

CUBAN LINK

INTERVIEW BY JOEL MARASIGAN

A few years ago Big Pun's protégé, Cuban Link, got his face slashed in a squabble in a New York deli. He blames his former crew, Terror Squad, and lead, Fat Joe, for the bloody altercation, as well as the ensuing difficulties with the music industry due to the industry's loyalty to Fat Joe. It's true that some have seen tougher times, but everyone loves the underdog and the tough fight he'll experience. What doesn't kill you makes you stronger, right? Cuban Link's faith in his talent and his motivation to keep himself grinding could help him avoid dead sales. It's interesting to hear the artist's business perspective—in this case, his promo plan. The game for his official reintroduction, through the independent release of *Chain Reaction*, is to diversify the music and hit the outside markets. Cuban's chess-like approach is second nature since he's been playing chess since grade school.

ZNR: I hear you're a chess it a little. If the music industry were a chess game, who would be your rook, knights, etc?

CL: Well, I know we've got a lot more than eight pawns. The queen, the most powerful piece on the board, ain't there yet—still looking for one. My street game would be my knights and my bishops—my crew, the people who are around me, my inside click. The M.O.B. label would definitely play the rooks.

ZNR: What's the best move for Cuban Link for 2005?

CL: We're still talking about chess, so with that, we've gotta check 'em and we've gotta check the game. We gotta let them know I'm comin', and the album is finally here. This will be the first check, the original check. Last time we had to throw the game because of past situations and the affiliations I had with Atlantic and Terror Squad. We're starting from scratch right now. It's a brand new game. Enemies definitely have to put a (chess) piece in front of me unless they want their ass eaten up and their king stolen. In an industry sense, I have to let them know Cuban Link is coming strong. I want to make sure I make a positive impact this first time. Every emcee goes through these trials and tribulations, and I'm no different. It just made me stronger—this is a part of hip hop. Now I'm built. I'm right. And I'm ready for them.

ZNR: You talked about what you went through with Terror Squad. A lot of people would have been shut down indefinitely.

CL: Whether it's in the street or the industry, I never burn bridges. If there were any burnt ones it's because someone else burned them. Everyone I was cool with before, I'm cool with now. I have a little grudge against the industry, because when I needed a little help it wasn't there. The industry guys could have extended their hands a little but so what; it made me stronger. I had my people who really believed in me, and I found people who felt comfortable with me who would back me up. I'm happy at M.O.B. records. I could go back to the streets and I could go back to the industry with no dirt on my shoulders.

