

# DEATH BEFORE

Do you know why this man rhymes with such fury? The reasons are complex,

surprising and tragic. Walk in Mystikal's shoes for a moment.

# DISHONOR

Words by Dana Crum Photographs by Jonathan Mannion



**"I remember callin' my sister,"** Mystikal says, mimicking the electronic sound of a phone keypad. "'I'm 'bout to go to war. Shit. Damn.' She didn't believe me, but by the time I got off the phone, I remember we were on the phone cryin'. I broke down. I was like nineteen. 'I'm scared.' 'I know,' she said. But then once I heard her cry, then I automatically...I felt like I had to be the strong one now."

We know him, this man leaning deep into the front seat of a champagne-colored Lexus cruising the streets of Baton Rouge. We know his videos. His fiery intensity. The braided hair he wears today beneath a blue bandanna—an admittedly futile attempt to conceal his identity. We know this man called Mystikal.

But Michael Tyler wasn't always Mystikal. Before his first album, *Mind of Mystikal*, sparked his rise to hip-hop stardom, Michael Tyler served in the Army. Seated behind the steering wheel of his truck, a thick gold hoop hanging from each ear, he remembers the day he was informed of his assignment to Desert Storm.

"I didn't know what the hell to expect," he says, his voice gruff, Louisiana accent thicker than a bowl of gumbo. "I just was like, 'Damn, is this how I'm gonna die? Damn, this must be it.' You know people go over there and die. A lotta people died."

Soon he found himself on the golden, sun-parched sands of Saudi Arabia. Armed with an M-16 and a metal detector, he tiptoed across oceans of mines, liable at any moment to be blown to bits or picked off by an unseen sniper. "I had like one of the most suicidal jobs in the Army," he says about his engineering assignment.

Now, years later, he rocks a gold link-chain, at the bottom of which hangs the gold, diamond-studded No Limit charm. The square-shaped trinket is a symbol of his membership in one of the most vibrant labels around; but with a tank at its center, the charm makes you wonder about all he must have witnessed during the war. When he returned home safely, he thought he'd survived the most harrowing experiences life had to offer. But he was wrong.

Michelle. His sister. She was twenty-four when her brother headed for the Gulf, leaving her full of worry that she might lose him. She didn't, but five years later, on the very day he

turned twenty-four, he lost her, to brutal murder.

All their lives the two of them had been close in the way that all siblings should be but that most aren't. Supportive of his aspirations to blow as an MC, she gave him honest feedback on his rhymes. "She was definitely one of my main rhyme testers," he says. "'Cause she was a hard critic. If it pleased her, I done done somethin'."

Her death snatched from him an indispensable critic. More significantly, it snatched from him a close friend and confidante. "I was the one who found her and everything," he recalls. "It just was like, 'What I'ma do? Lose it or get strong?' Youknow-'I'msayin'? My lil' fuckin' cement dried up. From there on out, it was just like I was ready for anythang."

Before her murder he possessed drive, enough to continue rhyming after eleven years with no record deal. And surviving the war provided a boost when his confidence began to falter. Still, it was not until Michelle's murder that his drive rose to the furious intensity we are now so accustomed to. There is reason behind Mystikal's madness.

**At the time of Michelle's murder,** Mystikal was almost done with his first album. The final song, "Y'all Ain't Ready Yet," he completed in a rage of emotion. That courage and perseverance enabled him to finally launch the long-elusive rap career. He dominated the charts in Louisiana, earning Big Boy, the local label backing him, a distribution deal with Jive Records. The album went gold: *Unpredictable*, which followed in '97 as the product of a joint deal with Jive and No Limit, went platinum. Now he awaits the cataclysm from his third LP, *Ghetto Fabulous*.

Of course there is tragic irony in all this success, a fact Mystikal remains painfully aware of. "That [Michelle's death] was the step that took me where I needed to go. And that's so fucked up."

He addresses his sister as though she can hear him. "It made me feel like, 'Well, damn, I can do somethin' else, youknowwhat?' 'I'msayin'? I can...I can excel at somethin' else—fuck it—if the cost I had to pay to make it [was] lose you. Un-uh, fuck no," he says, shaking his head. He begins to address me again, undercurrents of pain in his voice.

