

WORDS BY ETHAN BROWN • PHOTOGRAPHS BY JILL GREENBERG

MY NAME IS PRINCE ...AND I MAKE BEATS

AS AN ECCENTRIC, ENDURING PRODUCER FROM LONG ISLAND, PRINCE PAUL MANAGES TO BE BOTH UNSUNG AND HIGHLY REGARDED. HIS CLEVER NEW ALBUM, *A PRINCE AMONG THIEVES*, REINVENTS THE RAP ALBUM. THIS IS HIS STORY.



Prince Paul: I was born in Queens, but my family moved out to Amityville, Long Island when I was like four or five. Growing up, I was into bikes, racing cars and records. That was about it. I've collected records since I was five years old.

Peggy Houston (Paul's mom): We used to have to put a boombox in the baby carriage with Paul. And his father and I would play records around the house all the time.

Prince Paul: When I got into hip-hop it wasn't even called hip-hop. It was more B-boy than hip-hop. This was around '77-78. I was in the fourth grade, and that's when the whole DJing thing came in. The records they played then were Cameo's "It's Serious," "Hot Shot" by Karen Young, Cerrone's "Look For Love" and of course "Apache." I was going to block parties and backyard parties in Long Island and in Brooklyn, cos' my grandmother lived out in Brooklyn. That's how I got exposed to different styles. I would sit in front of the DJ from the time I rode my bike to the block party until they loaded the equipment back up. That enabled me to figure out a lot of records, because even though a lot of DJs scratched out labels, they weren't smart enough to put the covers down. So when I got money from birthdays or holidays, I went out and bought those same records.

Trugoy (of De La Soul): Paul was the neighborhood DJ. Everybody knew about him.

Prince Paul: I started DJing in the fifth grade. I had a real makeshift system, this little Lafayette turntable that I hooked up to this other turntable set. I used the balance knob as the mixer. I didn't have direct drive turntables until I did "On Fire" with Stetsasonic. I was like the McGyver of hip-hop!

Peggy Houston: Paul was mature for his age; he was always with the older kids.

Daddy-O (of Stetsasonic): Paul was always tagging along. But it wasn't like he was out of his league or anything like that; he was just mature.

Biz Markie: I grew up in Suffolk County, but I knew about Paul. Paul was nice; everyone knew that. He was ahead of his time.

Prince Paul: I did play a lot of parties, but some DJs wouldn't let me spin because I was so young. My breakthrough gig happened at The Ace Center in Amityville in 1981. I cut up Trouble Funk's "Pump Me Up" and that became my claim to fame.

Biz Markie: Paul had a super-human style. When I saw him I was like, "Yo, he's gonna be one of my DJs." And he was. He'd be at a party and I'd get on the mic.

Prince Paul: I worked with Biz Markie first; I was in the eighth grade at the time. We would do parties and tapes together. I didn't join Stetsasonic until '84. The story of how I met Stetsasonic still bugs me out to this day. My friends were going out to Brooklyn to DJ. They were filling the van up and they were like, "Yo, you wanna go?" I was like, "I don't know." So they started pulling off and I was like, "Wait, wait. I wanna go." I jumped in the van at the last minute. When we got there, it turned out that there was a DJ battle on the block.

Daddy-O: The battle was at this party called the "Brevoit Day Celebration," in the Brevoit Projects in Brooklyn.

Prince Paul: I started battling, doing that under the leg mixing, really showing off and that caught the attention of Daddy-O and the other Stet guys.

Daddy-O: Paul was spinning Liquid Liquid's "Cavern." He was spinning like he was mad at the turntables. He would hit the scratch and be like "unnng!" We were looking for a DJ for Stetsasonic and he seemed perfect for what we needed.

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Prince Paul: At first I thought Stetsasonic were gonna beat me up. They gathered around me and said, "Yo, that's him. That's him!" I was like "Uh-oh." Back then, they wore spikes and leather, "Beat Street style" clothes.

