

HIP-HOP ON A HIGHER LEVEL

IN STEREO



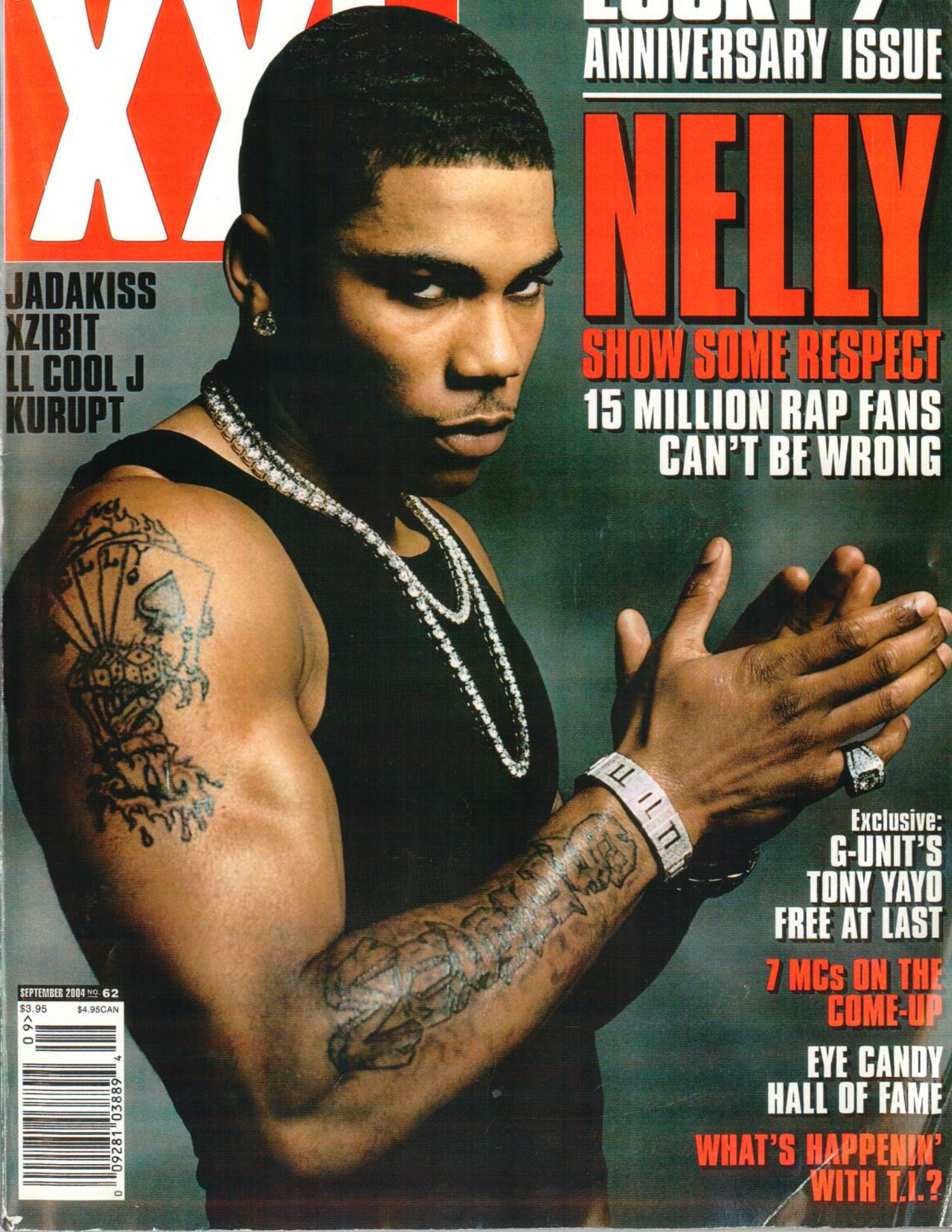
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LUCKY 7TH
ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