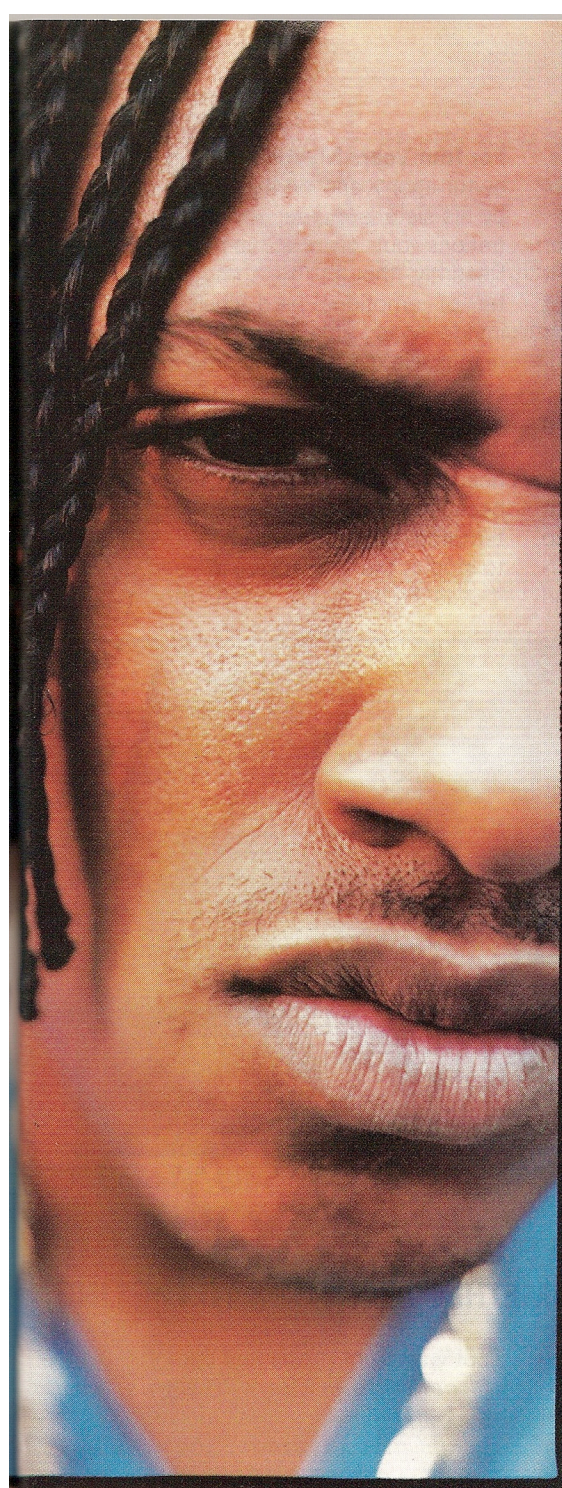
"Man, that shit just felt so fucked up that I could just go 'head on and live without her, youknow-'I'msayin'? She not around. That shit just was like...make you feel guilty."

But for some time he felt guilty about more than just his continued existence. "I felt like there was so much I could have done to avoid my sister going out like that. Your mind'll outthink you sometimes. But so...Fuck. I just knew [my sister's boyfriend] wasn't right. Just wish I woulda..." His voice trails off. "But I guess I couldn't get him outa there too."

It was Michelle's boyfriend, whose name Mystikal will not reveal, who mur-







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dered her. From the very beginning, Mystikal was against the relationship. Her boyfriend was younger than her, even younger than Mystikal.

Her boyfriend ended up getting hooked on drugs. As though those two factors weren't portentous enough, he was abusive towards Michelle. Mystikal speaks for his entire family when he says, "We wasn't feelin' it, but, I mean, she was a woman, so you gon' stand by her."

Yet before the healing that only comes with time took effect, Mystikal berated himself for not doing what only a meddlesome sibling would have done:

interfere with his sister's social life. Now he realizes that he and his family were right to allow Michelle to make her own choices. The only blame rests on the man who took her life. He and his family, no matter how much they disapproved of Michelle's boyfriend, had no idea he would one day kill her.

Once the tragedy happened, Mystikal ruminated over what he should do about it. "I was definitely bitter. But I had to be

smart. I had to be smarter than I was bitter, youknow'I'msayin'?"

He envisions what would have happened had he acted solely on emotion: "All bitter and a dumb move, now I got nothin'. Done fucked it all up now. Now my mom done lost two children now. Then I was thinkin' about, 'now if I don't kill this nigga, what niggas gon' think about me now?' Youknow'I'msayin'? Am I gon' be soft or what? I was dealin'



wit' all that shit."

Heads sought him out, asking what he was going to do, some of them vowing, "If you want me to kill 'im, I'll kill 'im." Mystikal adds, "It could be people I ain't even know. It was just all kinda shit."

Knowing people inside the justice system enabled his sister's murderer to evade just punishment. He is now in prison, but only because he committed some other crime from which he couldn't disentangle himself.