Daddy-O: We used to do the Grandmaster Flash thing: spikes, leather jackets, collars, the whole nine. So when we approached him he had this look like, "What the fuck do they want from me?"

Prince Paul: They were like, "We're looking for a DJ. Would you be down with us? We just won this Mr. Magic contest at Coney Island last weekend." We were initially going to get a deal with Sugarhill. Then we got the deal with Tommy Boy.

Monica Lynch (president of Tommy Boy Records): Stetsasonic had just won the Mr. Magic talent contest and they came by the office. Paul was the baby of the band. He was shy, quiet and he was always doing something different.

Prince Paul: Stetsasonic were thinking about making a record, but I didn't know anything about making records. I was 16 or 17, naive as you can be. We recorded "Just Say Stet" as a demo. After we got the deal with Tommy Boy, we re-did the song up at Tom Silverman's studio. I just brought a few records down and scratched on it.

Daddy-O: We did "Just Say Stet" in Tom Silverman's apartment. Tom didn't even have a table for Paul's decks, so he had to spin on the floor. But Paul was a perfectionist. If there was even the tiniest mistake with one of his scratches, we'd have to back up and do the song all over again.

Prince Paul: After "Just Say Stet" everything started going really well. If I didn't go with my friends on that van to Brooklyn I wouldn't be where I am now.

Monica Lynch: If you listen to Stetsasonic's first record "In Full Gear" you can hear the precursors to the skits and weirdness that lay ahead with De La Soul.

Prince Paul: The guys from De La and I were all in the same school together. Mase was in ninth grade, Pos was in 10th, Trugoy was in 11th and I was in 12th.

Trugoy: We all went to school with Paul, but we weren't formally introduced until 1987 when he approached us one day at work. We were sweeping up at this flea market called the Busy Bee. It surprised us that Paul would even approach us at all; we knew him as Paul the great DJ, Paul the Stetsasonic man.

Prince Paul: They were working cleaning up at the Busy Bee at the time. It was like a flea market in Massapequa. It was funny though because they were always dressing real cool.

Trugoy: We probably were the only janitors wearing gold fronts.

Prince Paul: Our music teacher at school, Mr. Collins, ran this small record label and he had signed this guy named Gangsta B. Mase was his DJ at the time. Mr. Collins asked me to come in and program a beat for him. But I was like, "I don't think this is really good, man." And Mase was like, "Yo, I agree." I laid down the beat anyway and Mase was like, "Yo, I see you got a whole lot of ideas. I got this group called De La Soul and if you want to try these ideas with us, we'd be down."

Prince Paul: So De La brought a demo by my house. It was a rough sketch of "Plug Tunin." I was like, "This is phat! I've got some ideas for this!" I threw a little dough into it and we re-recorded it up at Calliope Studios. I tried to get Daddy-O involved, but he said they sounded too much like the Ultramagnetics.

Daddy-O: Yeah, I thought they sounded like the Ultramagnetics. But "Plug Tunin'" was dope. That was my shit. I didn't think the rest of the demo was as strong. I thought that all that shit could have been as dope as "Plug Tunin'."

Big Daddy Kane: When I first heard "Plug Tunin'" I didn't know what the hell it was. If someone had asked me to use that track I would've been like, "You're buggin'!" But I ended up working with Paul on "It's A Big Daddy Thing" and "Ain't No Stoppin' Us Now." I thought Paul had a whole different, unique style. He'd take a sample that somebody else would use—and turn it into something else completely.

Prince Paul: Ironically, when the De La demo was done I asked Daddy-O to shop it for me. And he was getting more buzz on my tape than his own artists. That's when he became interested in the group.

Dante Ross (veteran music industry talent scout): I was working for Rush Management at the time. Me and Daddy-O were real good friends and he introduced me to Paul. I thought De La Soul were the best thing I'd heard since Slick Rick. Monica Lynch was thinking about signing them.