NELLY

SHOW SOME RESPECT
15 MILLION RAP FANS
CAN'T BE WRONG



Exclusive:
G-UNIT'S
TONY YAYO
FREE AT LAST

7 MCs ON THE
COME-UP

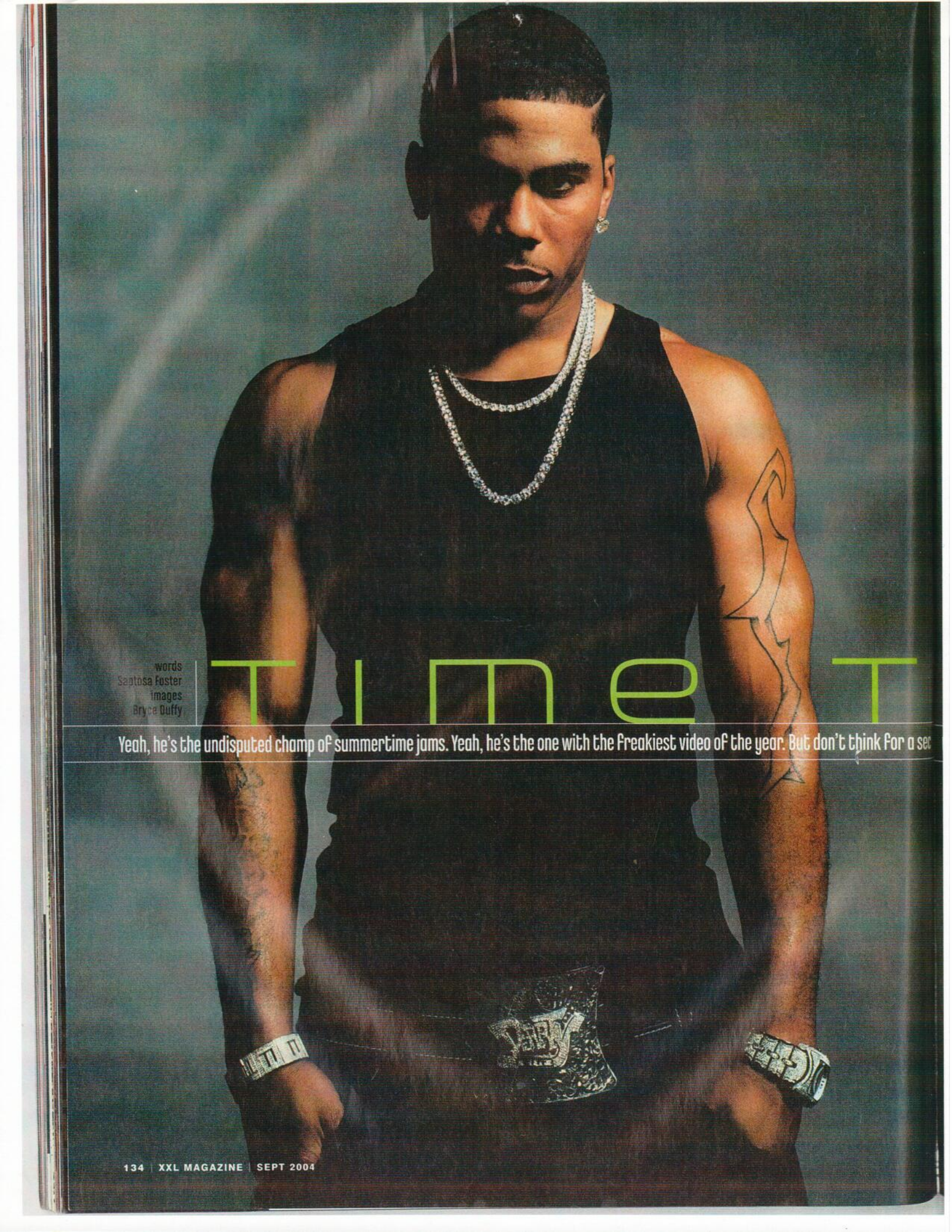
EYE CANDY
HALL OF FAME

WHAT'S HAPPENIN'
WITH T.I.?

