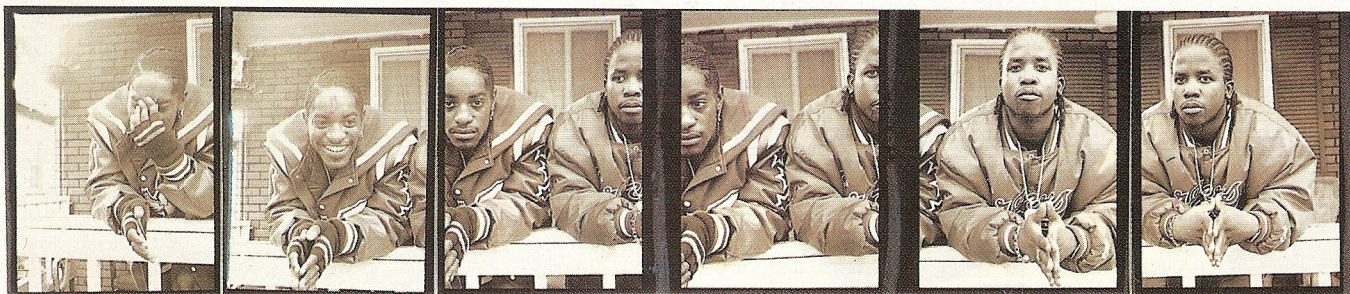


the 3 couple

Photos by Jonathan Mannion Words by Dana Crum



Here's the story of Big Boi, the B-Boy, and Dre, the eccentric. Their third album, *Aquemini*, may be a classic. How does this off-beat duo from Atlanta stay so nice?

healthy thighs and hips sway back and forth as honeys prance about in tight shorts. Leaning against cars, fellas lounge in long shorts and vivid jerseys—gold or red or luminous green. They sport matching caps and the latest Nikes and Filas.

Dre, one half of OutKast, strolls through the crowd with his loping gait, wearing cut-off camouflage shorts, black soccer leggings and worn-down white Converse. He sports a football jersey too, but his is nondescript and netted and black. Under it is a white T-shirt. From beneath a tan safari hat he gazes out at the scene around him, his long braids dangling down his neck. The end of each braid is capped with gleaming silver beads.

No one else at the Organized Noize/Bad Boy-sponsored picnic is dressed like him. Does the crowd reject him? Is he an outcast amongst his fellow African Americans? No. They give him love. Every few seconds another brother reaches out to shake his hand. Every few seconds another smiling sister approaches, holding a camera, asking if he'll take a picture with her.

Not everyone who encounters Dre is so open-minded, though. The next day, at the Smokin' Grooves concert, flocks of fans greet him with homage, but one cat glares at him as though personally offended by his choice of clothes. Dre seems to notice. But he doesn't register a reaction.

In the two years that he and partner in rhyme Big Boi have spent working on their third and latest album, *Aquemini*, Dre has grown accustomed to the occasional ambivalence and disapproval

spawned by his increasingly eccentric attire. "A lotta people may look at me and be like, 'Man, this nigga's crazy. Man, fuck this nigga. I ain't listenin' to this nigga shit. This nigga on some wild shit.' But, I mean, really, it's not about me. It's about the music, man. If you like the music, man, jam to it. If you don't like me, just say, 'Okay, he on some other shit.' You know I'm sayin'?"