Monica Lynch: Daddy-O and Paul came by the office with a tape of De La Soul's "Plug Tunin'." The best word to describe that song is a word that was in the hip-hop parlance of the day—"dusted." It was abstract, so different from the visceral, literal kind of hip-hop that was dominant back then. It was arty shit. It was one of those things where you thought, "This is either going to be a landmark or it won't even make a dent in the consciousness."

Prince Paul: We had offers from Profile, Geffen and Tommy Boy. De La went with Tommy Boy because they felt that it was the most personable label. Profile and Geffen were offering a lot more money, but we went with Tommy Boy.

Daddy-O: I shopped the De La Soul record around for Paul. Tommy Boy signed them quicker than I could say fuck. Monica moved so quickly she had the contracts ready before I even knew they were being drawn.

Monica Lynch: Yeah, we jumped to sign De La Soul.

Dante Ross: Monica hired me from Rush and said, "This is the first act you're gonna work with."

Prince Paul: De La was my pet project. "Plug Tunin'" was doing really good. It got play on the radio. It was bumpin' at the Latin Quarters. The next songs we recorded were "Potholes In My Lawn" and "Jenifa."

Trugoy: The first time we went into the studio with Paul [it] just blew me away. The scene was amazing: Daddy-O was pacing up and down the place on the phone, music was blaring, and people were just clowning.

Prince Paul: After those initial sessions, we did *3 Feet High and Rising* and that just took off. We had a budget of like \$20,000 for the record. It took about a month and a half to make. We worked so well together because they were open and I was open.

Dante Ross: The De La guys ran through my records. The *3 Feet High* sessions really inspired me to make my own beats. Those sessions were so fun you'd have people like Q-Tip and Mike G running through, and the guys from Upstairs Records would be bringing us beats.

Prince Paul: After every studio session, I would write out a homework assignment: "You must have rhymes done for this song." I would write it into their book and they would have it done. I respected them and they respected me.

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MC Serch: I really wanted to be on "Buddy" but I never made it. Paul gave me two tracks instead which became "Gas Face" and "Brooklyn Queens."

Trugoy: *3 Feet High and Rising* was like learning to ride a bike. There were no boundaries. We could be foolish, angry, hostile whatever. There were no limits. Paul wouldn't stop us from doing anything. If you made a joke he would say, "Go and record that!" That's how a lot of the skits began.

Prince Paul: Everybody says that I was the first person to put skits into hip-hop records. It went like this, though: We finished doing *3 Feet High* and I was like, "Yo, it's missing something. We need something to link the record together." I said, "Let's do a game show so people can get to know the group better." We had our engineer play the host and everybody made up ill questions.

Trugoy: Paul always instigated the skits, but everybody had a hand in them. All that dumb shit like, "How many fibers are intertwined in a shredded wheat biscuit?" Looking back I just go, "What the hell were we thinking? How did we come up with that shit?"

Prince Paul: People would actually answer the questions and cut out the proof of purchase on the back of the album. I remember with the shredded wheat question, someone wrote: "Oh, it's a trick question. The fibers aren't intertwined, they're interwoven." All the mail went to Dante Ross—here was a big box of mail at Tommy Boy called "Dante The Scrub Mail."

Dante Ross: I used to call everyone "scrub." One day we were doing a show down in Texas with Sir Mix-A-Lot. It was like 100 degrees and I was trying to get De La to jump in the pool. They wouldn't even get in. I was like, "Damn, you can't get Black people to go in the water! Y'all are scrubs!" So they called me "Dante The Scrub" in revenge. But I got Maseo back. I called him Baby Huey and the name stuck. I never looked at the "Dante The Scrub" mail. But I do know that no one ever had the right answers.

Prince Paul: Ever since then everybody wants to do skits. What's wack about skits now is that people feel like they need them to make an album. Somebody came up to me recently and said, "Yo, my album's almost done, man. All I gotta do is put the skits on it." That's really corny.