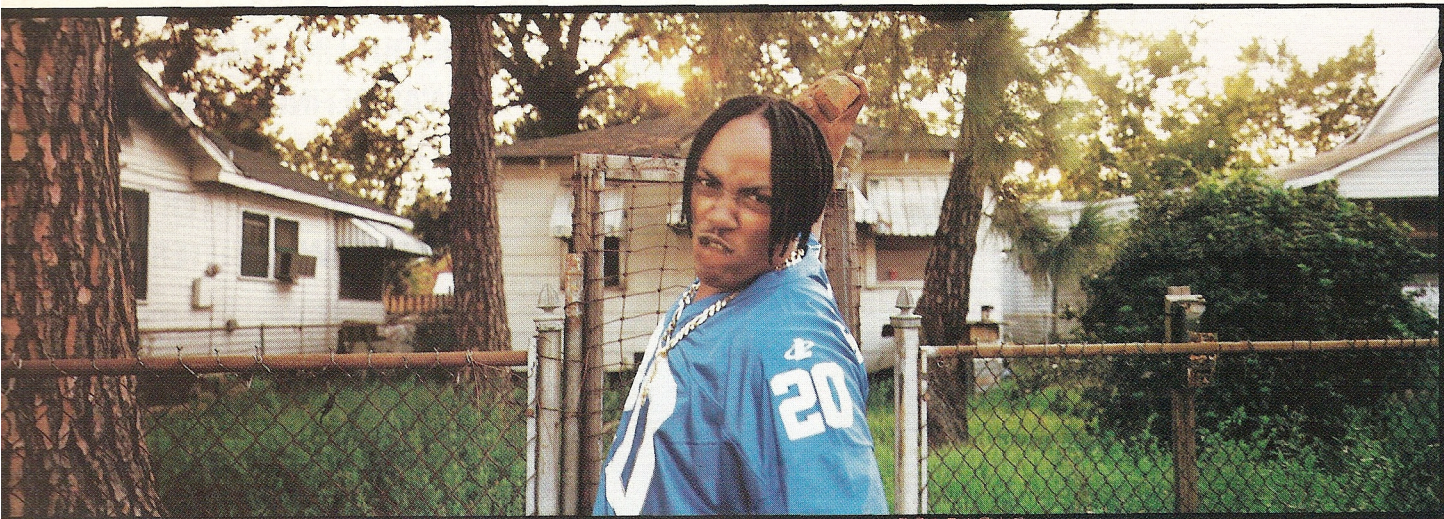
**The streets of Baton Rouge.** Faded wooden bungalows with peeling paint slump on tight plots of grass. Open or

granted. "When I'm writin' my lyrics, I'm thinkin', 'Damn, I gotta take a tunnel that another nigga would not take.'"

"I've set such a high standard for myself," he explains, "it be difficult at times to do it 'cause, I mean, I expect nothin' [but] the best from myself, just like the people expect from me, you-knowwhatl'msayin'?"

In a musical climate where bragging rights are often based on being an adroit freestylist or at least a prolific composer of lyrics, Mystikal isn't bashful about admitting it often takes him a while to come through with a verse. It's the perfectionist in him that drives him to brood

**For four years Mystikal harnessed** the awful agony and writhing rage caused by his sister's murder and took his frustrations out on the hip-hop industry. Recently, though, the tumultuous welter of emotions he'd chained down inside was unleashed with violent results. He'd just driven home to get the boots he needed for the last session of the photo shoot for *Ghetto Fabulous*. It was two or three in the morning. A headache throbbed through his skull because he hadn't eaten all day. He was tempted, on his way back to the shoot, to stop at the Waffle House nearby; but it was Friday night, which meant the



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screened, porches head the houses. Out back, rusting American cars rest on bricks with their hoods up. There is a low, spread-out layout to the city; wide expanses of grass reign between places of residence, employment and recreation. This is a city with a slow pace.

Mystikal and the rest of No Limit left New Orleans and relocated here to escape the distractions that were curtailing their productivity. And yet, you wonder if Mystikal had an additional reason for coming here, if he wanted and needed to escape the stronger memories that must haunt New Orleans, the site of his sister's murder.

Michelle's death affected him in many ways. He dissects one of them when he explains, "I try not to take nothin' for granted. [I] try to take shit serious."

He certainly doesn't take continual success in the hip-hop industry for

over each line. His fellow No Limit soldiers often give him hell about it in the studio: "'Man, come on, Mystikal. Fuck! You gotta come through with that motherfuckin' verse.'"