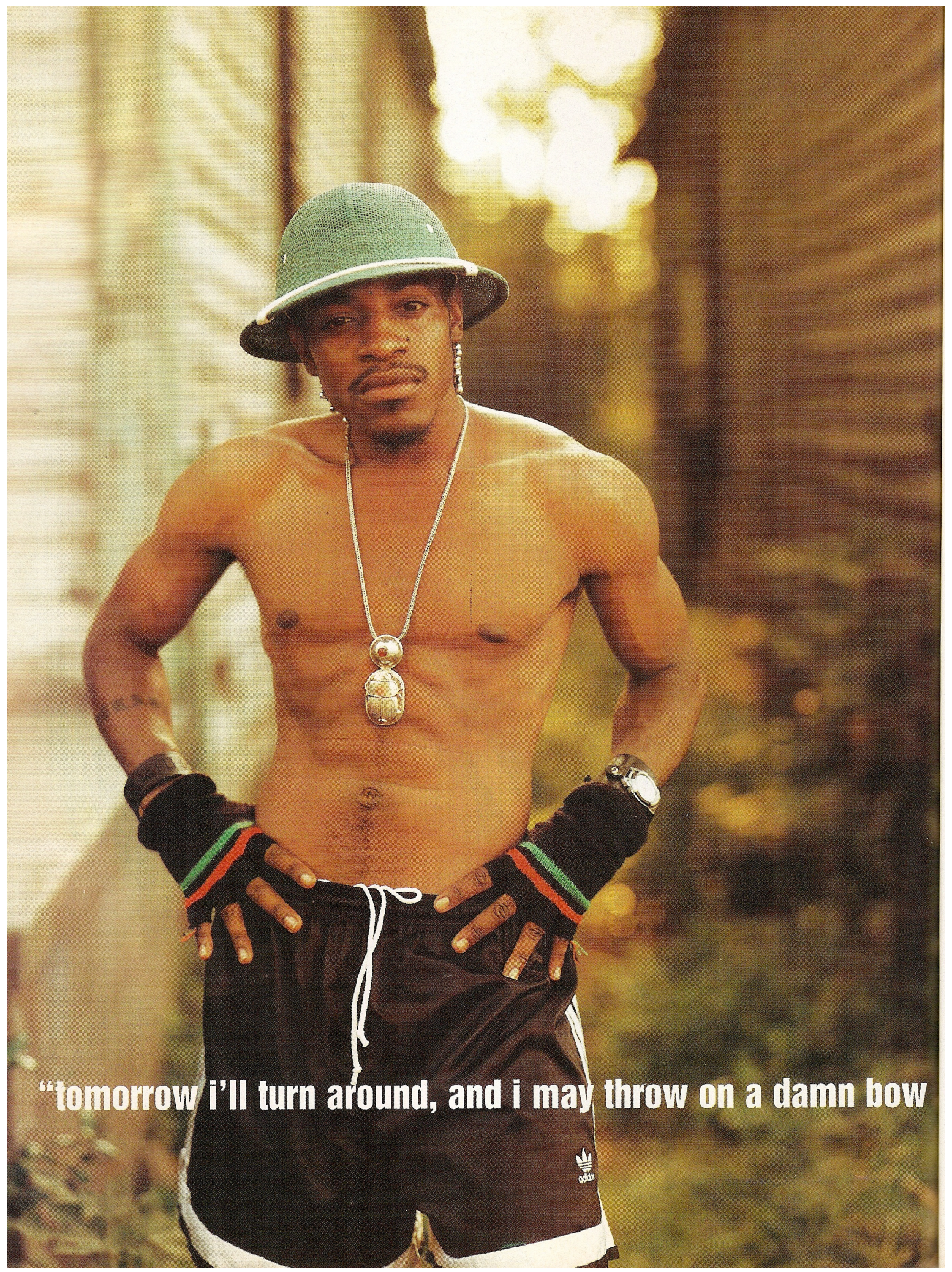
Whether Dre is talking to you in person or rhyming through your Pioneer speakers, the drawl and twang with which he speaks Southern slang puts you immediately at ease. While navigating his forest-green Landcruiser through Atlanta's sprawling, many-laned expressways, which coil about in ramps and swollen overpasses, he describes his style of dress as "some funk, wild-out shit," inspired by '70s funk.

But don't think he's trying to pass as George Clinton's little nephew. "Nah, I mean, it's right now. And I don't want people to be like, 'This nigga tryin' to do some George Clinton shit.' 'Cause I'm not. I love what George did. And, I mean, I studied them niggas 'cause I love they music. But I'm not tryin' to imitate nothin' they doin'. I'm doin' some Dre shit, some Dre, 1998, wild-out shit."

The "they" he speaks of includes James Brown and Parliament. And when he says he studied them, he means it. At the moment he's perusing a biography on George Clinton. Though Dre's mode of dress is funk-influenced today, tomorrow it may be completely different.

"Tomorrow I'll turn around, and I may throw on a damn bow tie, some slacks. I'm an artist, man, youknowwhat I'm sayin'? So





"tomorrow i'll turn around, and i may throw on a damn bow

I'm gon' change. What I'm sayin' is never peg me. I mean, you can't just say Dre is one way. So what I really want people to say is, 'That nigga might do anything, man.' And that's true."