SEPTEMBER 2004 NO. 62

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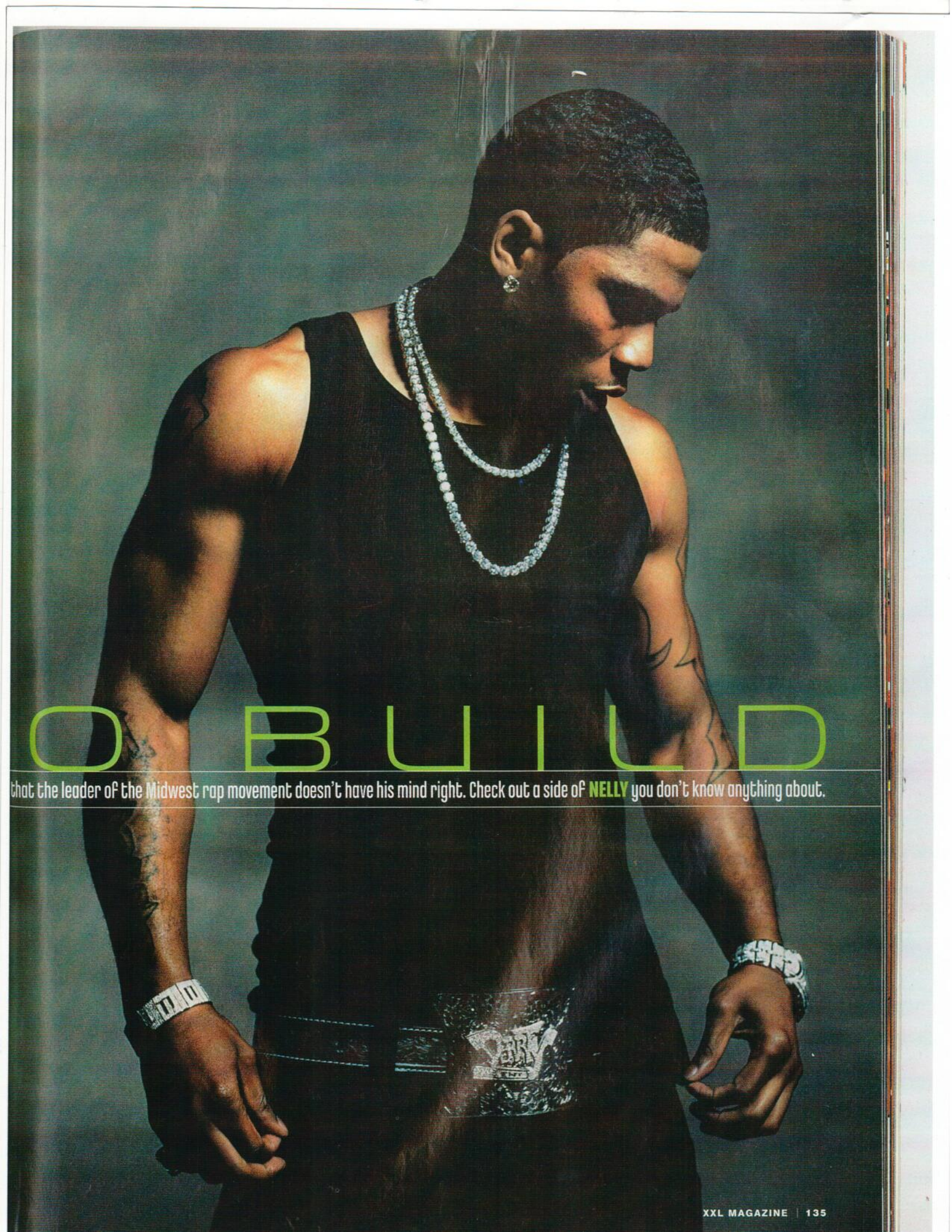




