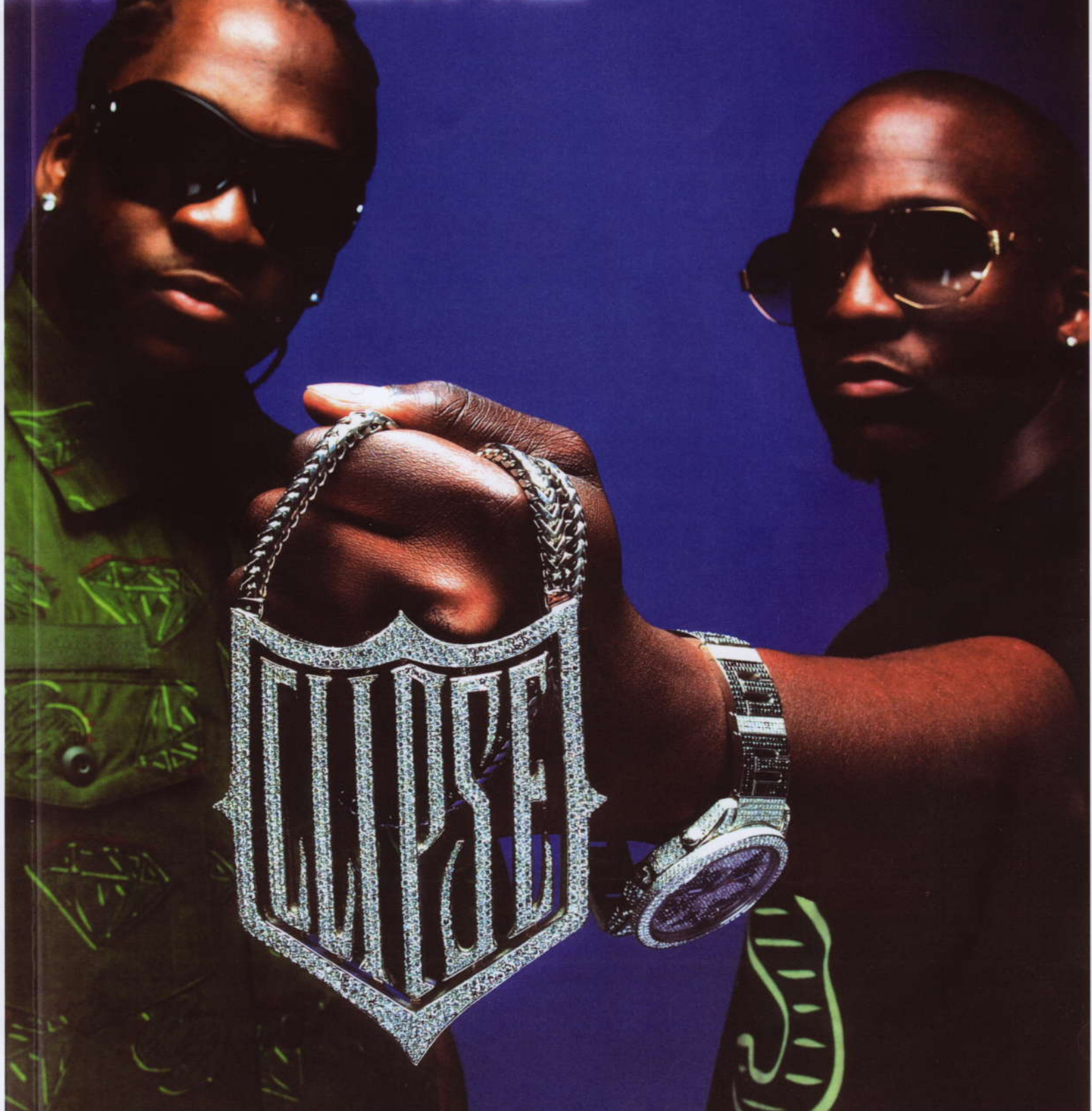


# ELEMENTAL MAGAZINE



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**CLIPSE: At The Gates of Hell.** By Jesse "Orosco" Serwer. Photos by Gregg Delman.