Dre has gone through a metamorphosis, but it's not his first and it won't be his last. His steez has always been subject to change, but his past metamorphoses weren't as drastic. However, music has bolstered his confidence and drawn out once-hidden facets of his personality.

"I done changed totally," he says. "But inside I'm the same person." A contradiction? Nah, son, a paradox. Dre is a chameleon. In other words, he's a Gemini, a scrap of information that explains more than any metaphor could. If you know any Geminis, you understand what I'm talking about.

As the glittering glass skyscrapers and rigid stone edifices of downtown Atlanta scroll past my window, Dre imagines life if his mutability were suddenly suppressed. "I'd die if I had to stay one way. Geminis get bored very fast."

Geminis can be enigmatic, but they have helped make music the life-affirming, multi-faceted art form it is today. Imagine hip-hop without the contributions of Biggie Smalls and Tupac, pop without the Artist Formerly Known as Prince. And Dre has made his share of contributions, whatever he's wearing on a given day.

What is true of Dre is true of the music he and Big Boi create together. It's drastically different from other hip-hop, but it's undeniably hip-hop. The music changes from album to album, but it always has that recognizable OutKast sound. This time around the music is as funky-out as Dre's clothes. And though many dig the music, not everyone does. But then this is true of all groups.

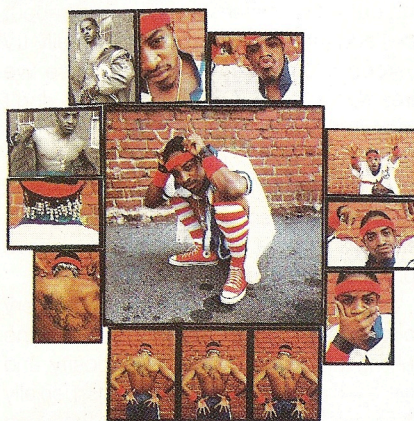
What is not true of every group is a sizable fan base. OutKast has maintained such a following despite the risks it takes. Though its experiments are consistently successful and groundbreaking, some fans abandoned the group when the second album, *ATLiens*, blasted the hip-hop populace into outer space at the speed of light. Many were expecting another dose of the funk characteristic of the group's debut, *Southernplayalisticadillacmuzik*.

gained some followers even while losing others. *Aquemini* will not only maintain their fans, new and old; it will hold sway over those who were afraid to follow when asked to bravely go where no man had gone before.

As always, OutKast to a large extent employs live instruments. Organized Noize has been doing the production since day one; but after *Cadillacmuzik* Dre and Big Boi, who know a great deal about music in their own right, began assuming greater responsibility for the tracks over which they rhyme. Of the fifteen cuts on *Aquemini*, they produced seven.

The LP, Dre says, is a midpoint between the first two and could have served as the second album. Big Boi elaborates: "This album is a mixture between the music on the first album and the lyrical styles of the second. It's like now we done mastered our style so much that we can flip it any kind of way we wanna flip it."

However, in revisiting previous musical and lyrical formats, they were sure, he



says, to update them and sometimes subvert them altogether. Case in point: for those of you who fiend for that unadulterated funk OutKast came with on album one, there are songs like "Slump," a jam complete with crooning and a groove that simply moves. But then there's also "Rosa Parks," which of all the songs on the album probably best demonstrates the group's willingness to take chances. The song is daring but avoids being reckless. Its folk-music underpinnings culminate near the end in a wailing harmonica interlude.

"We step into some different realms [from] what's like normal hip-hop," Dre

res they hadn't been exposed to growing up. Consequently, their musical sensibility is a kettle-cooked stew full of huge chunks of funk and hip-hop, but further flavored by a wholesome, spicy mishmash of soul, reggae, rock, calypso, blues and classical.

Friend and filmmaker Brian Barber, currently working on a down-low film about the duo, recalls the first time Dre and Big ladled him out a steaming-hot serving from the new album. "I was like, 'Where y'all tryin' to go wit' it?' And I remember them sayin' that they can't do the last album. They gotta reinvent themselves every time they come out, 'know'l'm-sayin'? If you don't reinvent yourself as an artist, you end up sayin' the same thing you done already said.'"