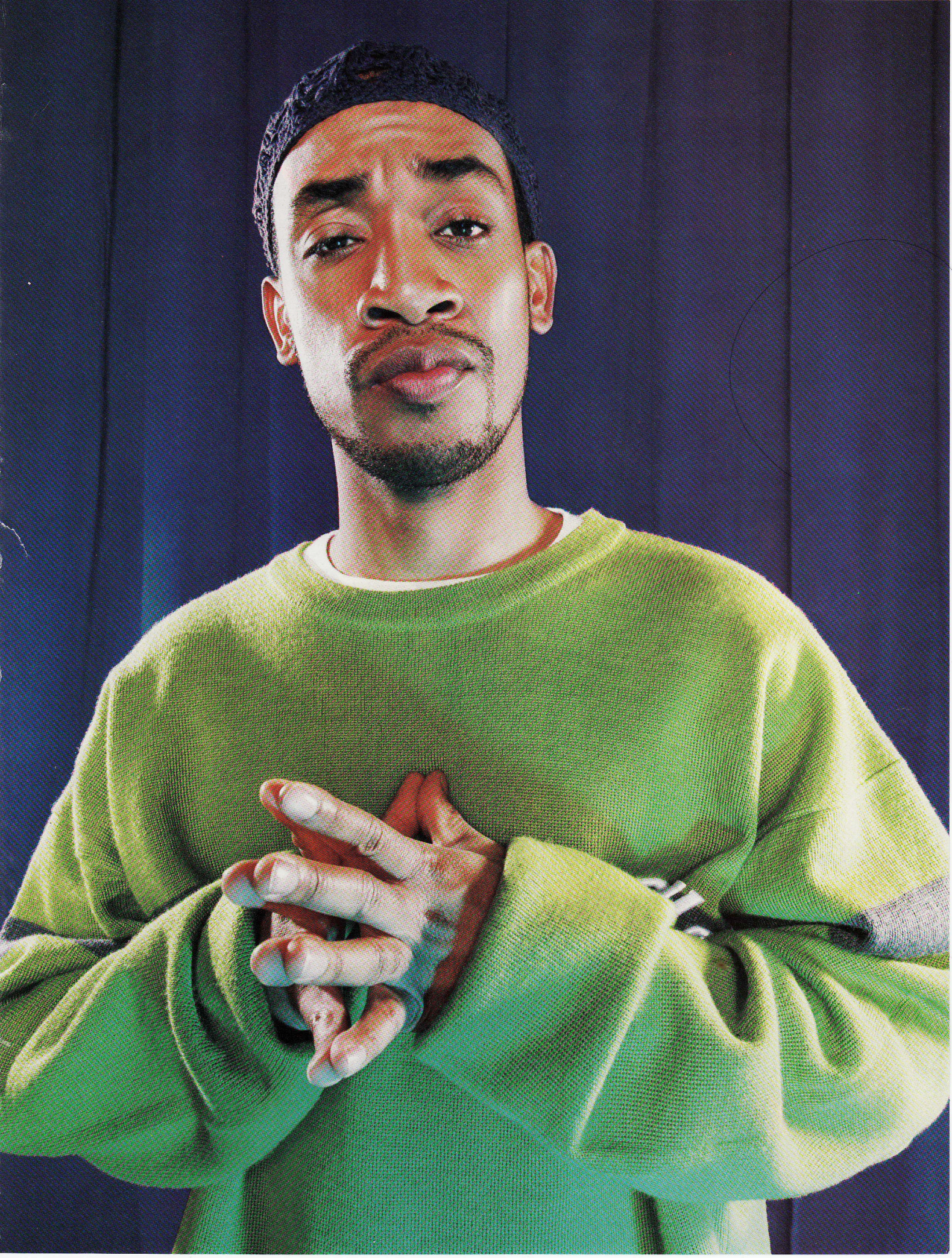
Prince Paul: *3 Feet High* worked because it was just about having fun and not being really pressured by sales or anything like that. When we finished the album we handed it in minus "Me, Myself and I." But the label made us go back and record it because they felt like we didn't have any hit records on there.

