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An updated and hugely expanded edition of the underground classic *Rakim Told Me*

# CHECK THE TECHNIQUE

Liner Notes for Hip-Hop Junkies

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## A TRIBE CALLED QUEST

*The Low End Theory*

(Jive, 1991)



I just remember hearing music constantly. It was all around us.” Q-Tip from A Tribe Called Quest isn’t talking about being anywhere near a turntable or a recording studio. He’s further back than that, reminiscing about his childhood in Jamaica, Queens. Linden Boulevard in the early eighties. He continues: “Me and Phife [Tribe’s other talented MC] heard [the Sugar Hill Gang’s] ‘Rapper’s Delight’ when it came out, but once Run-DMC started doing it, we knew we wanted to do *that*.” The world can be thankful that they decided to do *that*, because Q-Tip, Phife Dawg, and DJ Ali Shaheed Muhammad, like their idols Run-DMC, blazed a new path in hip-hop in the late eighties and early nineties. Every time they hit the studio they added a serious, studious, jazz edge to their supremely innovative productions.

“I was born in Queens,” says Tip, who was born Jonathan Davis but has since changed his legal name to Kamaal Fareed. “My mother almost gave birth to me in Harlem, because that’s where I started kicking. But they got her to Queens in time.” Growing up, both Tip and Phife had musical families. Tip remembers: “There was a lot of blues and gospel in my house when I was young, and my dad was a big jazzhead.” His older sister was also influential, because in the mid-eighties she began dating a member of hip-hop’s Zulu Nation and became exposed to the deepest roots of true-school hip-hop. Tip also recalls, “My neighborhood had all these bands who would play all around. [Drummer] Omar Hakim had a band; [drummer] Billy Cobham, too. They’d play at Roy Wilkins Park and at the Village Door [club], around our way.” Probably as a result of this, the producer-to-be was the definition of a musical sponge. He recalls: “I was drawn to all kinds of music as a kid. Al Green, Stevie Wonder, Joni Mitchell. I listened to rock radio stations too, so I heard lots of Led Zeppelin and Pink Floyd.”

“I’ve known Phife since I was like three years old,” says Tip of his childhood neighborhood friend and future rhyme partner. “Phife is the one who got me into rhymin’ in the first place. He was the one who pushed me into MCing. I was always into books, so I guess that’s why I fell into rhyming so easily.”

The Queens-born Phife [Malik Taylor] had an arts-heavy upbringing by Trinidadian parents: His mother wrote poetry and his father was a big music

fan. Calypso and reggae filled his childhood home, and Phife picked up patois and extra island slang since his father played soccer and socialized with many Jamaicans. Phife says of his childhood pursuits: "Around my neighborhood, if you didn't play basketball, rap, or DJ, you were an outcast."

Phife went to a couple different high schools, including Pine Forge Academy for his freshman year (a Seventh-Day Adventist school sixty miles outside of Philadelphia), then Springfield Gardens High School in Queens. He and Tip stayed in touch during high school but didn't hang out as much as they had through junior high because of school circumstances. After getting back from his year in Pennsylvania, Phife met up with the man who would be the fourth, and least easily defined, member of A Tribe Called Quest—Jarobi. Phife says: "Jarobi was originally from the Bronx and he moved to Queens when he was like twelve. He was a year younger than us. He used to beatbox and I would MC. We'd battle cats out in the park." Although Jarobi would never have a vocal presence in the group, he was an important behind-the-scenes force, especially on the group's first album.

As his mid-teens approached, Tip faced a major turning point as an artist at the musical and geographical melting pot that was lower Manhattan's Murry Bergtraum High School for Business Careers—home to future hip-hop luminaries like X-Clan's Brother J, the Jungle Brothers, and his future Tribe-mate Ali Shaheed Muhammad. Tip explains: "Going to Murry Bergtraum was a big influence on me, in one way just because it let me get out of Queens. And there was just so much crazy stuff going on there. The first person I met there was Brother J—he was just there rhyiming in the lunchroom. It was just a fly-ass school." Tip graduated in 1988 with a specialization in computer science.