Dre and Big Boi's continual transmutations keep them from sounding too much like themselves. Their old selves, that is. Most significant, of course, is how different the two-man crew sounds from other hip-hop groups. Their music rises out of the din, leaving you entranced. "OutKast," as they use it to refer to themselves, is synonymous with someone who insists upon individuality at all costs. But if Dre and Big Boi are true outkasts, it stands to reason that they are different not only from other groups but also from one another.

And different they are. So different that during the time since *ATLiens* dropped, a rumor was spread across Atlanta that the two were parting ways. People behaved as though Dre were indeed from outer space and wondered how Big Boi could possibly work with him, let alone hang with him.

In his gruff, commanding voice, Big Boi vents, "Everybody wanna think, 'They breakin' up. Oh, [they] so different.' They mad, man, 'cause, I mean, they can't figure it out yet. How can we still do [what we do]—niggas bein' so different? I smoke. He don't smoke. I go to strip clubs. He don't go to strip clubs. He used to, youknowhat'l'msayin'?" Big Boi notes, alluding to the lifestyle change that coincided with the shift in Dre's attire.

"I drink. He don't drink. Like that. They can't comprehend that. I mean, it's just homeboy shit. Whatever people wanna do is their own right, youknow'l'msayin'? Like how he dress, how I dress.

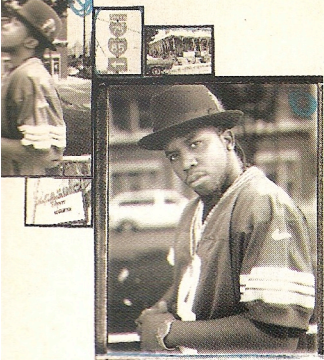
tie, some slacks. i'm an artist, man. so i'm gon' change."—dre

Despite the slight exodus in the OutKast fan club, the second album sold a million and a half copies, five hundred thousand more than the first, an accomplishment that shows Dre and Big Boi

says. To understand why OutKast's artistic creations are so eclectic, you must first understand that in their respective households a mélange of musical genres was played. As adults they even explored gen-

Whatever. I mean, that's individualism. And that's what OutKast is all about."

When Dre's lifestyle changed, their friendship didn't. After all, they were used to negotiating differences in their person-



alities, something they'd been doing since the day they met. In terms of lyrical content, Big Boi is more street while Dre is more spiritual and conscious. Dre, an only child, is a

self-described recluse who only occasionally needs companionship, while Big Boi, surrounded by brothers and sisters as a child, always has people around him. Though the former lives in a house by himself, the latter had siblings and cousins move in to his house to keep him, his girlfriend and his daughter company. Away from the homestead, Big Boi roams Atlanta with a phalanx of partners.

Dre hits the movies by himself and waits until the last show to avoid the crowd. Sometimes friends and acquaintances will spot him and ask why he's alone. He tells them he does this all the time, as if nothing's wrong. And nothing is wrong. Solitude soothes his soul. Even when hanging with friends, he from time to time pulls away from the group and seizes a few precious moments to retreat inside himself.

Heads who rumored that OutKast was breaking up were aware of all these differences between Dre and Big Boi, but no difference had preoccupied them more than the stark contrast in how the two dress. In their provincial worldview, Dre's eccentric attire could only mean either of two things. He was acting like a white boy. Or he was gay. After they marinated over one hypothesis for a while, their opinion swung in the other direction and they stepped to Big Boi with questions. "I mean, what's wrong wit' him? You the cool one. That nigga gay or somethin'?"

"That shit made me so mad, man," Dre recalls. Rumor had it that he and Gipp of the Goodie Mob, also known for his out-

street in his attire, behavior and worldview. Not scared, he chooses to be himself rather than stepping into one of society's ready-made roles. Dissecting conformity in the Black community, he says, "Everybody wanna be [a thug], man. That's silly, man. People just scared to go there. But everybody waitin' on that nigga to do it. But niggas scared because they don't want to be the one to get ridiculed. So you have to be a strong nigga to take that ridicule." Dre is strong enough. It's a shame, though, that he has to be.

For the record, the brother isn't gay. Neither is Gipp. "Niggas know what I'm about because of what I rap about. So I couldn't even see how they could say some shit like that." For the first time during the entire interview, Dre's voice rises. He's not shouting, but his voice has for the moment lost its jazzy, soothing quality.