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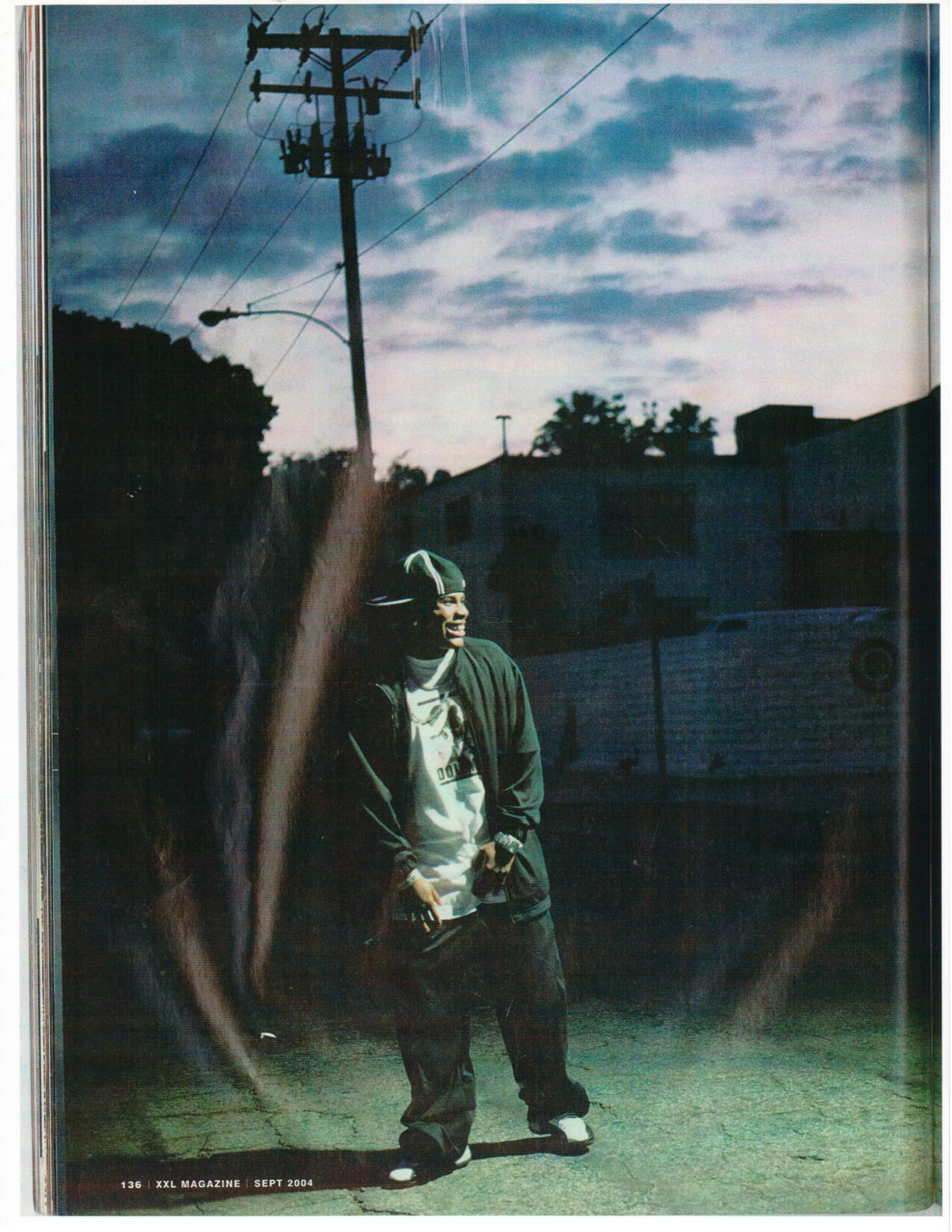
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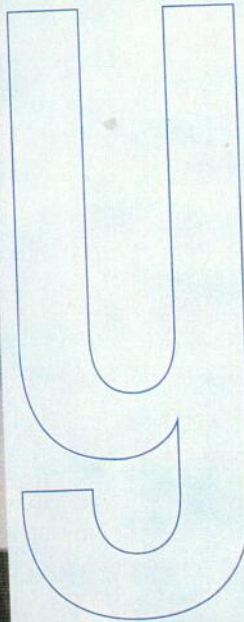
Yeah, he's the undisputed champ of summertime jams. Yeah, he's the one with the freakiest video of the year. But don't think for a sec



O B U I L D

that the leader of the Midwest rap movement doesn't have his mind right. Check out a side of **NELLY** you don't know anything about.





ou might not expect to find the rap megastar known for penning the line, "I think my butt's getting big!" engrossed in a marathon, late-night conversation about Iraq, voting and education. Here's Nelly, though, at three in the morning at Los Angeles' Record Plant studios, where, for the past four hours, he's been thoughtfully assessing the world's ills.

"Terrorism affects everybody," he says, leaning forward in a swivel chair. Dressed in blue jeans, a white T-shirt and white Air Force 1 sneakers, he seems very ordinary, despite the familiar assortment of lightning-bright diamond jewelry adorning his neck, wrists and ears. His assistant and childhood friend Grip nods in agreement, along with sound engineers Carl and Mike. "Regardless of why it's being done or who's doing it, terrorism affects everybody. You may think you have nothing to do with what's going on in the world, but shit, even if you going to get gas right now, shit is fuckin' three dollars."

Tonight's discussion began as an early listening session of Nelly's latest work: two separate albums, collectively known as *Sweatsuit*, with two lead singles (*Sweat*'s "Flap Your Wings" and *Suit*'s "My Place," featuring Jaheim), two opposing styles (*Sweat* is full of up-tempo party anthems; *Suit* is a trove of laid-back melodies) and the same release date—a historical first for hip-hop. The albums feature a motley collection of artists and producers, with contributions from Christina Aguilera, Mobb Deep, Snoop Dogg, T.I., Fat Joe, Remy Ma and (get this!) country singer Tim McGraw, as well as production from Jazze Pha, Jayson "Koko" Bridges and The Neptunes, who created the scorching, percussion-heavy track for "Flap Your Wings."

Yet, the more Nelly tries to explain the records' themes—which range from love to fatherhood to social awareness—the more the discussion veers into the territory of global issues. Such serious talk is certainly at odds with the flashy, carefree public image the world-famous St. Louisian cultivates—but it reflects his 29 years on the planet.