Aside from his contact with Ali Shaheed, Q-Tip's association with two other Bergtraum students, Mike G and Afrika Baby Bam of the Jungle Brothers, was what really started his career. The group was signed to Idlers/Warlock Records in 1987 and released their *Straight out the Jungle* album on the label in 1988. Tip wrote and performed on their songs "Black Is Black" and "The Promo," a nonalbum cut. It was his first time in a recording studio and he soaked up the experience. "I also helped mix the song 'Straight out the Jungle,'" Tip adds. "And those guys used some beats that I had found. I was on that album a good amount."

"I never really looked at hip-hop as a career," Tip says. "I guess that I

kind of knew, though, because I didn't really apply to any colleges. I went to City College for a couple of weeks and dropped out. Hip-hop was always a dream, but being around the Jungle Brothers and seeing them do it—that made it more of a reality to me."

Going back to the pre-Jungle Brothers days, during freshman year Tip had also hooked up with Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn resident DJ Ali Shaheed Muhammad, and the two quickly started working on music together. Tip says: "I met Ali through Afrika [of the Jungle Brothers], and I would go to his [Ali's] place in Bed-Stuy to work on demos. Me and Ali did the demo for 'Bonita Applebum' [which appeared on Tribe's first album, in 1989] around sophomore year in high school."

Regarding his rhyme partner during their high school years, Tip says, "Me and Phife went to grade school together, but in high school we didn't see each other much, because he went to a school [outside] Philadelphia and then in Queens. But I was always in touch with him, and was telling him that he had to come by our school and meet these people, because things were popping off there."

As previously mentioned, the final part of the Tribe picture was Jarobi. He rarely rhymed with the group and didn't officially produce, but he was an important part of the crew nonetheless. Tip says: "After freshman year in high school, Phife was rhyiming with this kid around the way in Queens, and Jarobi was that guy's beatboxer. We'd all hang out, so I met Jarobi when we was like fourteen." Phife says of Jarobi: "He was down with us when we started, but he was always into the culinary arts. He toured with us a lot on the first album but eventually he chose his other career instead of running with us in the music thing. But he's around—he still works with me today."

By their junior year in high school, things were starting to come together for what would become A Tribe Called Quest. Tip and Ali originally called themselves Tribe, but Afrika from the Jungle Brothers suggested their expanded moniker. By 1987 the four-man crew was working on music together more regularly, and had even added a drummer named Sha-Boogie to the mix. Tip says: "Originally there were five of us [including Jarobi]. Eventually Sha dropped out of the group." He continues: "We rented a rehearsal space in Manhattan, Giant Studios, and we'd practice there for a couple hours on Saturdays. It was actually kind of pathetic, now that I actually think about it [laughs]. My sister was dating [producer] Skeff Anselm



and he was in the Zulu Nation and knew Jazzy Jay, so Jay came down one time to check us out. He basically said: 'Um, keep working on it' [laughs]."

And work on it they did. Throughout their tenure at Murry Bergtraum, Tip and Ali continued to hone their four-track skills in Bed-Stuy. "I would do beats, and Ali would put cuts on them. By senior year [1988] I was also doing shows with the Jungle Brothers, after their album came out." Tip also continued to work on his vocal style, with Phife by his side whenever they could find time to link up. Q-Tip remembers: "Phife was always the battle rapper—he would take what was happenin' on the street and rhyme about it. And he was a great freestyler as well. My shit was always more cerebral, and the combo always worked really well. We'd always make up routines that would emulate Run-DMC."