*Euuuuuccchhhhhh.*

The Clipse's Pusha T says his unorthodox calling card is his way of "expressing that you just said the sickest, most disgusting thing you could possibly say over a track."

Viewed in light of the group's recent history, however, "Euchhhh" takes on a whole new meaning. Grindin' in the pocket for four years while label catastrophe and other drama derailed their plans for restoring East Coast dope dealer music to its rightful prominence, Pusha and his brother Malice are revolted by what they've seen in their time away.

"We're not out here on a crusade or anything but The Clipse are trying to bring back the hip-hop that we know and love," older brother Malice says over the phone from a promo tour stop in Philadelphia. "If lyric-driven hip-hop is dead and gone, then so am I. I can't change and do nothing else." Ask Pusha what active MCs he enjoys or wants to work with and he'll tell you: "Nobody."

Far from complainers, they're spitting on the game, literally and figuratively. Released

last year, their *We Got It 4 Cheap* mixtapes found the brothers Thornton and their Re-Up Gang cohorts, Sandman and Ab-Liva, one-upping MCs like The Game and Juelz Santana over their own beats. Addressing host Clinton Sparks after annihilating "Hate It Or Love It" on *We Got It 4 Cheap Vol.2*, Pusha tells Sparks to "let 'em know they got the crown by default—the illest niggas weren't even in the race."

If the mixtapes announced Clipse as challengers to the proverbial throne, then *Hell Hath No Fury*, their highly anticipated follow-up to 2002's platinum *Lord Willin'*, legitimately stakes a claim to it—provided it fits two heads. Leftfield singles "Mr. Me Too" and "Wamp Wamp" notwithstanding, the rest of the album is relentless, 100% pure cocaine rap. While every beat comes courtesy of their old friends from



Virginia Beach, it's the "Grindin'" and "What Happened To That Boy" Neptunes, not the "Change Clothes" Neptunes, that deliver tracks like "Keys Open Doors" and "Mamma I'm So Sorry."

Though not officially confirmed by Jive Records, Pusha T and Malice are promising the long-delayed LP will see a Halloween release.

"Why Halloween? We letting the demons loose," Malice explains in a separate conversation one week later, this time from Detroit. "It's fury, it's hell fire—what better time to unleash it than Halloween?"

The story of Clipse doesn't begin in the dope spots and coke dens of Virginia Beach, but goes further back to Gun Hill Road in the Boogie Down Bronx, where the brothers,

whose real names are Gene Thornton (Malice) and Terrence Thornton (Pusha), were born during the dawn of the hip-hop era. Though Pusha was only two when the family relocated to Virginia, Malice recalls watching breakers and MCs ply their still developing trades in the park below his apartment.

"I remember sitting on the terrace, seeing them pressing record on they boombox, rocking directly into the speaker," recalls Malice. "Things like that is what got me interested initially." By the time the Thornton family relocated to VA in 1980, 7-year-old Malice was already imbued with the arrogance of a true, jaded New Yorker.

"At 7, I could recognize that I was cooler than my peers, that the people in Virginia were a little slower," he recalls. "New York was a faster walk. Yeah, the kids at school talked a little funny to me." Frequent visits with his cousin Snapper back in New York fueled his love for hip-hop, particularly the harder-edged rhymes of Run DMC and, later, the Juice Crew, Rakim and BDP.

"I was definitely a huge fan of Kane, Kool G Rap and the entire Juice Crew," notes Malice. "We wasn't understanding West Coast hip-hop—the finger waves, popping and all that. I

don't think I understood the West Coast until Dre and Snoop and *The Chronic*."

While Pusha wouldn't get bit by the MC bug until years later, Malice hit the ciphers in downtown Virginia Beach and linked up with Def Duo Productions, or DDP, an extended crew of schoolmates (divided into two-man subgroups, hence "Def Duo") that also included a young Timbaland, then known as DJ Timmy Tim.

"Tim made beats for our whole crew—I used to go over his house every day after school, rhyming in his room," Malice recalls. "You couldn't move too much 'cause the mic cords on the headphones didn't stretch. But Tim was really hot with beats back then—we're talking 'round 1990."