"The 2004 era is becoming more of a grown-up type of era, you know," he explains, referring to the mellow pace of the *Suit* album—"with the emergence of all the button-downs and things. Everybody wants to be older. Everybody wants to be grown and sexy. And it's time for that. It's time for people to grow up because there's so much serious shit going on right now. It's time for everybody that's of age to be trying to make a difference."

Having sold close to 15 million records over the past four years, Nelly has the resources to make a difference. Choosing causes close to home, he's established two nonprofit organizations, 4 Sho 4 Kids, a community youth outreach program in St. Louis; and Jes Us 4 Jackie, a fund through which Nelly is trying to find a bone marrow donor for his sister Jacqueline, who was diagnosed with leukemia in 2001. Yet maturation is a complicated process, and good deeds aren't always easy to do. Nelly discovered these truths last April when plans to hold a bone marrow drive at Atlanta's Spelman College were dashed after Spelman's Feminist Majority Leadership Alliance announced they would stage a protest over the use of misogynistic images in Nelly's video for "E.I. (The Tipdrill Remix)." The video, currently airing on BET's *Uncut*, an after-midnight hour of uncensored programming, features topless girls grinding on one other and Nelly swiping a credit card through a woman's behind. After spotting protest signs posted around campus during a preliminary visit to the college, Nelly's foundation canceled the drive.

"It felt personal to me," Nelly says, annoyed. "I mean, you're talking about a school where I know for a fact there are females on that campus who work in strip clubs and go to the school. I know for a fact that this school is located no farther than 10 blocks from a strip club. I know that you had a performer perform at your school who also has a video

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on this same channel that you're trying to throw at me... Don't get me wrong, the reason they threw out, I'm with. I'm with the upliftment of every aspect of our culture and our people. But your energy is misplaced right now. I think they're doing this for publicity. We're talking about the oldest profession on Earth. Women have been exotic-dancing forever and they're gonna continue."

Moya Bailey, a senior and president of the FMLA, denies any allegations of a publicity stunt. She contends that it was in fact the foundation that went to the press with the inaccurate story that Spelman cancelled the drive.

"We thought it was going to be a really small protest," says the 21-year-old comparative women's studies major. "Like maybe five or 10 of us with some signs. We had even planned to register to donate bone marrow, and maybe have a sign up that said something like, 'Think about the images Nelly presents us.' But I think he and his people had this idea that there would be masses of us chanting, 'Nelly, go home!' Never. It most likely would've been just a handful of students participating. We had a lot of opposition on campus. A lot of girls felt like this wasn't the right time to speak out. A lot of girls wanted to see Nelly and felt this wasn't an issue at all. So it



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wasn't all of Spelman, and it wasn't a personal attack on him at all.

"This issue is so much bigger than Nelly," says Bailey. "It's a critique of the entire industry. Him being an artist and an adult himself, I still think we can critique his behavior and ask him to change it... He's the one that we see in the video."

As for the other artist with a video on *Uncut* who performed at Spelman: Ludacris, whose video "P-Poppin'" gets regular play on *Uncut*, recently visited the college, according to Bailey. "Had I known in time that he was going to be on campus, I probably would've done something then too," she says, adding that the FMLA is working to get BET's parent company Viacom to take *Uncut* off the air altogether.