Aside from the Jungle Brothers connection, Tip's musical development progressed even more after meeting Amityville, Long Island's De La Soul. The JB's, De La, and Tribe would form the nucleus of what would be called the Native Tongues movement, which would catch the hip-hop world's ear after De La's monumental 1989 album *3 Feet High and Rising*. Tribe would be the third of the crew to release an album, and they rode the Native Tongues wave to national recognition. Tip says: "We did a show with De La Soul in Roy Wilkins Park on July 4, in 1988. The Jungle Brothers had just met De La up in Boston at a show a couple days before, and we all just clicked. I started hanging out with De La all the time after that."

Phife remembers: "When Tip and the Jungle Brothers met up with De La it just seemed like they had known each other for years. We were just kids back then, and it was just a family affair, not like a marketing thing. It's like in elementary school, on the weekends you have a sleepover. But the sleepover with Native Tongues was in a recording studio instead. People would just roll by other people's sessions and we'd be in there all night, eating Chinese food and working. We had fun being around each other, and that was really the main thing."

Tip was at many of the recording sessions for *3 Feet High* (he was featured on several songs including the single "Buddy," and says he co-produced the song "Description") at Manhattan's Calliope Studios, and this experience proved to be the final schooling he needed to shine on his own. He remembers: "I'd be in there, mesmerized by all the equipment. I'd even stay after their sessions were over and mess around, figuring stuff out."

Being at a real studio like Calliope (the Jungle Brothers recorded at cozier TTO Studios in Coney Island) was the chance that Tip was waiting for. He says: "At the time, in 1988 and 1989, my original productions were all on pause tapes, when I wasn't messing with Ali's four-track. So I'd just show up at Calliope with a bag of tapes, trying to figure out how to make them come alive." With the help of engineer Shane Faber, Tip started learning equipment like E-mu's SP-1200 and Akai's S-950 samplers. He adds: "[Queens-based producer] Large Professor also showed me a lot of production stuff at the time, and I expanded on what he taught me."

Tip remembers: "After the De La album came out and all the hype it got, a lot of people wanted to hear our demo. Red Alert was managing us at the time and he shopped a demo we had with four or five songs on it. Geffen, Def Jam, Atlantic, and Jive all wanted to sign us. We went with Jive because they just seemed more interested."

A Tribe Called Quest's first album, *People's Instinctive Travels and the Paths of Rhythm*, came out in 1989 on Jive and was a critical success, eventually going gold on the strength of singles like "Bonita Applebum" and "Can I Kick It?" "That album was just a lot of fun," says Tip. "I had all these ideas in my head and I was just letting them out. It wasn't too cerebral—it was about emotions and colors. The label was happy, it sold well, and we had a buzz out there."

Tip details the production duties on the first album, which he says were the same for the first several Tribe releases: "I would do all of the music, basically, and the other guys would be the sounding board, and we'd improve tracks from their suggestions." He notes that Ali Shaheed produced "Push It Along" from *People's Instinctive Travels*. Phife says: "I was being ignorant on that first album, that's why I was only on a couple of tracks. I was hardly around, not like I should have been."

"I wouldn't say that Phife was being ignorant," Tip replies. "He was just running around, doing his thing, being nineteen years old. I was in the studio every day, but it wouldn't bother me if he wasn't there. He was my man and I was going to hold him down. We all helped stitch that album together."

"Everybody had their hand in the production, one way or another," explains Phife. "Tip had the massive record collection, and he used to dig for records all the time. We'd go on tour and right before sound check, Tip would be driving around looking for records. Ali did a lot of the program-

ming and played any live stuff that needed to be played. And Tip did everything else. There were times that I might write a paragraph or two for Tip, or he might write sixteen bars for me. It was really a group thing, and we didn't have any kind of basic format. I do beats now, but back then I left that to Tip and Ali. I just enjoyed their production so much that it wouldn't make any sense for me to mess up something that was good."