His girlfriend, the mother of his ten-month-old son, can vouch for his sexual orientation. But if you don't already know who his celebrity girlfriend is, you won't find out from this article. "The stuff about [me] and [her]," Dre indicates, "I really try to keep it out of the media because we already out there. And then you just don't want the whole world to be in your personal home life. So really, we can just keep this [interview] to the music. And that'll work. Because our whole life is really [for] the people. We gotta have somethin' that's ours, at home."

What he and his girl want is what every couple deserves—privacy. So can we, the public, forego our ravenous curiosity and give them that? Let's hope so. Especially since many of us so love to twist facts and start rumors.

Dre isn't the only one different from those around him. Big Boi is too, but in his own way. "I'm the wild side," he clarifies. "And if I'm the wild side, then Dre has to be the even wilder side."

Though Big Boi's as street as the street

preparing to ask some more questions when I realize I don't have my trusty tape recorder. I look all over the front of the car, but to no avail. Big Boi suggests I check the console. Knowing it isn't there, I look inside anyway. I don't find my recorder. What I find is a loaded 9-millimeter. My skin flushes hot. I close the console. Only then do I think to check the back of my seat, and sure enough there's my recorder.

Trailing us, several cars back, is Mr. DJ, whose name at point-blank range explains the role he plays in OutKast. Minutes later Big Boi and I are exiting the expressway when a black Suburban headed in the other direction does a U-y and follows us. We turn into the parking lot outside Big Boi's bank and pull up behind the cars in line for the teller machine. The Suburban idles behind us. Big Boi's eyes narrow as he glares into the rear-view mirror. He places his burner on the floor within arm's reach. What if the unseen carjackers spark a shoot-out? I imagine blood, Big Boi's and mine, dripping down the windshield and soiling the beige leather seats. But Mr. DJ's Jag pulls up beside us, and the Suburban peels off, its tires screeching.

Mr. DJ steps out and Big Boi rolls down his window.

"Hey, I'll barbecue them niggas," Big Boi says.

"I'll fry they ass up!" Mr. DJ shouts in his soft-spoken drawl.

"Hey, man, for real, man. I don't know if he was goin' to the teller or what, but his ass was fin to go somewhere else, though."

Some would argue that carrying heat puts your life in greater danger by encouraging you to go looking for beef. That may often be the case. With Big Boi it's not. He keeps heat in the car only to protect himself, not to start a career as some Black Charles Bronson. And he's not involved in anything illegal. But it's not unusual for him to glance into his rear-view mirror only to see a car tailing him. He explains, "A nigga

"everybody wanna think, 'they breakin' up.' they mad, man, 'cause they can't

landish gear, had a thing going. On the track "Return of the Gangsta," Dre addresses all the rumors (there were more than two): "What's up with Andre? Is he in a cult? Is he on drugs? Gay? When y'all gon' break up? When y'all gon' wake up, nigga? I'm feelin' better than ever! What's wrong wit' you?" Another song—"Y'all Scared," a haunting, spiraling track—reveals how afraid the typical person is of straying from the crowd.

Dre, though he's from the streets and has an allegiance to them, is no longer

cats he comes in contact with, he has acquired (thanks to record sales) more material possessions than any of them, except, of course, for the most iced-down of drug dealers. He cruises the streets of ATL in a white Mercedes 500S, the gold around his neck and on his wrist glistening in the sunlight. We've learned the price Dre has paid for being different. Any guesses for what price Big Boi has paid?

I discover the answer while riding with him. We've just left The Blue Flame, a strip joint on Bankhead Highway, and I'm

want what you got and expect you just to give it up. Game don't work like that."

Big Boi is no gangsta, but he can become one if the situation demands it. "You gotta put ya gangsta mentality on, youknow I'msayin'? You gotta mothafuckin' grab yo' mothafuckin' heat, and whatever they wanna do, you gotta be prepared to do [it], youknow I'msayin'? You can ask anybody, man. I'm the coolest nigga. Don't want no beef. Just laid-back. But when it's time to get buck, I get buck. 'Cause ain't nobody fin to take me up