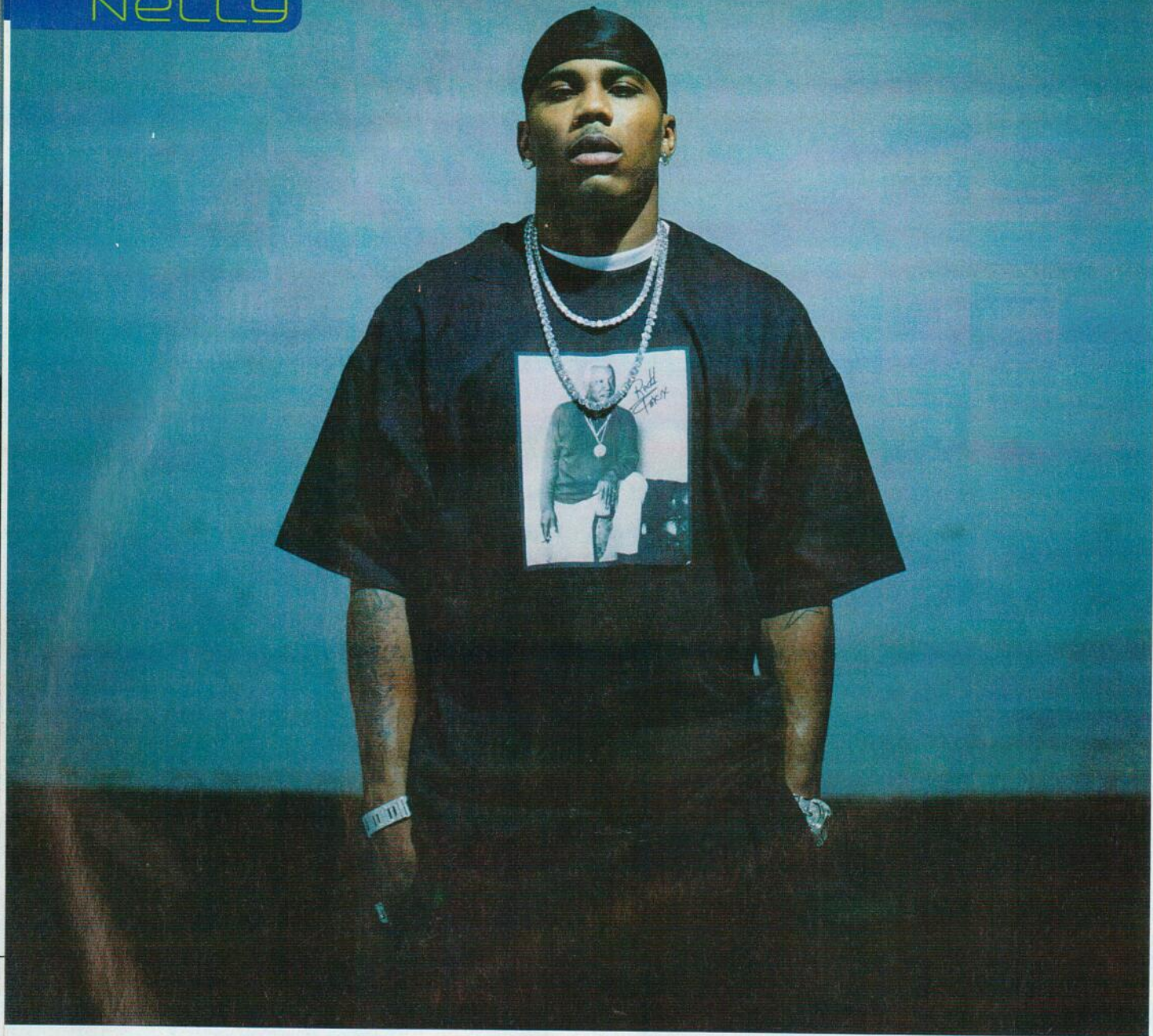
Monday is "Rock 'N Bowl" night at Pinz Bowling Center, a hip celebrity magnet in the LA suburb of Studio City. League play has just ended and only a handful of lanes are occupied. Top-40 tunes waft through the rafters as Nelly walks in briskly, his publicist, road manager and security guard in tow. He cheerfully greets the attendant at the counter and draws little attention to himself as he heads for lane 16.

"St. Louis is bowler city," he says, donning a pair of personalized black and silver bowling shoes. "So you know it's on!"

Ever the competitor, Nelly lightheartedly promises certain victory over all, and on his first shot, crushes all 10 pins. "That's what I'm talking about!" he cries, taking his seat amid a flurry of high-fives. As if on cue, "Hot In Herre," the smash hit from 2002's six-million-selling *Nellyville*, comes on over the loudspeakers. Nelly grins and shakes his head. Even *he's* a little tired of the song, he admits. But he quickly remarks, "I'm happy to even *have* a song that I'm tired of."

Over the next three games, Nelly is relaxed and pleasant, savoring this rare moment of recreation. "Back in the day, this was a cheap date," he reminisces between sets. "I used to love for a girl to say she wanted to go bowling. I'd be like, 'Bet!' Play a couple of games, eat, and we'd be good."

Nowadays, Nelly can certainly afford a more lavish evening, especially when it's time to take a particular R&B diva out for a night on the town. "Naw, we're just friends," he replies firmly, when asked to confirm rumors that he and singer Ashanti are romantically linked. "I mean, we more or less just enjoy each other's company. That's it." But minutes later, when asked if he would ever try to hide a celebrity relationship, Nelly



"EVEN WHEN I WAS HUSTLING, EVEN WHEN I WAS QUOTE-UNQUOTE GANG-BANGING OR WHATEVER THE HELL THAT WAS, THERE WAS A BIGGER PICTURE. HAVING CHILDREN WILL STEER THAT AROUND 100 PERCENT, BECAUSE NOW YOUR LIFE ISN'T THE ONLY ONE THAT MATTERS... YOU DON'T WANT YOUR KIDS TO DO THE SAME S*#T YOU DID."

is more revealing. "If you're asking me if we've been out on a date, yeah, we've been out on a date. Like I said, we enjoy each other's company, but it's not like that. I mean, we're friends and friends go out on dates."