The group continued to feed off the artistic energy of the Native Tongues camp, which grew to include Queen Latifah, Monie Love, and Black Sheep. By 1990 it was time to think about their second full-length. Tribe had grown even more as artists and people, and their sound was sure to reflect this. Phife remembers: "Once we got ready to do *The Low End Theory*, we knew that it was do or die. I felt that way, at least. The first album was critically acclaimed, but we knew everything had to be correct to really make it hit like we wanted. Management, record label, distribution, everything." On the management side, they went with industry up-and-comer (and then Jungle Brothers road manager) Chris Lighty, who had been at Rush Management and was just starting his Violator Management company.

Tip says of his 1990 pre-*Low End* mindset: "I felt like there were even more possibilities with the second album, with all that I had learned and how I wanted things to be, sonically. I just went to another level when I was getting ready to do *Low End Theory*. I wouldn't say it was 'do or die.' It was more like: 'Okay, now watch what we can do.'" He continues: "I was definitely on another level at that point. I felt it and I knew it. I was chopping beats differently than other people were back then. The [second] album was like a project. A show. And everybody was invited to watch. The first album was about color, and *Low End Theory* was more about technique."

Phife admits: "On the first album I would have rather hung out with my boys on the street and got my hustle on rather than gone into the studio. I wasn't even on the contract for the first album—I was even thinking that me and Jarobi might have our own group, and so we were more like backups for Tip and Ali. But Tip and Ali really wanted me to come through and do my thing, and towards the end of the first album I saw how the fans really liked us. The difference between the two albums is that on *Low End Theory* I was focused, and that just made it that much better."

Working at Battery Studios in Manhattan with engineer, technical advisor, and all-around recording guru Bob Power (Tip points to Power as a sig-

nificant behind-the-scenes influence on the group's sound), Tip and Phife recall the album taking six to eight months to record, versus the three months it had taken for their first. And despite Jive Records having offices in the same building as Battery, the label never got any sneak peaks. Tip says: "We would never let the record label hear what we were doing. We didn't need anybody giving us their critique on our music. And like I said [on "Check the Rhime"], record company people are *shady* [laughs]."

Phife also remembers their self-sufficiency: "Jive would try to come downstairs and see what was goin' on, but we'd always be real discreet. They wouldn't hear anything until we wanted them to hear it, and that did make them mad sometimes. But in the end they were happy, because they knew what we had, and they knew it was hot." Tip adds: "Jive was really big on letting us just be who we were, and that was pretty important, looking back. You can't find that today."

The album, true to its title, featured bass lines front and center, but had many reasons for being called *The Low End Theory*. Tip explains: "At the time, there were some things that were happening in hip-hop, sonically, that I wanted to expand on, especially with the *bottom*. For example, I loved Public Enemy, but I felt that sometimes their mixes didn't have enough dynamics to them. All their sounds were on the same floor: bass, drums, guitars. I wanted to stack things on different levels. Like with Pink Floyd, I loved that group, and their music and mixes were all about dynamics. So I would always explain how dynamic I wanted things to be by telling Bob [Power]: 'I want this to be more at the *bottom*, at the *low end*.' I guess it was from a lack of articulation, but it got the job done. And that's where the title came from."

In addition to Q-Tip's next-level production and groundbreaking flow and lyrics on *The Low End Theory*, the entire group stepped up. Tip says: "Phife was so amazing, so crazy on that album. He was the fire starter and he always brought that edge. Back then and still today, when I make a beat I always envision how Phife is going to sound on it. His tone over my beats is always such a great contrast." According to Tip, Ali Shaheed didn't produce any full tracks per se, but "he did the cuts and had suggestions about how tracks could be improved. He was a much-needed sounding board for everything I was doing, because he understood everything from a DJ perspective."

Phife laughs when recalling Q-Tip's infamous perfectionism (which Tip himself admits): "Tip being such a perfectionist is good and bad. Because

sometimes when a track's blazing hot, he might not feel it and might overdo it. Ali and myself or Chris [Lighty] would be like, 'It's hot, leave it alone!' ”

Another part of the album's sonic impact was the sequencing and Tip's philosophy about “blending” songs together. He says: “With the sequencing, I definitely wanted everything to blend together. De La had all those skits and I wanted things on our album to end cold and go right into the next song, *bam*. No space between songs.”

