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**PRODUCER OF THE YEAR**

# Lil Jon

**(SORRY, KANYE.)**

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Display until March 28, 2005





# PRODUCER of the YEAR



STORY SAPTOSA FOSTER  
PHOTOGRAPHY MICHAEL BLACKWELL

TURN ON ANY radio in 2004 and you'd hear why Lil Jon is our "Producer of the Year." Indeed, his '04 discography reads like a Top 40 playlist, with mammoth hits such as "Yeah," "Goodies," and "Freek-a-Leek!" ushering in a nationwide crunk craze. While becoming the go-to guy for a guaranteed club smash, Jon's signature outbursts were immortalized in pop culture's vernacular. Even his record sales went mainstream. *Crunk Juice*, Lil Jon & the East Side Boyz' fifth LP and follow-up to the 2002 double-platinum *Kings of Crunk*, sold over 360,000 copies when it debuted last November—a history-making feat for an independent album.

Reflecting over the last dozen months during an Atlanta photo shoot, Jonathan Smith is hardly the caricature you see on MTV. Gone are the sunglasses, the diamond-studded pimp goblet, and the gaping grin. Lil Jon is fairly subdued as he explains the simple origins of his biggest records, the future union of rock and crunk, and the burden of being the industry's royal wild man. "All the interviews, TV shows, concerts," he says, "it takes a lot of energy to do that shit. Eventually, I'm just gonna concentrate on doing beats, like Dre." Is the crunk king ready to turn in his crown? Lil Jon takes us behind the party.







# Ghetto Boys

**LET'S BEGIN WITH** the obvious questions: Who are the Eastside Boyz and how are they kin to Lil Jon? The rumor is they're Lil Jon's security. The truth, however, is that Big Sam and Lil Bo are not the secret service for the king of crunk, but rather they are his partners in rhyme. Sam details how they blend crunk and rhyme.

"I have to explain our role from the perspective of the studio, because a lot of people think [Lil] Jon go in and do it himself and that's not true. Yes, he does all the tracks," Sam continues. "We don't do tracks. We write." Known for coming up with some of the South's most classic chants, the Eastside Boyz helped pen "I Like Dem Girlz," "I Don't Give A...," and "What U Gon' Do." They are each other's hype men. As Sam explains, "We feed off each other's energy." In fact, their ability to sync hypnotic choruses and cadences is a reflection of how Lil Jon, Sam, and Bo ultimately became Lil Jon & the Eastside Boyz.

As the story goes, Lil Jon, who is from Atlanta's Westside, met Sam and Bo, who are from Atlanta's Eastside (Decatur), when Lil Jon worked as an A&R rep for So So Def. He subsequently produced the three *So So Def Bass All-Stars* album compilations, which included songs by an



**SCRATCH:** This has been a monumental year for you. What has your impact been on music?

**LIL JON:** I think I brought energy back to music. A lot of people do tracks and they don't really move you. Crunk music gives you that energy where you just want to wild out. So, basically, I transferred that energy from ghetto tracks and put it on R&B and whatever else. Also, my background is DJing, so I'm gonna make records that'll rock the party.

**Did you spend a lot of time making "Yeah"?** Originally, the beat was for Petey Pablo's "Freak-a-Leek." I did that beat in, like, 15, 20 minutes. Then [due to a mix-up with Jive Records], I remade the record so Usher could use it. First, I tried to do different beats. That didn't work, so I took the original track and played a new synth line. Then the writer [Sean Garrett] got hold of the track and wrote the lyrics to that motherfucker and it was a hit as soon as he put those lyrics to the beat. Really, when you have a hit, most of the time it happens quickly. You don't take a lot of time on it. Talk to any producer and they'll probably say their biggest records were shit that was done in one take.

**When "Freak-a-leek," "Yeah," and "Goodies" all came out with the same beat, were you concerned that people would say all your music sounds the same?** Well, it was only people just trying to criticize me. The listeners never had any problems with any of the records. We had three monster records, and, really, if you have a sound, you're sound is gonna sound similar. So I wasn't really worried about it. I knew the records were hot in the clubs. That's all that really mattered to me.

**The backbone of your music is synthesizers. Where does that come from?** It's real simple.

I was in the studio doing "Damn." I was doing the beat. I had a basic drum track, and I was just going through sounds. Then I got to this synthesizer sound, and it sounded good over the beat. I was just fucking around, playing shit, trying to find a sound. And that became my signature sound after that.

**Was that how you did "No Problem"?** I was just fucking with sounds, and I like the way the piano sounded. It was kind of crazy. That was the first thing I laid down too. I don't even think I had a drum track. I think I might've had a hi-hat and snare on my clap, and I just started. I found that sound and played the line, and it's just that simple.

**When you remixed "Lean Back," did you already know Mase and Eminem were gonna be on the track?** I knew it was gonna be Mase and Fat Joe and Remy. That was the hardest track for me to do this year. It took me a couple days to get it right. Because "Lean Back" was such a big record, I was like, "How the fuck am I gonna top the original fucking song?" So I was in there fucking around with it. That was when we were living in the Miami house working on *Crunk Juice*. So I fucked with it for, like, two days, got it to a point, and Fat Joe came over to the house. When he heard it for the first time, he was just like, "Wow." And the speakers blew in the house, too, so that made it even more crazy. That's when he told me he was getting Eminem. Then Joe was like, "This here is too hot. I'm keeping this shit for my album." So he made it even harder for me, because I had did a hot beat, and he tells me to do a new one. I'm like, "Oh shit." So I took "Stop! It's the motherfuckin' remix!" and did a new beat.

