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KILLER CROSSOVER

Iverson may have the platinum chains, but Shaquille O'Neal has the plaque. KING documents the rap career of the only athlete to ever scan a million units sold.

He may as well have been on the free throw line, because Shaquille O'Neal didn't have a clue. There he was in Orlando, recording his debut album, *Shaq Diesel*, and the 7-foot center didn't know punch-ins from personal fouls.

His first single, "What's Up, Doc?" was the surprise hit of spring 1993, but that was different; that was easy. The song was already recorded by the Fu-Schnickens and all Shaq had to do was spit a verse, make sure the facts were straight ("Now who's the first pick? Me, word is bond / And not a Christian Laettner, not Alonzo Mourning") and let his presence take care of the rest. That, like flushing an alley-oop from Scott Skiles, was second nature to him.

Artists who have recorded with Shaq will talk about his ability to come off the top of the head; Peter Gunz even thinks he's "one of the top five best freestylers ever." But actually linking three 16s, with a hook and a concept was a different story. Sensing this, producer Erick Sermon kicked the Fu-Schnickens and some Jive executives out of the studio. Two hours later, "Shoot, Pass, Slam," was done. Not long after, so was "I'm Outstanding."

The hits, for lack of a better term, kept on coming.

Chapter I: Can We Rock?

Shaquille Rashaun O'Neal was born on March 6, 1972, in Newark, New Jersey. Before moving to Germany at the age of 12, Shaq became captivated by hip-hop. He listened to records by Run-DMC, and was a casual observer of the culture. That is, until he put pen to paper.

Mark Stevens (*Shaq's first cousin, CEO of Deja34 Records*) When we were little kids Shaq would write raps on a piece of paper and then perform in front of the mirror. Later, in college, the music would motivate him to play basketball harder. Before a game he would be listening to rap and be like, "I'm going to get 50 tonight."

Jeff Sledge (*director of A&R at Jive Records*) Shaq was that era's LeBron. He mentioned in an article, I think in *USA Today*, that one of his favorite groups was the Fu-Schnickens. Them and Das-EXX were his two favorite groups; we just moved faster than Sylvia Rhone. Fu-Schnickens was our group, so we engineered for them to meet. They clicked. Shaq was going on *The Arsenio Hall Show* and said, "I want to rap with my favorite group." They came out, did "What's Up Doc?" and it went really well. That set things in motion.

Chip-Fu (*artist, Shaq Diesel*) We decided to put him on a song, “What’s Up Doc?” The song was already finished and we were about to release it; we flew to Florida for him to record his verse. After Jive heard the finished product, they flipped over it.

Sledge Of course we knew it was a hit, it had a Bugs Bunny chorus. Once that blew, we decided to make an album.

Jeff Fenster (*senior VP of A&R at Jive Records*): The key thing for us was that Shaq was definitely committed to putting the time and the work in to create an album. A lot of people in his position might make a record but not put in the time and effort to make a competitive record and Shaq was very clear that he was going to take this seriously, and he did. We knew we were going to sell some records regardless because Shaq was so hot at the time, but we knew it was a challenge to make a record that was actually a good record.

Sledge: We went down to Orlando. It was myself and the Fu-Schnickens. The Fu-Schnickens were helping him write. Me, being the A&R person, I was thinking about what type of records dude should make, but more importantly, what kind of sound he should have. I called Tribe, and Ali and Phife were into doing it. Phife was a sports fan so he was excited to meet Shaq. Also, he had a good relationship with the Fu-Schnickens because of “La Schmoove.” Ali had produced some stuff for the Fu-Schnickens so it was kind of like all in house. I also called Erick Sermon. EPMD had just broken up and he was still trying to feel his way around as a solo artist. He had just produced “Hittin’ Switches” and that had a big, big sound. This is a big guy, he needs a big sound

Phife (*artist, Shaq Diesel*) Jeff Sledge knew I was a basketball head and approached me about [working with Shaq]. Being that I already was a fan of his—LSU and Orlando Magic—it was no brainer for me. I was on “Where Ya At,” and Ali produced “Giggin On Em” and I co-wrote that. I pretty much wrote most of the verse. He added certain things he wanted as well. It was truly a collaboration. It was his first album so he needed some tutoring with things like breath control. He’s a big kid. When we went to his house in Orlando he had all the actual arcade games.