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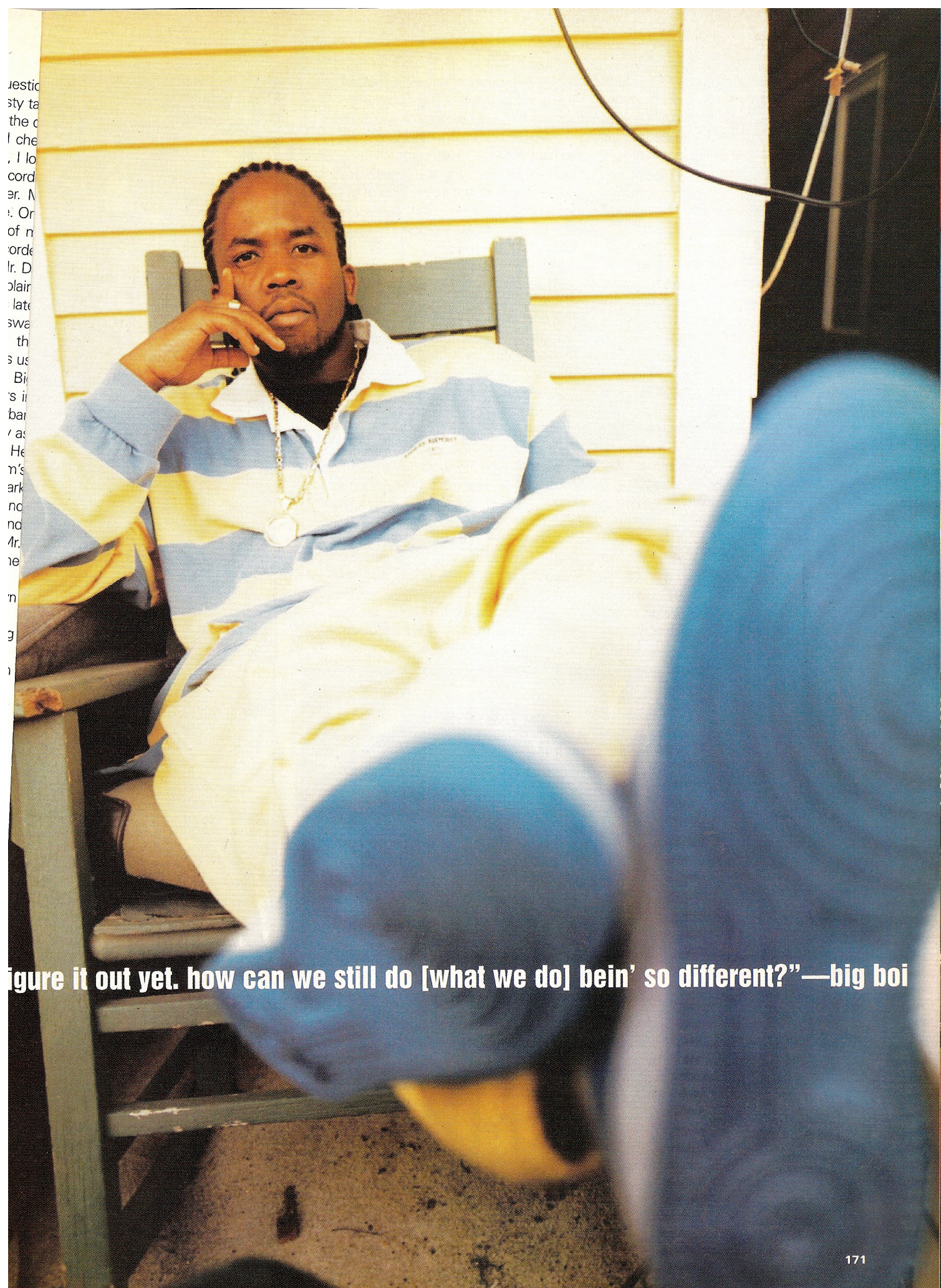


figure it out yet. how can we still do [what we do] bein' so different?"—big boi

outta here on no bullshit.

"Don't get me wrong. I don't wanna harm nobody, son, but if the harm comes to my front door, shit, I gotta protect myself. The first rule of life is self-preservation, and that's what I'm fin to do. And that's real."

For some time he's silent. "Straight-up, man. I got a kid, man."

"And you need to be here," I say, looking over at him. "To take care of her."

"Not only that, man." His voice lowers. "Youknow'I'msayin'? Shit. My whole family dependin' on me, man. You know what I'm talkin' 'bout?"