Monica Lynch: De La Soul was embraced by a very interesting mix of kids: Black, white, Latino. And they were so popular in colleges across the country.

Trugoy: It was a golden age back then. '88-'89 was pure to me. It was like, "Wow! Hip-hop is finally here. Albums were just blowing shit out of the water. Artists that were there then are still here now. I'm proud to have been a part of that era."

Daddy-O: It was a golden age for hip-hop records, not hip-hop itself. Even if you weren't Run-DMC or The Beasties, you could eat. Now if you're not Jay-Z, you're starving.

Prince Paul: What made that era so good was that everybody strived to be unique. It was important to have your own identity. That's why Public Enemy was so different from De La; De La was different from Ultramagnetics; Ultramagnetics was different from Eric B and Rakim...and



so on. It probably won't be like that ever again. People are so into being each other right now and being accepted and scared of like breaking the mold.

Dante Ross: And you could pretty much sample anything back then and cats hadn't run through most of the records yet.

Monica Lynch: Sampling was an enormous gray area back then. There was an element of risk to all this. But as a label we were at the forefront of establishing the ground rules of sampling. *3 Feet High* would be unimaginable now cost-wise for us as a label.

Prince Paul: For De La's second album, I remember I just wanted to do something similar to *3 Feet High*. You know, have fun and laugh and do something really crazy. But De La Soul and hip-hop had matured a lot—they didn't want to be pigeonholed as a zany group.

Trugoy: Paul felt excluded. It was sad, but Paul knew that we were just handling our business. One day Paul called me and he was like, "Damn, I'm not doing this De La Soul album. I don't know what I'm going to do."

Prince Paul: It was sad; it was the hardest decision I ever had to make in my career. But when I listen to the album now, it sounds really good. To be honest with you, I think De La Soul did a lot better without my presence.

Trugoy: We did well without Paul, not better.

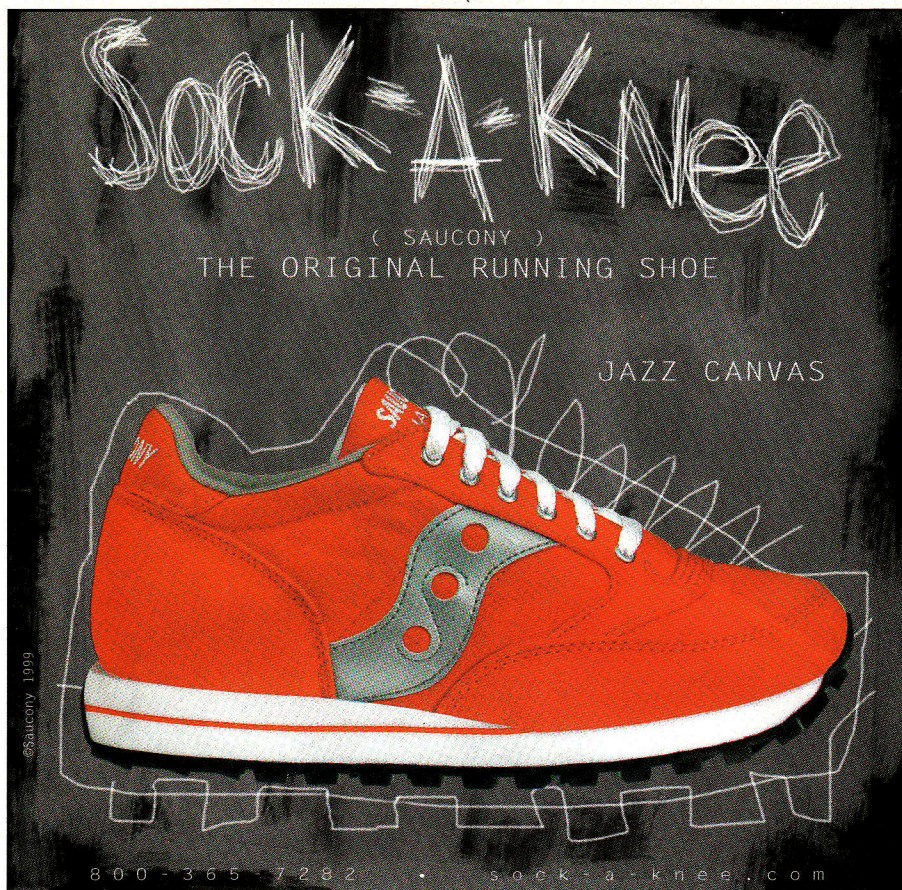
Prince Paul: That whole experience with De La led me to do *Psychoanalysis*, which was my farewell to making records. And then my relationship with Rush Management fell apart. It was like 1992-93. So I just called in everybody who I felt got jerked—that's how the Gravediggaz got started. I got Fruitkwan, 'cos he got kicked out of Stet after the second album; Poetic, who was homeless at the time; and RZA, who was hustling. So I pulled together everybody who was in the same mindset I was in. I was like, "Yo! We gonna get em all back."