**Is it true that you, Usher, and Ludacris are forming a group?** We've been talking about it.

Me and Luda have actually started working. I gave him some beats and he wrote to some of the beats already. It's just the fans gotta really push for us to do it. I guess they're already telling us since "Lovers and Friends" is so big. But I think it'll be a monumental supergroup for the South. We already proved that we can make hits together. It'll be easy for us to do an album.

**Most people don't know you produced "Shorty Wanna Ride."** Yeah, that goes out to all those who say all my shit sound the same. [laughs] I mean, I do all type of tracks, but once you get a certain song like "Yeah," people always want "Yeah." Buck came to the studio; I played him a whole bunch of tracks. He took some tracks and came back with that one and let me hear it. I was like, "This shit is crazy." Me and my production team, we just go in the studio and go with the vibe. My boy Lemarquis Jefferson plays bass and does crazy sound effects. Craig Love plays guitars on all the shit. He's on "Shorty Wanna Ride" playing the main line. Then I got my boy L-Roc who actually played the line on "Yeah." They play on all my shit. Some of the songs I play on. Like on "Freak-a-Leek." I played the synthesizer. A lot of people don't know that there's live instruments on all of my songs. We got real guitar and bass.

**You don't sample as much as other producers. Why not?** I think I kind of got out of sampling when we first started producing. I started off with this guy named Paul Lewis. We called ourselves Dynamic Duo. We couldn't really play instruments, so we just sampled a lot. But we moved away from it and started using musicians early on. And then you don't get no publishing if you sample. I use samples every now and then, but I find it's easier for me to just make a beat from scratch. It takes 15 minutes rather than



old-school ATlien named Playa Poncho. "Me and Sam used to roll with Poncho to shows if Lil Jon couldn't go," Bo explains. "Sam pulled me in whenever I came home from Alabama A&M [University]." One weekend, Bo, Sam, Lil Jon, and a host of other So So Defians rolled out to the Gate, the mid-'90s Atlanta it spot. Sam recalls. "We was up in the club and Mystikal's 'Here I Go' came on. People was running around throwin' bows so I started chanting 'Who ya wit, who ya wit, who ya wit, goddamn, who ya wit.' Before I knew it, everybody was saying it—even the people throwin' bows." To make a long story short, Lil Jon stepped to Sam promising to lay down on wax what they experienced at the Gate. Within days, Jon, Sam, and Bo had their first underground hit called "Who You Wit." Back in the days when BME Recordings was still Black Market Entertainment, Lil Jon & the Eastside Boyz shuffled the song to clubs instead of the radio. "I didn't think it was gonna happen like it did," Bo remembers. "It was shocking."

No wonder the significance of the Eastside Boyz is an enigma—especially when a lil man with a platinum grill has managed to take the world by storm shouting 4-letter words and banging out dope tracks. —JOYCELYN A. WILSON

going and buying ten thousand records and going through all them records. Kanye has perfected rocking samples. Me, I just like to do the shit from scratch. An 808 drum kit, synthesizers, guitar, and bass. That's it.

**When you're in the studio, how closely do you work with your engineer?** I don't touch the buttons, but I'm like, "Turn this up. Turn this down. That ain't fat enough. Make the kick hit harder. The snare's too light." I don't just do the beat and leave. When we mix it, we mix it together, because I like my shit to sound a certain way. Over the years, just listening to other people's records and watching different things, I developed a style. If you notice in the club, my records are kind of louder and hit harder than some of the other records, because everything I do is designed for the club. Even if it's an R&B song, like "Yeah," that shit's still gon' hit like a rap song.

**I read that you're a big rock fan, which makes sense given crunk's wildness.** We always look at crunk and punk rock as the same energy and the same type of aggression. It's kind of like a parallel. I used to skateboard in the early '80s and listen to everything from the Sex Pistols to Dead Kennedys to the Ramones. So I got a little of that in me too. Like the song, "Don't Fuck with Me" that Rick Rubin produced on *Crunk Juice*. That's a concept from the Suicidal Tendencies song "Institutionalized." "Don't Fuck with Me" uses a sample from Slayer, the rock group. Me and Rick were in the studio, we had all these different loops, and I was like, "That ain't hard enough." Then he went and got some Slayer shit out and I'm like, "That's the shit." We took that piece, put it all together and got what we got.

**What direction is crunk going in?** I think the music is gonna continue to grow and

merge with other shit and spread, because now we're doing crunk and rock 'n' roll. That's gonna be incredible when it starts to really go, because nobody's really touched it yet as a mixture. Like, I grew up in the '80s when you listened to the radio and heard Run-DMC and then you might hear Duran Duran. It was all just music. I think Black people would listen to rock 'n' roll if it's presented to them in a certain way and it's stuff that they can relate to. They don't like the rock 'n' roll of today because they can't relate to what the fuck it's talking about. But if you got somebody like me saying some shit over a rock beat and I might add an 808 to that motherfucker, it makes it more appealing.

**Everybody wants a Lil Jon track on their album.**

**Do you ever worry about overexposure?** I was kind of worried about that last year but I've gotten past that stage. In 2005, I'm concentrating on my artists. We got my girl Ooh Baby. She's our R&B artist. Then we've got Lil Scrappy's album, Trillville's album, E-40's album, Bo Hogan's album. Then I'm dabble into more of the pop shit, too, because I don't want to just be pigeonholed into one thing. I'm gonna dish out stuff to motherfucking Lindsay Lohan and shit.

**How long do you think you can maintain your "crunk" persona?** I'm really a wild dude, but it's a certain time and place for that. My wildness came from me being a DJ, because I was a reserved person before that. Once I started being in the clubs all the time and DJing parties, I started getting wilder and wilder. But I don't know how long I can keep it up. This might be my last record. I'm not trying to do this when I'm 40. I'm trying to be at the crib chilling. My son's playing the piano now. In about ten years, he'll be doing beats. So eventually, I'll pass the torch. \*