Before they could begin contemplating rap careers, the allure of the block lured both brothers in. Both were knee-deep in the coke game by the time they finished junior high school, four years apart from one another: the brothers Thornton had already become Neighborhood Push and The Patty Cake Man.

"We shared a room as kids, and when P would get a glimpse of what was going on, he'd be like 'Get that outta here!' But when I moved out of the house and came back, I saw the exact same pattern in him that happened with me. He knew the same people that I once knew."

While it seemed like everyone in Virginia Beach was a rapper during these days, Malice says, the record industry appeared remote and impenetrable to VA cats. The drug game, on the other hand...

"[The authorities] didn't know how big of a problem it was in the beginning," recalls Malice, who says his jump into the game coincided with "New York's infiltration of Virginia Beach" in the late '80s. "You could carry it in your pocket and walk around."

By the time the brothers began wiling their free time away in Neptunes silent partner Chad Hugo's attic, their subject matter, and commitment to reality rap, was set. True to their destiny as cocaine rap's most colorful purveyors, their first single, "Got Caught Dealing," lightheartedly recounted Malice's early days in the dope game.

"I got caught dealing at the age of 15, like the song says," Malice explains. "Not by the police, but my parents. They knew where it was going down, and they took a little stroll to see what was going on and I bumped right into 'em. Our family was really tight knit, that's why it never made sense. We didn't do this to survive or to feed kids. It was real ignorant—we just wanted to have money."

The brothers say they were hardly bothered when their debut LP, *Exclusive Audio Footage*, was shelved by EastWest Records in 1998 (vinyl promo copies did make it out, however, and the album re-surfaced in 2004 as a vinyl bootleg).

"We've always treated the rap game as something extra, a side hustle," Pusha states. "So nothing had changed in our lifestyles. We was locked in."

Push and Mal went back to the drawing board, but unlike other unsigned rappers willing to jump on the latest trend to get their name on a hit record, they were in no hurry. Flash forward to 2002 and their friends Chad and Pharrell, now on top of the music world, sign them to Star Trak, then a newly formed joint venture with Arista Records. With *Lord Willin'* on the way, Clipse would truly announce themselves to the world with "Grindin'" a marriage of minimalist drums, a hypnotic synth lead and picture-perfect lyrical gems that hit summer '02 like a brick.

"It was a chance to just talk, to MC," Malice explains of the flow-friendly "Grindin'" beat. "I've always been one for lyrics. I wasn't a dancer so the beat is cool to nod your head to but I've always been one to ask, 'What's dude saying?'"

The success of "Grindin'" and its follow-up, "When The Last Time," put Lord Willin' on the path to platinum sales. With Baby's "What Happened To That Boy" keeping their name on tongues through the first half of 2003, the brothers headed back into the studio and began work on an album they'd already decided to call *Hell Hath No Fury*. And that's when the all-too-familiar, casualty-of-the-industry story that's derailed so many hip-hop careers set in. Arista folded and its roster was dissolved into Jive Records; while Pharrell was able to negotiate his way out and bring Star Trak over to Interscope, the execs at Jive curiously demanded that Clipse remain behind as a concession. With Jive unwilling to release *Hell Hath No Fury* upon its completion or to even devise a marketing plan suitable for the street-oriented group, *Hell Hath No Fury* went from a somewhat arbitrary album title to a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Following an unsuccessful attempt to free themselves from Jive through the courts, Pusha and Malice would find their salvation in the mixtape circuit they'd largely avoided up to this time. Corraling Philly fam Ab-Liva (who appeared on Lord Willin's "Cot Damn") and Sandman into the Re-Up Gang, they hooked up with Clinton Sparks and dropped *We Got It 4 Cheap Vol. 1* in January of '05.

"We were trying to spark the nostalgia of back in the day when those records came out, and to reprogram the listeners to listening to that kind of hip-hop," Pusha explains of Vol. 1, which features the crew rhyming over such instrumentals as EPMD's "You're A Customer" and LL Cool J's "I Shot Ya." "Vol. 2 was done out of the spirit of competition. We gonna take your records and burn over them and now you tell me what's hot. We showed who we were fans to—we picked the beats and the producers we like and said 'Okay, see how we rock over your shit.'" When the end of the year rolled around, *Cheap 2* was earning places in numerous publications' year-end best album lists—an unprecedented feat for a black market release.