Several strikes, plenty spares and one blunderous gutterball later, Nelly has won two of the three games bowled. As he exits the alley, several eager teens approach and ask for photos and autographs. He patiently obliges his young fans before heading out to a gleaming black 2004 Rolls-Royce Phantom with "Derrty" vanity plates. He's good with kids, and while he appreciates the rewards of his job he's troubled that his rigorous schedule keeps him away from his daughter Chanel, 10, and son Tre (Cornell III), five.

"I love them to death and I miss them very much," Nelly sighs wistfully, staring out a tinted window as the Rolls glides down Ventura Boulevard. "I know they miss their daddy, especially my daughter. I used to keep her with me all the time, back before I had a deal. She'd

ride with daddy wherever. She'd be in the car seat, and we'd be mobbing. When she was five, I got a deal. Then all of a sudden, Daddy's not there. My son was probably about a year old when I got the deal, so he probably doesn't know too much about me being there all the time. He basically just heard my voice over the phone for the first couple of years, and saw me when I was in and out of town. My daughter understands, but it's still hard for her. She still cries when I have to take her back home and I have to leave to go out of town."

Nelly rarely speaks publicly about his children, but today he is remarkably open. He has put his devotion to his children to music on the tenderly-written "Die For You" from the *Suit* album, where he describes the premature birth of his baby girl. Now, Nelly boasts that his daughter makes good grades and excels at basketball and tennis. "My daughter's cold!" the proud papa exclaims with delight. "She was in this nine-year-old tennis tournament when she was six. She's in the

"WE, AS YOUNG BLACK MEN, WE CAN GET INTO A SITUATION IN OUR LIVES TO WHERE WE REALLY FEEL THAT WE'RE NERVOUS ABOUT REALLY TRYING TO LEARN STUFF, OR TRYING TO BE POLITICALLY AWARE, BECAUSE THAT AIN'T COOL OR THAT AIN'T HIP OR THAT AIN'T SOMETHING LIKE THAT. AND YOU ONLY GET THAT AS YOU GET MATURE OR AS YOU GET OLDER."

fourth grade and she plays against fifth- and sixth-graders in basketball. I mean, her team was getting waxed, but they had 22 points and she had scored 14 of them. She gets down, just like her daddy."

Nelly beams just as brightly for the boy who bears his name. "He's a video-game freak," he says, laughing. "The other day, he knocked me out like five times in a row in this boxing game!" He marvels at young Tre's mean driving skills on go-carts and battery-powered mini-cars. "My son loves cars. He gets it from me... Tre loves the auto racing games on the PlayStation. He might be a race car driver one day."

Indeed, Nelly is grateful that he can provide his children with the type of childhood that he never had. Born Cornell Haynes Jr., on November 2, 1974 in Austin, Texas, Nelly moved to St. Louis after his parents divorced when he was seven. Shuttling between the homes of various family members, he attended eight different grade schools. By high school, he was living with his mother again, but he soon started selling dope on the streets. Things changed dramatically when the teenage hustler learned that his girlfriend was pregnant. He realized he had nine months to get his life together.

"Children have a lot to do with you maturing," he says, "making you realize that there are better things in life to focus your energy on. I always wanted something more. Even when I was hustling, even when I was quote-unquote *gang-banging* or whatever the hell that was, there was a bigger picture. Having children will steer that around 100 percent, because now your life isn't the only one that matters. You have a different responsibility to bring somebody up and you don't want your kids to do the same shit you did."

In 1993, Nelly met Robert "Kyjuan" Cleveland, his brother Tohri "Murphy Lee" Harper and Ali Jones in the St. Louis suburb of University City. Along with Nelly's brother Lavell "City Spud" Webb (currently serving a 10-year sentence at Missouri's South Central Correctional Center for assault and armed criminal action), they formed the St. Lunatics, adding hypeman Corey "Slo Down" Edwards in 1996. After a couple of years of club dates, local radio airplay and selling records out of car trunks, the group found their way to Universal Music, which signed Nelly as a solo act first, in 1999. Considering his unconventional flow, few would have predicted that his 2000 debut *Country Grammar* would sell 10 million records worldwide. But sure enough, it did—presaging the mainstream's embrace of Midwestern artists like Chingy, Kanye West, Twista and J-Kwon.