Interestingly, Q-Tip claims that he didn't like to make videos for Tribe songs, despite the fact that some of the offerings on *Low End Theory* are among hip-hop's finest of all time (notably “Scenario” and “Check the Rhime”). He says: “I don't like videos, even to this day. I think that they take away the mystery of a song. It makes the relationship between the public and the artist a passive one. Our videos were okay, but I like to leave the imagination in there.”

Regarding the album cover, which is one of the most distinctive of the era, Tip recalls, “I wanted [the cover model] to be Naomi Campbell, naked, with all the red, black and green paint all over her, with a Tribe logo on her ass. I guess that was kind of cocky [laughs]. We couldn't get her, of course. I don't think that the label even tried. But we got another model to do the same thing. We wanted a shot where we were all walking in Times Square with her, but that was a bit much, too. And I wanted a white background for the shot, but they flipped it and made it black. I liked how it came out, though. Basically I was just trying to go for the new Ohio Players type of shit.

“After the responses came back and they were all very positive, it really did feel like we had arrived as a group,” says Q-Tip of the album, which hit gold in 1992 and platinum three years later. “A lot of our albums have been ahead of their time, including our first and third records. But I think that *Low End Theory* was one of the most on-time records we ever did. At that time, it really broke us out of the Native Tongues stereotype, and it made people take us very, very seriously, especially after they had heard a song like [the humorous 1989 single] ‘I Left My Wallet in El Segundo.’ Most of all I'm just glad that people consider it a classic *musical* album.”

“*Low End* kicked the door down and knocked it off its hinges,” adds Phife. “In this game, timing is everything, and the timing of *Low End Theory* was perfect.”

# TRACKS

## EXCURSIONS

**Q-Tip:** I took the original bass line, which was in  $\frac{3}{4}$  time, and I put a beat onto the last measure to make it  $\frac{4}{4}$ . I made the drums underneath smack, so it had that big sound. And I put a reverse [Roland TR-] 808 [drum machine] behind it, right before the beat actually kicks in. I loved that Last Poets sample on there, too.

## BUGGIN' OUT

**Q-Tip:** In some of my lyrics on there, I was talking about the trend of R&B artists at the time taking on hip-hop personas—to get more of an edge, I guess. It always seemed to me that that was done out of commerce more than out of genuine interest. It was just the thing to do. It started happening the other way around later on, with hip-hop artists having R&B guests on their songs, around 1995 or 1996. That whole Bad Boy [Records] era. Back then it always bugged me.

## BUTTER

**Phife:** I wrote that before the first album was done, actually, but I had never used those rhymes. The only reason I got “Butter” [as a solo track] was because I argued about it. That was my opportunity right there. I said if [Q-Tip's] going to do five solo tracks then I should do that many too. But that wouldn't be much of a group album if there were ten solo tracks. I wanted

some burn, too. I wouldn't have minded having one more solo shot on that record, but I can't complain too much, because that album was hot.

**Q-Tip:** I'd always ask Phife if he wanted to be on any songs and he'd say yes or no. "Butter" was the one song that we argued about, because I wanted to be on it. He had to fight for that one. That's probably my favorite overall track on the whole album, honestly. I gave in to Phife on our argument because there was some girl in there yelling at me to let him do a solo, so I was like: "All right!" Some of his rhymes on there were older—I remembered them when he started kicking them in the studio.

## VERSES FROM THE ABSTRACT

**Phife:** That's got to be Tip's best solo work, other than [*Midnight Marauders*'] "Sucka Nigga." That's just a killer. Ron Carter, the jazz bassist, is on there, playing live. He was a really cool guy.