Re-energized and focused, the brothers gained enough leverage with Jive to go back into the studio to record an almost entirely new *Hell Hath No Fury*.

"The original was lighter [because] we didn't really have any gripes then," Malice explains of those days in 2003 when he and Pusha were more concerned with party-

ing then marketing. "We were coming off of a platinum album and the machine was rolling the way we expected, probably better. But now we're nowhere close to the same place. The past four years were difficult, and the only thing we could do was put all of our focus into getting way creative with these verses. With all the drama, the title became so much more relevant."

The album is essentially a solo mission: aside from Ab-Liva and Sandman (who, as opposed to their omnipresence on the Re-Up Gang mixtapes, only make cameos), the only featured guests are Rosco P. Coldchain, Slim Thug (whose hook on "Wamp Wamp" was recorded before Pusha and Malice even got the beat) and Bilal, who provides the hook on the epic album closer, "Nightmares."

"We're not coming back to shake hands," Malice says. "We definitely got a point to prove and there's not a lot of cats out here that do what we do." Pusha offers his own succinct explanation: "There's just so many made-up connections and made-up cliques—it's a real problem in hip-hop."

While everything isn't exactly hunky dory over at Jive, Clipse are staying put for now. "Everybody harps on these labels—none of these labels ain't shit and you ain't ever gonna get us championing no label," Pusha says when asked if he's looking to join Star Trak again over at Interscope. "As long as we got Re-Up Gang Records and we can maneuver the money with a certain level of freeness, we will control our own destiny."

Despite rumors of tensions between Clipse and The Neptunes, the relationship remains a healthy one; in fact, Pusha even lives in Pharrell's Virginia Beach mansion.

"Of course there's been bullshit but that says a lot about The Clipse—we take the high road," Malice says. "If everybody was happy all the time then somebody would be being fake. It's not that no problems exist but how you handle them. We have a certain etiquette—you don't get in the public and start going crazy calling each other out in publications. Work through it—that's what family does."

As for the dustup over the rights to the "Wamp Wamp" beat (Pharrell apparently sold the beat twice, due to a miscommunication between himself and Jay-Z, who had solicited the beat for Foxy Brown)? "That's not our controversy," Malice explains. "It's a Pharrell and Jay-Z thing. We follow the same protocol for every record. If I write a song, I am trying to marry it and fall in love with it. I need to know that record is mine."

For now, *Hell Hath No Fury* is being kept under lock and key. If you want to hear the album you've got to find Pusha, who allegedly carries the only copy around on his person. But that doesn't necessarily mean it's safe from would-be bootleggers.

"Some dumbass at the airport [in Virginia Beach] actually stole it out of one of Pusha's bags and didn't even know what he had, but we got it back," Malice says, laughing at the thought. "But we know everybody in Virginia—we know *evvvrrybody*."

The recon mission was a peaceful one, Pusha explains. "We just got it back. I'm sure he got fired or something but there weren't no charges or nothing."

As they wind their way towards Halloween, Clipse are hoping to release a third installment of *We Got It 4 Cheap* ("The problem is there's no more hot tracks," Pusha states) and finish a feature film companion piece to *Hell Hath No Fury*.