"Everybody knows Nelly opened the doors," acknowledges fellow St. Louis rapper J-Kwon. "He put a new style of rap on the map and put St. Louis on the map at the same time. He's like our governor and president. He jumped on my album and he ain't even have to. Didn't charge me nothing. That's the type of guy he is. A nice guy, laid-back and real humble."

Proving J-Kwon's point, Nelly refrains from calling himself a trailblazer. "The only thing I can really give myself credit for is working hard," he says. "I give the fans credit for accepting it. It was a joint effort. I can only make it. But they have to buy it. We made it as a group, and when I say 'we,' I mean the St. Lunatics. Our focus was to do it differently and be different coming out of St. Louis."

Nelly's loyalty to his hometown is unshakable, even in the face of conflict. When the question arises as to why teen sensation Chingy—who started out in a rap group with Ali's younger brother and toured with Nelly in 2002—left the 'Tics camp and joined Ludacris' Disturbing Tha Peace crew, Nelly is cautiously diplomatic. "That was something he chose to do as far as the DTP thing, so more power to him. People take advantage of certain situations and that's good, because that's what you want. It's better for the city, and the only thing Nelly and the

St. Lunatics are for is for the city, regardless of personal relationships."

Of course, the lead Lunatic's industry connections extend well beyond the "Show Me State." Take Nelly's slightly mysterious association with the recently resurrected Mason Betha. The two share ties with longtime industry mover and shaker Cudda Love, who manages Betha and owns Fo' Reel Entertainment, to which Nelly is signed as an artist. Cudda was also instrumental in getting Nelly his deal with Universal. It was a year ago that Nelly first met Betha face-to-face, and the ministerial MC's very first return to the booth after his six-year hiatus was for the recording of "In My Life," which appears on the *Suit* album. Though he declines comment on Betha's retirement or clergyhood, and refuses to speculate on the reasons behind his reappearance, Nelly says he can understand it.

"I think once you're into music, that drive is in you to create. The only thing that may change is how you create, but you'll always have the drive to create. And once you do it at a certain level to where you were actually successful at it, to just give it up is kind of hard."

The day after bowling, Nelly is looking ridiculously glamorous at a photo shoot in West Hollywood. His plump biceps are sensuously oiled and the diamonds he's drenched in twinkle like Christmas lights as he moves through a series of cool, detached poses. Nelly is the picture of success. But rap success is fleeting, and he knows it. So he's turning his attention to other arenas.

He's had his eye on the big screen for some time now, and recently read for a part alongside Adam Sandler and Chris Rock in a remake of the 1974 hit *The Longest Yard*. Nelly plans to strengthen his clothing lines, Vokal and Applebottoms, and push his energy drink, Pimp Juice. And once the dust settles after the release of *Sweatsuit*, he intends to sharpen his focus in his role as CEO of Derry Entertainment, whose first release, Murphy Lee's *Murphy's Law*, is approaching platinum. Derry's roster includes native St. Louis artists Taylor Made, King Jacob, Prentiss Church and female rapper Chocolate Tai, plus rock band Stedfast and New Jersey singer Avery Storm.

The growth of his business ventures is obviously important to Nelly. But as he heads into his 30s, he's got his mind on more than his money. Rather than seclude himself in a gilded bubble of celebrity and riches, he's increasingly in touch with issues that affect the world around him.

"We, as young Black men, we can get into a situation in our lives to where we really feel that we're nervous about really trying to learn stuff, or trying to be politically aware, because that ain't cool or that ain't hip or that ain't something like that. And you only get that as you get mature or as you get older. As your life changes, things become more clear than what you thought was clear. You know, your biggest problem in high school is probably like [what to wear to the] prom, homecoming, and shit like that. You know, then you get out here in the real world, you like, 'I could care less about a fuckin' outfit or a prom.' You know, gas is fuckin' three dollars!

"Now we're getting people in the hip-hop community to get out and actually pay attention. That's a big step. Because this ranks all the way from 18-year-olds who possibly wouldn't be doing shit with they lives trying to get into politics somewhere down the line, or trying to really be like, 'You know what? That's some bullshit.' It's bigger issues out here that's really fucking with our mind. And all they doing is waking up that one more person. That 'nother person or that one more group of high-schoolers or that one more group of college kids that's like, 'Yo, we don't have to put up with this shit.' Just making everybody pay attention. So all it's doing is bringing us more and more aware, the closer and closer it hits." ♣