**Q-Tip:** About getting Ron Carter on there, Sophia Chang worked at Jive and had worked at Atlantic before that. When she was at Atlantic she did a record with Ron, and when she told me that I was like: "I'd love to get Ron on a track!" I was surprised I hadn't thought of it before, honestly. He was a great guy—we had a really good conversation. He was definitely interested in what we were doing with hip-hop or I don't think that he would have done the track for us. I don't think that's one of my own favorite verses on the album. I guess that it is one of my less abstract rhymes, despite the name of the song. Vinia Mojica is singing on there. I met her back in 1987 or 1988, walking down the street in New York. I was like: "Who are you?" Aside from being beautiful, she wound up being a great singer.

## RAP PROMOTER

**Phife:** That's one of my favorite tracks. It's just about getting jerked [ripped off by promoters] at shows. Most of the things we were talking about on *Low End Theory* were learning experiences from the first album, and "Rap

Promoter" was definitely about that. Promoters will try and get away with murder if you let 'em. It's the American way, unfortunately.

## SCENARIO

**Q-Tip:** There are so many stories about that song. We did a whole other song with Leaders of the New School for the album, but it never made it on there. I met those guys around the time of our first album because Chuck D was fucking around with them. He put them together and named them and all that. I was eighteen or nineteen at that time and Busta was like sixteen. We did two versions of the "album version" [of "Scenario"] with that same music. The one that made it to the album was the first version we did. Then we made a second one, later, with [their manager] Chris Lighty, Pos [from De La Soul], and one of the guys from Black Sheep. Jarobi was even on a third version we did [*laughs*]! We didn't know which one to use. We wanted to get everybody on there, but it was still obvious which one was the best, and we went with that one for the final album version. On the remix [which appears on the single], an MC named Kid Hood is the first guy rhyming on there. He was a guy that I met through a mutual friend. I loved Kid Hood's rhyme, it was on some pre-Redman shit. He could have been right up in that lane in the future, but two days after we recorded him, he got murdered. I think I like the remix better than the album version. And yeah, that video was fun, sure.

**Phife:** That was one of the first tracks, and also the last track we did. The original version of that actually had Pos from De La, Dres and Long from Black Sheep on it as well, and even Chris Lighty, our manager. There was like nine or ten people on it and we was just buggin' out. It was way too long. No one was really wack on it, though—it was dope. I guarantee you that Pos has it somewhere. He saves everything. I don't think I ever told anybody this, but I wanted to go first because a lot of DJs cut the record [short, before it's over] and whoever is second to last might not get heard [*laughs*]. So I was like: "Fuck that, I'm going first! Niggas is gonna hear me!" [*Laughs.*] And I killed it. I think everybody killed on that album version. And none of the guys from the original version cared that they didn't make

it on that final version. I would say that that song is one of the best posse cuts ever, with [Marley Marl and Juice Crew's] "The Symphony" and [EPMD with Redman and K-Solo's] "Headbanger."

## THE INFAMOUS DATE RAPE

**Phife:** Q-Tip came up with the title for that. It was just something that was happenin' a lot at the time [celebrities getting accused of rape]. It never happened to us personally, no no no. If she says no, then aight, beat it.

## CHECK THE RHIME

**Q-Tip:** That song took a minute to develop. And I don't really know why we spelled *rhyme* like we did [*laughs*]. I just liked fucking up words, doing lowercase and uppercase where they didn't belong. I also take full responsibility for making up the word *vivrant* [*laughs*]. When I first did that song I had just discovered how to chop beats up in certain ways. The beat was Grover Washington's "Hydra," and EPMD had used it [on the song "Underground" in 1990], but I knew that I could get more out of it by getting the kicks and the snares out—to make the drums more cohesive. That was a really early version of beat-chopping that I used on there. With the video for that song, that cleaners we were on top of [Nu-Clear Drive-In Cleaners, on Linden Boulevard in St. Albans] was just a staple in our neighborhood. I saw that U2 video where they were on top of that building in L.A. and it was all tall and shit, and I was like [*voice gets very deep and sarcastically macho*]: "Fuck that! We're gonna do it on top of a building in the 'hood!" That day we did the video was a lot of fun—it was like the hottest day of the year, and then there was a thunderstorm and the wind was blowing all around. There were tons of people, coming from all over Queens. People were out there hanging out, barbequing, shooting dice.