Ali Shaheed Muhammad (*producer as Dr. “?”, Shaq Diesel*) The first time I met Shaq was at his crib. He was young but smart. He knew exactly what he wanted to do but still knew how to have fun. When it came to hitting the studio, he was real serious. He had his rhyme pad and was ready to go. Some of his rhymes he wrote on the spot. We were down there for maybe three days. It was like a small mini vacation because it was Orlando. I went to Universal Studios to see what that was like.

Sledge We put out “Skillz” then “I’m Outstanding” then “Shoot Pass Slam.” It came out in October 1993. The publicity was crazy. The fact he was making a rap record got crazy pub. It was in Time, USA Today and places like that, The Source. Once they heard it, it wasn’t half bad. *Diesel* sold 1.1 million. He was like, “I can’t believe I went platinum.” It blew his mind, and ours too.

Ken Bailey (*Shaq's first cousin, executive producer Respect*) By the second album we started to understand the business a little more. The Fu-Schnickens were going through their own problems at that time too.

Chip-Fu Jive saw that our friendship was getting stronger and they tried to sever it. A friend of mine told me that Jive was saying that we were trying to take control. We weren't trying to control him.

Sledge They really had it in their mind that they were going to be executive producing the project. They didn't have that type of position in the game to demand that type of shit.

Released in November 1994, Shaq-Fu: Da Return, featured Method Man, RZA, Keith Murray, Redman, Erick Sermon, Warren G, but sold 550,000 copies, half of his debut.

Keith Murray (*artist, Shaq-Fu: Da Return*) At first I didn't take him seriously. I just thought it would be cool to make a record with him because it's Shaq, the eighth wonder of the world. Then I started listening and I was like, 'Shaq is the man.'

RZA (*producer, Shaq-Fu: Da Return*): I remember Funkmaster Flex, first time he played "No Hooks" was like, 'What does Shaq think he's doing rhyming in between the RZA and Meth?' He killed it though.

Funkmaster Flex (*DJ, Hot 97 FM*) I don't remember that one well. I might have said something. How did that record go? [*Writer raps the chorus*] That one I didn't like. Now I know. I didn't love that one.

Sledge On the second album the videos were "No Hook" and "Biological Didn't Bother." I think that's it. This one did like exactly half of what the first one did. It went gold. The first one did like 1.1 million and this one was like 550,000. I think with him being an athlete there was a novelty factor to it and on the second one, the novelty factor went down. On the first thing, I think some people bought it because they thought it might be a collector's item. On the next one, the people had kind of moved on and they were buying Biggie albums and Nas albums. I remember we were on a plane going to Philly to work with Warren G and I told him, "Having a platinum album and a gold album is more than most rappers get. Everything from here on out is just playing with the house money. Guys who do it for a living don't even go platinum." My advice to him was that we basically already won the lottery. I told him at that point that he shouldn't make any more records because the sales were going to keep dropping.

Bailey When Shaq left Jive he still owed them money. He didn't understand how with a platinum and gold album he still owed the record company money. He was like, "This is not the type of deal I need to be in."

Sledge I remember when he got his first royalty check he was like, "What is this recouping shit?" He wanted to do a label deal, but Jive generally doesn't do those type of deals with anybody. We parted on good terms.

Chapter II: Whose World Is This?

After leaving Jive, Shaq formed a deal with Rob Kahane at Trauma Records, which was distributed by Interscope. Shaq then began work on his third studio album, You Can't Stop the Reign, a star-studded affair packed with cameos by The Notorious B.I.G., Rakim and Jay-Z. It was the most critically acclaimed effort of his career.

Peter Gunz (*artist, TWISM Records*) Interscope wanted Tariq to help Shaquille out with hooks, critiquing his flows. Tariq called me one day and asked me to fly out. Once I got there, I told Shaq that I had to get back because I was on probation. Shaq got my probation officer on the phone and told him, "He's working at my record company now." He signed some sneakers and that was it. I only brought an outfit for the weekend because I thought I would only help him out with one song. Shaq pulled out a stack of hundreds the size of a cinder block and told me to go shopping.

Bailey [Tariq and Peter] taught Shaq how to make popular music. But Frank Edwards, God rest his soul, worked his ass off to get Biggie, Nas, Mobb Deep on the album. When Biggie came to the house it was like seeing a kid looking at his idol. Shaq looked up to Biggie.