Trugoy: When Paul got into the Gravediggaz I thought, "Damn, he's gonna do some shit that's gonna blow us out of the water."

Prince Paul: They all came to the house and we did a demo. I thought I had the phattest demo in the world. We shopped it and NOBODY was feeling it. Just as everybody had decided to quit, Gee Street picked us up. But the album was totally misconstrued; it was based on lifting yourself up, but everybody thought it was a gimmick. What topped it off was that labels who had rejected us were now signing groups that had ripped us off. In the end, the album did really well, but it didn't do as well as I had hoped it would. So I got really depressed. I thought I had the dopest record, but people didn't understand it. Which I should've expected because people never understand what I do. Nobody really understands what I do.

Trugoy: Paul was depressed, but I knew he wasn't finished. He re-invents himself over and over again.

Prince Paul: Two years later, Chris Rock called me out of the blue. He was like, "I want you to produce my record." He was a big *Buhoone Mindstate* fan. He said, "Comedians love *Buhoone Mindstate*. That's the comedian's album. I love that album." We met up and we clicked really well. And Chris's album won a Grammy, which I wasn't really expecting. We're



starting on his second album now. And I just finished the music for *A Prince Among Thieves* as well.

Breeze (of the underground group Juggaknots): I've been of fan of everything Paul's ever done, from Stet to the Gravediggaz, so I was blown away when he called me in to do *A Prince Among Thieves*. Just running into all the different cats who were working on the record like Big Daddy Kane and Don Newkirk was amazing.

Prince Paul: When we started the record, Breeze was at the point where he was thinking about quitting the business, too, so it made me feel good to use him. Prince Paul is for the underdog—anybody who's been kicked down, spit on, dissed. That's who I'm down with, brothers who are really dope but don't get the recognition. And that's why I got Breeze.

Breeze: Paul is wild cool, but he's also professional. He wants you to respect production schedules, but he's mad funny. It was a blessing to work with him.

Dante Ross: Prince Paul is an irreverent rule breaker. He is anti-macho in the face of retardedness. He is the funniest guy this side of the Beasties. And he's a gearhead, too. He can put any machine together.

Daddy-O: Paul truly created The Native Tongues. He had that vibe going way before the Tribe and De La records happened. In fact, he would try and get Stetsasonic into that shit.

MC Serch: Understanding Paul's contribution to hip-hop is like asking, "What's a tree's contribution to oxygen?" If you don't put him in the top 10 producers of all time, then you are smoking a rock. If Paul was to do a greatest hits album he'd have to sell it in monthly installments from K-Tel.

Biz Markie: Prince Paul's contribution to hip-hop is that you could use records that weren't by James Brown or just breakbeats. And Paul, remember those records I borrowed when we first started out together? You ain't getting 'em back. **S**