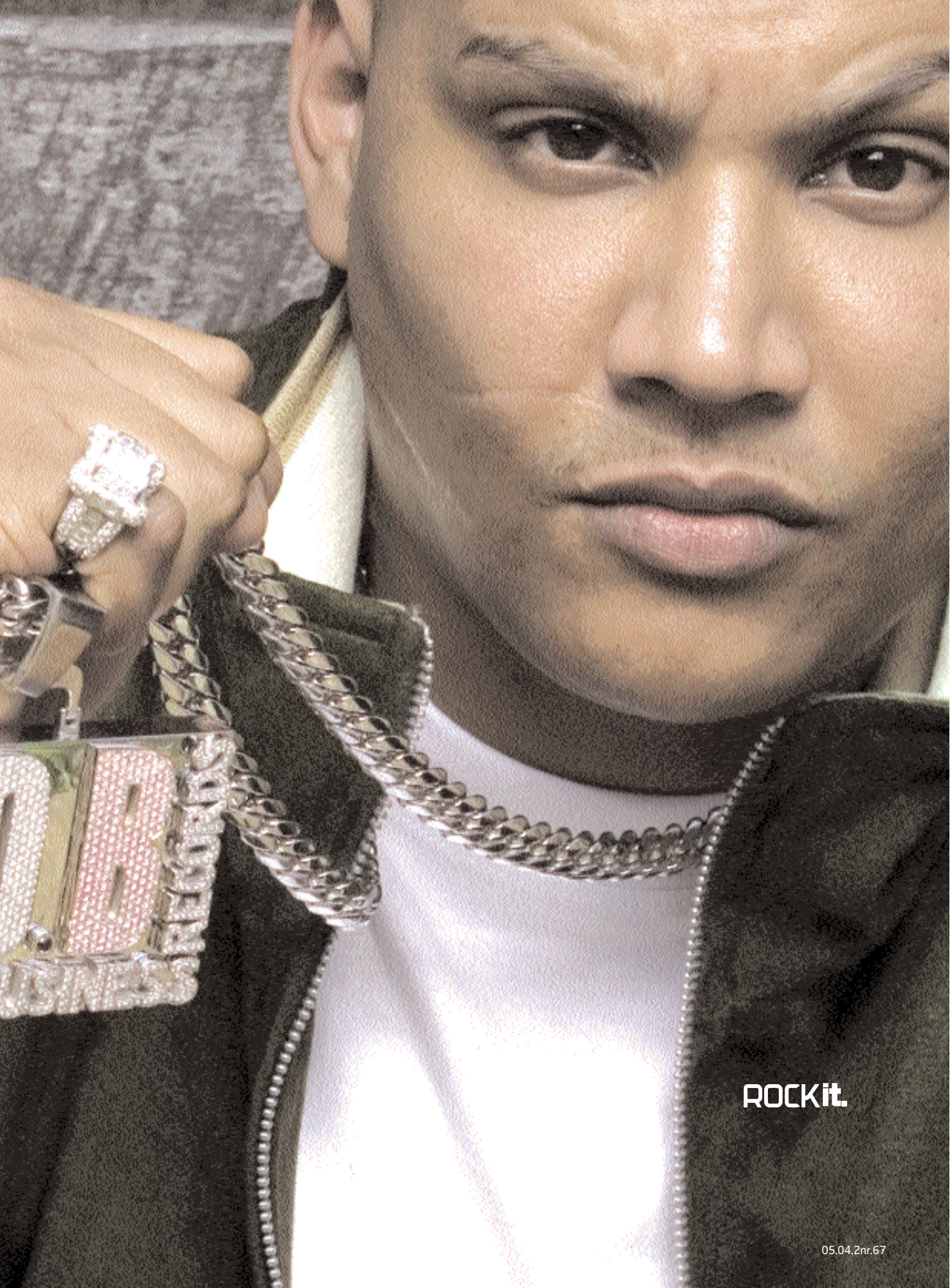
ZNR: Are you still going through bullshit?

CL: The situation is still going. The problem is still happening, but it's all good.

ZNR: How do you stay in the streets?

CL: I hit them up with mixtapes. I came out with a joint called *Broken Chains*. The title symbolized my break up with the Terror Squad and Atlantic. It says, "I don't deal with them anymore." A lot of DJs stopped messing with me because





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of the situation. I kept doing shows, and a year later I came back with part two, called *Chainsaw Massacre*. I did a few things with that release: I let my feelings out and took it to a broader level, to prepare people for the album. I'm going to drop a little something in January to keep me out there. I know the local cats know about me, but we've gotta get the shit heard universally not just regionally.

ZNR: Do you plan to start off in markets outside of your home base?

CL: I'm dealing with a situation that has a longer reach than I do. I'll come across the problem wherever I go. Fat Joe love won't be as strong in the West as it is here at home. The plan is to hit from West to East or South to North. We're not trying to play the same intimidation game. I'm just going to ride with my music. We feel it's good enough to break all that barrier shit. We've just got to get the ball rolling in January and get the music out there.

ZNR: Big Pun's mom says good things about you and that you deserve the success.

CL: Gale is like my second mom. I'm the type of person who doesn't judge. If I feel anything negative toward a person I keep it in. Because of these traits, snakes will sometimes try to bring you down. Sometimes they're like parasites to a host: they just feed off of you. They see what your good traits are and they take advantage of them. There will be a time when the characteristics she talked about will shine.

ZNR: What things have you learned thus far?

CL: I'll definitely keep my eye on my money. Stay focused and have a strategy—it's needed. You have to write down the steps to your goal and put down a timeline for when you want that goal done. Those business rules go with life, too. You also have to take care of yourself.