Lil Cease (*artist*) Big was looking to him like, "You're a big motherfucker." We went out to his crib in Orlando. He took us on a tour of the whole spot, kicked it, met his family, and met his wife. We was just chilling. As soon as we got out there, him and Big got to work. We was sitting in there vibing and they were listening to the beat. I smoke and you couldn't smoke out there so I used to take breaks and go outside. You couldn't smoke in his crib. C'mon he is a professional ball player, he can't have certain shit around you like that. We respect his business. We weren't going to disrespect the dude like that.

Ken Bailey: When it was time for Biggie to lay vocals, it was nothing to him. It took like an hour and a half. He sat in the room for just 30, 40 minutes just listening to the track and then he came back like, 'I'm ready.' He came in, laid his vocals and that was it. Then it was back to hanging out at the house. It was like a three day trip. I got the funniest story about Cease. He was on a Jet Ski, flung off it and damn near drowned. My girlfriend had to jump in and save his life. He didn't know how to swim. He was like 19, but it was hilarious. To see Biggie's big ass sitting on the dock laughing at his boy was the funniest picture.

Lil Cease That was the first time I went jet skiing. We tried to make a turn and all of us fell off that shit. I lost my mind because I didn't know how to swim. I was scared to death. I didn't like that shit at all.

Peter Gunz Flex still plays "You Can't Stop the Reign" and drops bombs on it every other night.

Funkmaster Flex That record with Biggie is tough. I even like it without Biggie on it. There is a version without Biggie on it. I think the 12 inch didn't have Biggie. That record is tough.

Lil Cease Big had wrote a rhyme for Shaq, but it was something too much for Shaq to say. It was some hard shit. It was some gangster shit. Shaq was like, "I can't. I'm a ballplayer, I can't say that type of shit."

Peter Gunz Shaq really writes his own stuff. When I tell people that, they say, "That's bullshit." All I had to do was critique his flow.

Lord Tariq (*artist*) Most of the rhymes, he wrote. Me and Pete did the majority of the fill-ins, the stuff he had to tighten up and didn't have the time to. He came in, learned it and spit it like he wrote it.

Sauce Money (*artist, Respect*) I was there sort of as a coach. Shaq wrote his own lyrics so I was just really there for moral support. We worked on hooks together and different rhyme schemes. He's a talented brother. To his credit, to play basketball full time and to do that you would think he would be looking for people to put the work in for him but he definitely pushed his own pen.

Kay Slay (*Director of A&R, Deja34 Records*) Last summer, Cam'Ron was in Miami. We told him to come through. Cam came in the studio and was like, "Yo, what is Shaq doing with a pen and pad?" I was like, "He's writing his rhymes." People just don't believe it.

While recording You Can't Stop the Reign in the summer of 1996, Shaq signed with the Lost Angeles Lakers. He quickly hooked up with a West Coast icon and adapted the sound of his new surroundings.

Peter Gunz We went to L.A. and got a record with DJ Quik; Shaq came up with the hook.

Tom Sturges (*former VP & GM of TWISM Records*) "I like playing on the West Side / Even though I miss playing on the East Side." We were getting 90 spins a week on Power 99 and 100.3 The Beat [in L.A.]. "Straight Playin'" was big.

Peter Gunz I was talking to Jay-Z one day and he said that was Shaquille's best record ever. He told me, "You know Shaquille's best record is that record he did with DJ Quik."

Sturges That whole album was genius, but we couldn't sell more than 200,000 unfortunately. So we got out of the Trauma deal and did a new JV with A&M. TWISM/A&M put out a second album [with the new deal] called *Respect*.

Clark Kent (*producer, Respect*) That Loon joint, "Heat It Up," was a hit record, but the record company stopped that. The morning after I mixed the record, I took it to The Beat and they added it.

Loon (*artist*, Respect) On *Soul Train*, Shaq performed that jam but it wasn't with me. I turned on Soul Train and it said, "Shaq featuring Loon" and then he came out with not even a good stunt double. I ain't mad at it. I chalk it up as an industry glitch.

Bailey They changed the song at the last minute. They used someone else to replace Loon and lip-synch the lyrics. It was me. I knew all the raps anyway.

Cus (*engineer*, Respect) Clark called me and asked, "Do you want to go to L.A. and mix Shaq's record?" This is in May 1998. They went out to Utah, and came back real fast [Writer's Note: The Lakers were swept, 4-0, by the Utah Jazz in the 1998 Western Conference Finals.] Kobe Bryant rhymes on Respect. "3X Dope" is the one with Kobe. Go back and listen to that song. There is a third person with Shaq and Sonja Blade; it's Kobe. From what I understand, they couldn't get him cleared so they just never wrote that he was on it. Really, who can prove that it was him?