But at his more modest pace, Mystikal often pens verses in which every line is fraught with maximum voltage. "Back in the day I [would] write one song in a month. One song. Write a line a day, youknowl'msayin'? That's how 'Y'all Ain't Ready Yet' was. I mean, every line was a punch. Every line was a line, youknowwhatl'msayin'? It wasn't somethin' leadin' up to the line."

And he always garners compliments once the song premieres over the airwaves. In response, he will usually mutter, "'Yeah, right, thank you.'"

Why isn't he elated at their approval? "Deep down in my heart I know it coulda been tighter," he explains. "I like to try to always have it as tight as possible."

spot was crunk inside and out.

*I can't go in there like this, he thought to himself. I'ma cause motherfuckin' mass hysteria. Then I'm by myself. I'm definitely gon' get into a fight, how I'm feelin' right now. I'm hungry and frustrated.*

But he went against his better judgment and strode inside. Mayhem broke loose.

Heads hailed him. "Ah, it's the man right chea!" Girls screamed his name. The entire crowd gave him love. Except for one cat sitting off to the side.

"Man, I don't give a fuck about no motherfuckin' No Limit!" the cat shouted. "Man, fuck No Limit! I like Rap-A-Lot! Fuck No Limit!"

Ah, he showin' off for his friends, Mystikal told himself. *Ignore him.*

No one else in the restaurant paid the guy any mind. The cashier, a young woman, skipped Mystikal to the front of the line, partly because he was a celebrity,





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partly because she wanted to get him out of there before a fight sparked off. "Don't worry 'bout him," she said.

Mystikal was barely done giving her his order when the cat shouted, "Man, fuck No Limit! I told you! I don't give a fuck!"

Mystikal stepped to him. "Excuse me, bruh," he said. "If you got somethin' to say to me, go 'head and say it, so you don't gotta be doin' all that. I'm a man. What's wrong? How you wanna do this? 'Cause I...don't...give... a...fuck. I'm a rapper. I do all of that, yeaah, yeaah, but I'm not trippin' on that right now. Get

it on off your chest."

The cat evaded the opportunity. "Nigga, I said what I had to say. I'm talkin' to this man."

"Whaaaat? Okay. But you talkin' about me. I don't see no No Limit in here but me. You wasn't talkin' 'bout that until I came in here 'cause I was in here a few seconds before you saw me, nigga. What's happenin'?"

"All I know is I said what the fuck I had to say. I'll say it again. Fuck No Limit."

"You know what, man?" Mystikal said. "It's cool. It's all right. I'm straight." But

he began taking off his rings. Afterwards, he stood at the door with his arms folded, shouting, "You gotta come out of there!"

The cat began to look worried. Meanwhile, Mystikal was studying his face, thinking. *This is scary. I don't know you when I see you. So I gotta see what you look like. You might wait on me one day and you just done up and fucked me up or somethin'. I can't let you leave like this. This is serious. I got a lot of shit to live for. And I'm not gonna be runnin' and live like that. We gon' get this out the way now.*

The guy wouldn't come out and meet him, so Mystikal went back inside and met him.

Talking about the incident now, months later, Mystikal says, "I'm hittin' him with the force of 'nigga killed my sister!' I'm hittin' him with that kind of force. That's not for him. This shit done been bottled up in me all this time. By the time I realized what I was doin', I was jumpin on his head with two feet, bruh. And I'm hearin' people screamin'. 'Ahhhhh! Ahhhh!' 'No Limit! No Limit!' 'Yeaahhhh.' 'Taran-tula on the caterpillar! I'm the 18-wheeler rolling over the armadillo!' These niggas is there quotin' lines from me and everything."

Mystikal's antagonist hadn't swung a single punch, hadn't even covered up. "Now I'm feelin' horrible," Mystikal goes on. "I felt like I was the villain. 'Cause all he did was verbal."

The cat who disrespected him and seemed to pose a potential threat to his life became, for Mystikal, a symbol not only of the possibility of his own death, but also of the finality of his sister's. He was a symbol of the unexpected nature of death and its frequent lack of justification. It can strike even if you don't deserve to leave this world. Michelle did nothing to deserve what happened to her. Mystikal did nothing to deserve the potential death he imagined was awaiting him in the form of his dastardly defamer.

By the time Mystikal was done stomping the guy down, a sea of blood had splattered all over the restaurant and the guy needed eleven stitches in his head. It might be easy to write off Mystikal as a wild nigga. A living embodiment of the gangsta persona he adopts on the mic. But that would be far too easy, and far too wrong.

"That's the rage that I have when I walk the streets. It's that serious to me. A nigga can kill you. You will die. Nigga killed my sister and I couldn't do nothin' 'bout it. I was home. I was 'sleep." **S**