**Phife:** Originally we did that song to a different beat. It was hot, too. We didn't title it at first, but as soon as we put the horns on there, we just named it "Check the Rhime." The original version would have come across

dark, almost like a Mobb Deep joint. Those back-and-forth lyrics with Tip and I on there came very naturally. We grew up together, and when we're onstage he knows what I'm gonna do before I do it and vice versa. Ali is like the referee behind the turntables, making sure we're doing it right. Ali gets the vibe the most by being back there, watching both of us. That video was done down the block from my grandmother's house and a block or two from Q-Tip's mother's house.

## EVERYTHING IS FAIR

**Q-Tip:** I was kind of speaking about a specific woman with those lyrics. It was a story I had heard about and seen, with the different images on there. Skeff [Anselm] produced that one as well. He was working with Brand Nubian at the time and he was around in the studio a lot, so I was like: "Yo, throw us a beat!"

## JAZZ (WE'VE GOT)

**Phife:** When I said, "Produced and arranged by the four-man crew" on there, I was talkin' about Skeff Anselm. He's the other dude with the hat in the video for that. He used to be in the studio with us all the time, whether he was doin' a track for us or not.

**Q-Tip:** I was hanging out with Pete Rock and Large Professor and we were talking about doing a record together. Pete had come up with that beat, but the song we were going to do never materialized. So I asked Pete if he was going to use the track, and if I could maybe trade him something for it. I already had the record he used, but I wanted to get his permission. He was like: "Yeah, go ahead." I don't think I ever traded him back for it, so I guess I still owe him! When it came to hip-hop and jazz, the work we were doing was a unique opportunity to combine both of them, like the way we used Ron Carter on "Verses from the Abstract." Both musics came from the black underclass, and both are very expressive. There were so many similarities, and that made it even better to sample it and rhyme over it. I thought Phife



was talking about Jarobi when he mentions the “four-man crew.” Although Jarobi wasn’t around much on the second album.

## **SHOW BUSINESS** *Featuring Brand Nubian*

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**Q-Tip:** Skeff Anselm produced that. His style was definitely very Strong City [the label that Jazzy Jay owned]—it had that Jazzy Jay skip to it. We got Skeff on the record because, contrary to what people think, I didn’t want the album to be all about me. I wanted it to breathe, and for other people to come in. Tribe meant what it said, it was a community. As for Brand Nubian, we had a song called “Georgie Porgie” that we did with them. It was about a kid who grew up in the ’hood and wound up being gay. We played it for the label [Jive] and they felt that it was a little too . . . strong. So we all decided not to put it on the album. Puba got mad and didn’t want to do another track, so that’s why he’s not on there. We used the same beat.

**Phife:** That was with Brand Nubian. We’d always run into them at clubs like Power House and the Daddy’s Night that Puffy used to throw at Red Zone. I don’t know who Tip would tell you that he got a lot from as an MC, but for me personally, Grand Puba was my favorite nigga of all time, with KRS and LL. Puba was mad witty and sarcastic, all at the same time, and that’s how I always wanted to come across when I rhymed. With the content of the song, we had seen some real fucked-up things in the business, and we just had the idea to spill it on a record. Everybody looks at it as entertainment, but there’s seriousness to it.

## **WHAT?**

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**Q-Tip:** That was done kind of midway through the sessions. The label wanted that song as the first single. It was between that and “Check the Rhime.” I’m glad that it went the way it did. Things definitely would have been different if “What?” was the first single.