Clark Kent Kobe was out of his mind. He thought that he was nice. The conversations we had about making records were hilarious. He was like, "Yo, because lyrically..." He was like a Ras Kass-type rapper, or at least the thought he was.

Bailey When Phil Jackson came into the picture with the Lakers, he [told Shaq], "I need you to take a break from that and focus on this." That's when he decided to step back and focus only on basketball.

Chapter III: The Return of the King

Shaq followed Jackson's advice, took a step back from rap and led the Lakers to three consecutive NBA championships (2000-2002). He recorded another album, Shaquille O'Neal Presents his Supafriends Vol. 1, which is unreleased. During the 2004 NBA playoffs, DJ Sickamore released Drop Another Day #34 with a freestyle from Shaq. It led to one of the more confusing rap battles in hip-hop history.

DJ Sickamore (*mixtape DJ*, Drop Another Day #34) I got the song from an old man in a trench coat on a side street. I didn't even know at the time that he was dissing Mad Skillz. I didn't know until later.

Skillz (*artist*) My man told me, "Come listen to this Sickamore mixtape. I think this nigga Shaquille is talking about you." I'm like, "Shaquille who?" To this day, I have no idea what I said to tick him off that bad.

Lord Tariq I think Skillz came to Orlando. Whether he worked with Shaq, I don't know.

Bailey I've been there for every single one of Shaq's sessions and I ain't ever seen Skillz write a verse for him.

Skillz I never wrote anything for Shaq. If I did, he would have sold a lot more records

Peter Gunz I want to say that Skillz said something about Shaq being wack.

Lord Tariq Skillz was talking a lot of shit. Corey told me all about it.

Corey Gunz (artist) I don't recall from where it stemmed from or where it all started but I know he said some things that Shaquille didn't like.

Skillz Maybe the Supafriendz thing. In a song that never really dropped, I said, "I'm from the R-I-C / Anybody saying Supafriendz is lying if they don't know me." That was [directed at] local cats from my city. Anyhow, I did an answer to Shaq, which was "The Champ is Here." Then he put out an answer, so I did a whole CD. Off that mixtape, *Skillz vs. Shaq*, I might have made over \$20,000.

DJ Vlad (*mixtape DJ*, Hot in Here Part 5) I told Shaq, "Do you want to respond on this?" He sent me a CD with a couple of freestyles. The Kobe disses got on ESPN. We were supposed to do something with MTV but I think his lawyers told him to lay low.

Bailey Shaq killed him

Kay Slay Mad Skillz is a great lyricist and so is Shaq. I would say it was a draw.

Funkmaster Flex Who battled Skillz? Shaq? I didn't know that. Mad Skillz? I didn't know that. I didn't know that. Mad Skillz said something slick about me on a record anyway. He said something slick.

DJ Vlad I think that one line about Skillz being a valet parker killed it. Shaq called me saying, "Thanks for helping me win my first hip-hop battle."

Skillz You're kidding me, right? The day Shaq beats me in a battle, is the day he'll be able to fit in a fucking Ford Fiat.

Following the battle, Shaq retreated from the music industry.

Peter Gunz Shaquille really kind of retired from rap. You will never get another rap album from Shaquille. Ever time I bring it up, he says, "I'm retired. It's over." He will do a song with you but as far as doing another album, he says he's done. I think it was the politics. I think he got tired of hearing he wasn't a rapper. You can quote me on this, I don't care, and he said, "There is not enough money in rap." Not enough money in hip hop for him to put up with the politics.

Corey Gunz Music is in his blood. Every time I see him, he plays me stuff he made. He stays in the studio.

Kay Slay He's never going to move on from hip hop. This man is hip hop to the fullest.

Ron Artest (*athlete, rapper*) It doesn't get any more hip hop than Shaq's albums. He kind of led the rebirth of hip hop because hip hop had turned to R&B and Shaq wasn't trying to take it that route. Shaq is a pioneer.

Flex I spoke to Shaq one day about sports guys who make rap records, and he said, 'Just remember, I'm the best one out here that did this sports thing on the mic.' He was right. He was saying it jokingly but he was right.

WC (*artist, Shaquille O'Neal Presents His Superfriendz. Vol. 1*) Shaq had bangers. He had actual bangers. I'm not saying those other cats couldn't rap but Shaq had bangers.

Skillz He's probably the most successful ball player turned rapper but that doesn't say much. They were all ass, all of them.