ZNR: Besides music what's your other talent?

CL: We could talk about chess—I can play a little. I love writing. I love coming up with new ideas others haven't. Originality is my forté.

ZNR: Are you a storyteller?

CL: To a certain point. You must tell a story fans can relate to.

ZNR: Cuban Link is what 2005 old-school artist?

CL: I'm a little bit of Slick Rick, a lot of Kool G Rap, a little bit of Big Daddy Kane, a twist of LL Cool J and a bit of Big Pun. Then add some of the realness and revolutionary spirit of Tupac. If you put all that in a pot, you'll get Cuban Link.

ZNR: Finish these lines. I will never...

CL: Fuck with T.S. again. <He laughs.>

ZNR: That's the last time I...

CL: <He laughs harder.> Fuck with T.S. again!

ZNR: What's your key to success?

CL: Staying focused and executing the plan.

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ZNR: A lot of people would have given up; how do you stay focused?

CL: There are lots of things to stay focused on when you're in Cuban Link's shoes. I try my best to stay in balance with a lot of things. I'm blessed to have M.O.B. in my career because I need someone to help me concentrate on business. God plays a hand, but I stay focused by relaxing and just walking the streets thinking about the past, the history, and how I can turn a negative into a positive. It's a lot like chess.

ZNR: Another way to relax would be to have a nice meal!

CL: I'm trying to cut down on food right now. I'm getting a little too chubby. I'm trying to tone up. I'm in the middle of setting up a little workout plan. I've gotta get my metabolism up, so I'm working out and eating almost every three hours: a little fruit in the morning, a shake in the afternoon, a light dinner, a little snack round 7 p.m., then some fruit before I go to bed. I need to get a little cock diesel for the ladies—I've got to get that LL Cool J status!

ZNR: What would like to see your album do?

CL: Business wise, I've been through a struggle. Since this is an independent thing, and I've been helping everybody and waiting so long, I'd like to see it hit some numbers—some impressive numbers. For myself I just expect the love to be there. There were a lot of long nights and the lyrics are from the heart. There's something good for everybody and one should hear it.

ZNR: What did Big Pun teach you to keep you strong?

CL: He taught me a lot of things in business and in life. A lot of it I didn't get until I had to go through it. There's this thing with Pun and tattoos. He had a lot of them. But there was this one tattoo I questioned: It sat on his back and it said, "I hate you." I was like, "Why the f**k did you put that on your back?"

He told me, "In life there are going to be a lot of people who will be fake. This is to them—all the

backstabbers."

Pun had a lot of love, but something clicked in his head and he had to get that tattoo. With all the stuff I went through I regret not opening my eyes to see them. Pun taught me there's one great friend in a lifetime.

ZNR: The album sounds like it's gonna be good for a lot of people.

CL: The first single off *Chain Reaction* is "24 Carats," which drops March 8, 2005. I've got good people on the album: Mya, Peeti Crack, Game, and for my heritage I got a reggaeton joint called "Scandalous." But look for the Syleena Johnson track. It's filled with so much soul. You can hear the struggle in her voice.

ZNR: If this does well, you'll get to say a lot of I-told-you-so's.

CL: If it happens I think I'd only say it to myself, or maybe joke around with the crew—I'm not the bragging type. I'm just happy to come out with something to show the world what Cuban Link is really about. I want to get away from all the negative bullshit and keep the focus on the music. Then again a great artist ain't a great artist without a great history—the struggles make a better person.

There are few artists out there who have the potential to overcome business and personal barriers. Cuban Link, with his humble, positive attitude and self-accepted turbulent history is a great contender in the handful of "comeback kids" for 2005. His facial scars prove the realness of his struggle and his solo stand is proof he's not ready to put down the mic and leave.

STATS:

Born: Dec. 18, 1974, Havana, Cuba

Sign: Sagittarius. "The Sagittarius icon is a man with a bow and arrow on a horse—I'm trying to find my target."

Album: *Chain Reaction*

Release Date: March 8, 2005

Web site: www.cubanlink.com