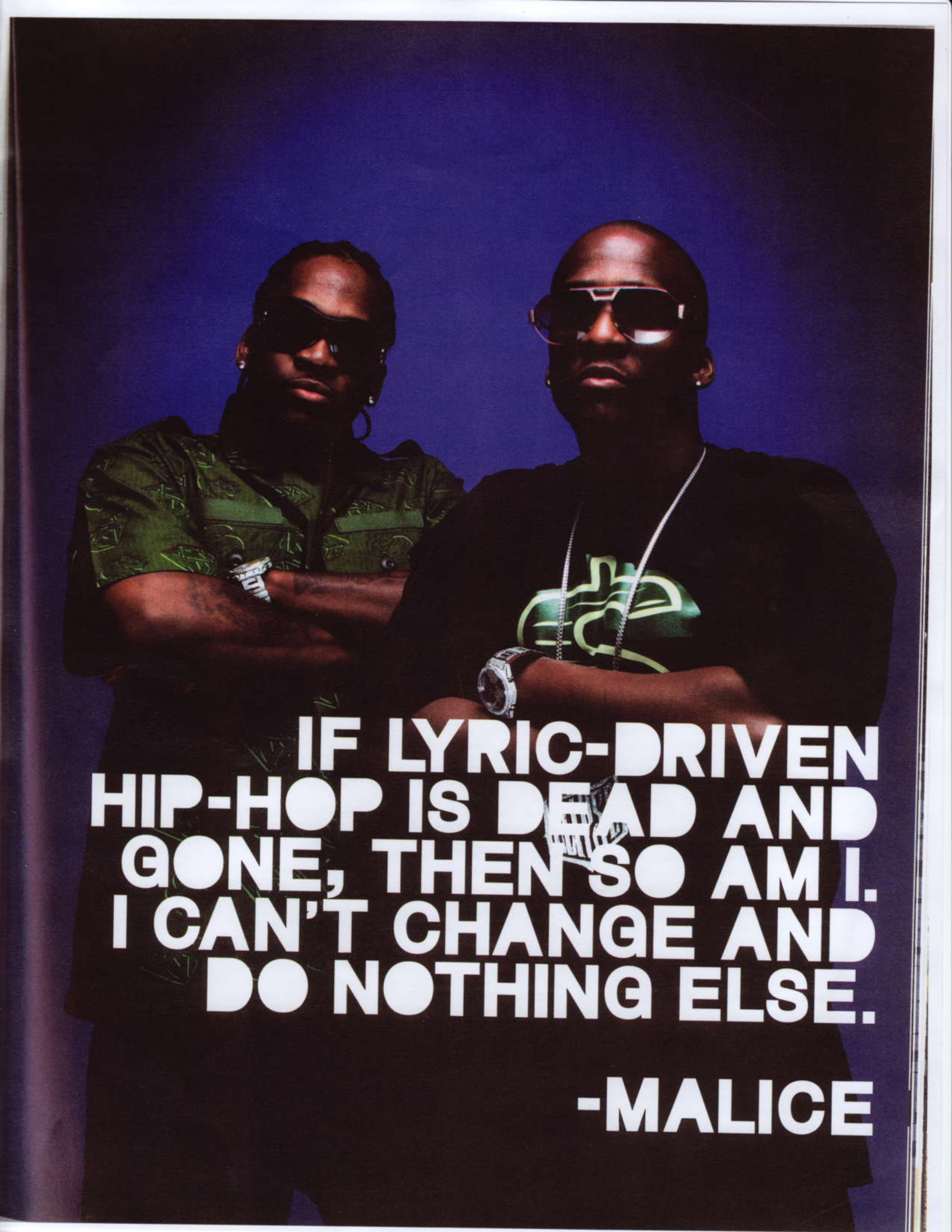
"It's sort of like our 'Streets Is Watching,' basically a collage of different videos, about our lives during the hiatus," says Pusha. "This album has a lot of color but I think people need to see the visuals."

While concerns over whether Jive will be able to market such a hard-edged album to a public busy doing the Shoulder Lean persist (particularly on the Internet, where the album delay has been one of the major discussion points on music sites this year), Clipse aren't worried.

"I think what's going to sell this album to the public is how hard it is," Pusha says. "Shit, every song is so purposeful."

Finishing where his little brother left off, Malice adds: "It really is a very emotional album. It depicts everything, the highs and lows. We're realists, man."

Check for Clipse's *Hell Hath No Fury* later this year. For more info, visit [clipsemusic.com](http://clipsemusic.com).

A photograph of two men standing against a dark blue background. The man on the left has dreadlocks, wears sunglasses, a green patterned short-sleeved shirt, and has his arms crossed. The man on the right is bald, wears sunglasses, a black t-shirt with a green graphic, a silver watch, and a chain necklace, also with his arms crossed. The text is overlaid on the bottom half of the image.

**IF LYRIC-DRIVEN  
HIP-HOP IS DEAD AND  
GONE, THEN SO AM I.  
I CAN'T CHANGE AND  
DO NOTHING ELSE.**

**-MALICE**