"Yeah. I do."

"Can't take away a man's livelihood. If you back him in a corner, he liable to do anythang."

Big Boi notes that OutKast gets mostly love on the streets, and he is careful to clarify that he isn't tailed everyday. But that he should ever be tailed is a tragic and sad commentary on certain elements in our community.

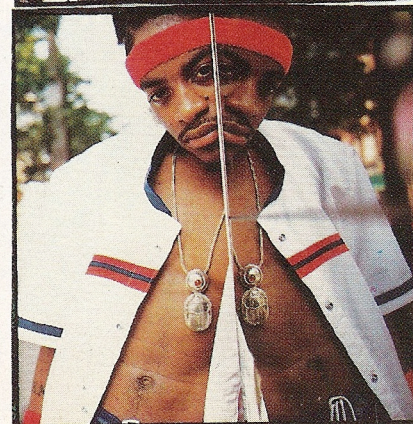
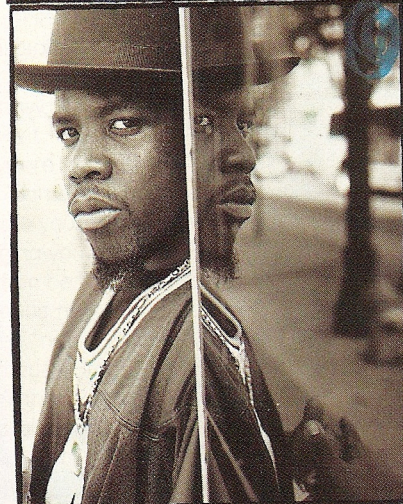
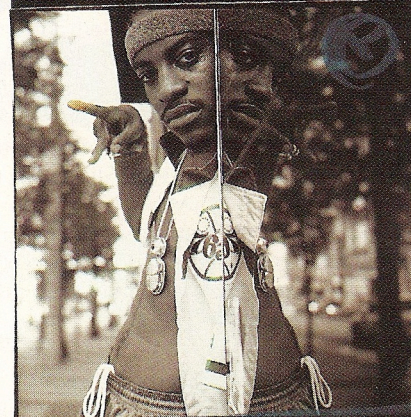
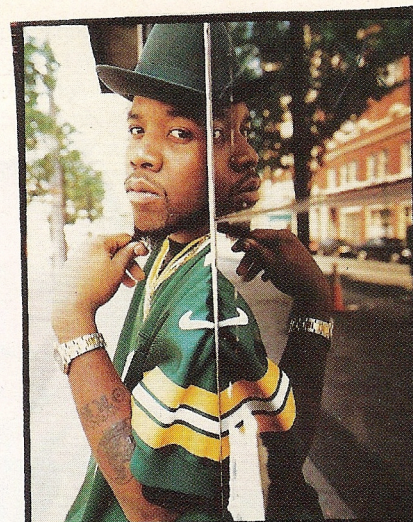
Big Boi and Dre live in two very different worlds. Dre in the self-created world of his solitude. Big Boi in the hectic streets of ATL. Both of them are in some way beleaguered by their journey, but ultimately they find solace and strength in their deeply-

rooted friendship, a friendship that enables them to bring to the hip-hop community albums that are memorable works of art.

"We back," Big Boi proclaims. "We just so happy 'cause it was so much talk about OutKast breakin' up. And we never really got a chance to get in any kind of publications [and] speak our mind. That's why we named the album *Aquemini*, man. It ain't no breakin' up, man."

Aquemini is the score and libretto of their response to the rumors, which are still thriving. Big Boi is the Aquarius, Dre the Gemini. *Aquemini* is the amalgamation of two signs, two personalities, two men who have once again come together as one in pursuit of artistic transcendence.

"[People be] like, 'Man, how in the fuck can two people so different be so alike and communicate so well?'" Big Boi muses. "'Cause we brothers, man. I mean, Dre never had any brothers or sisters. So I mean, I feel like I am his brother and I know he feel that way. 'Cause like we shared a room in his father's house. Like brothers, youknow'I'msayin'? One sleepin' on the bed, one sleepin' on the floor when we was goin' through high school. And shit, man, that's my homeboy, youknow'-I'msayin'? If I wasn't in a group wit' Dre, I'd be solo. Straight-up. I couldn't have been in a group wit' nobody else."



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