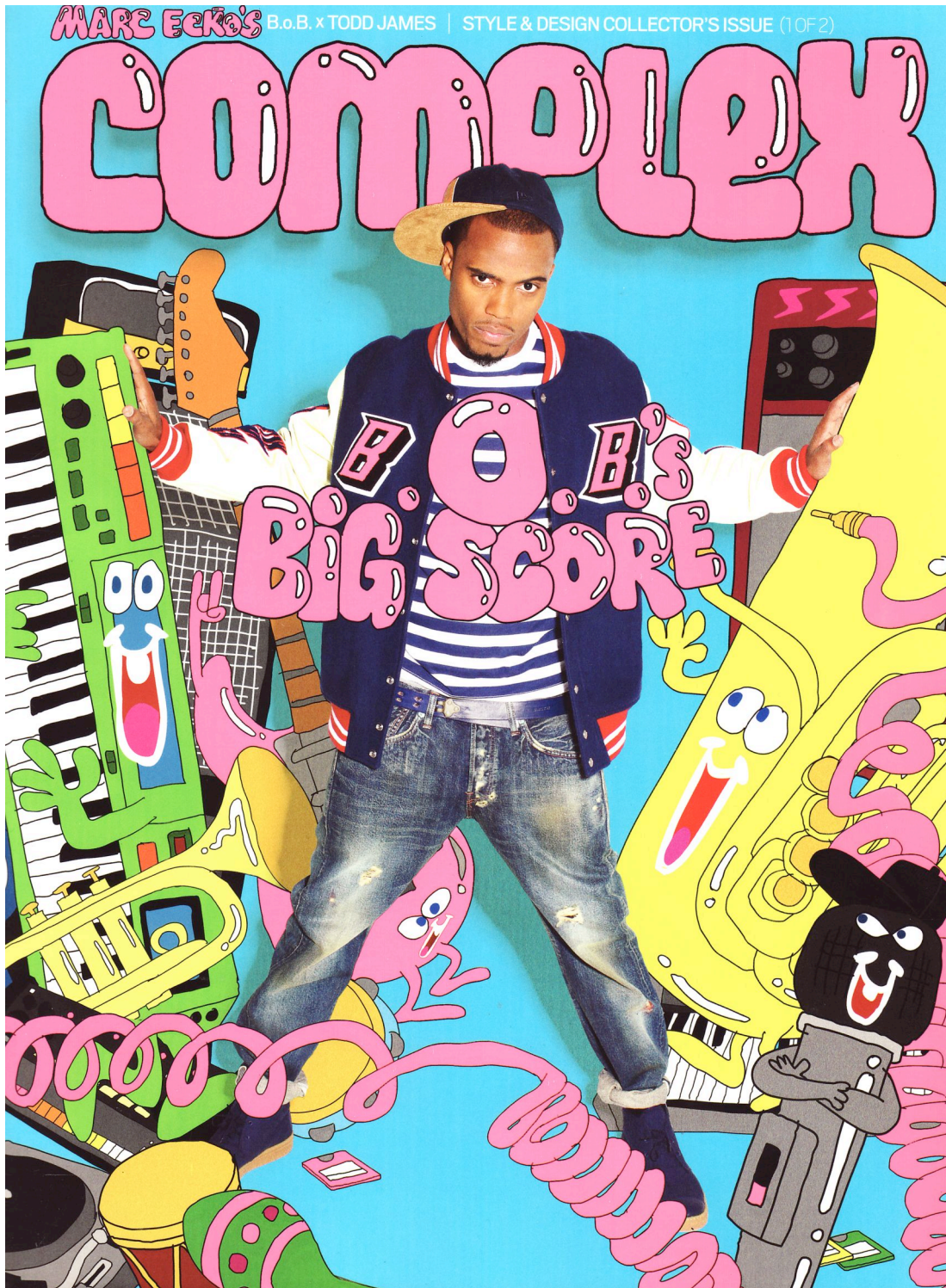


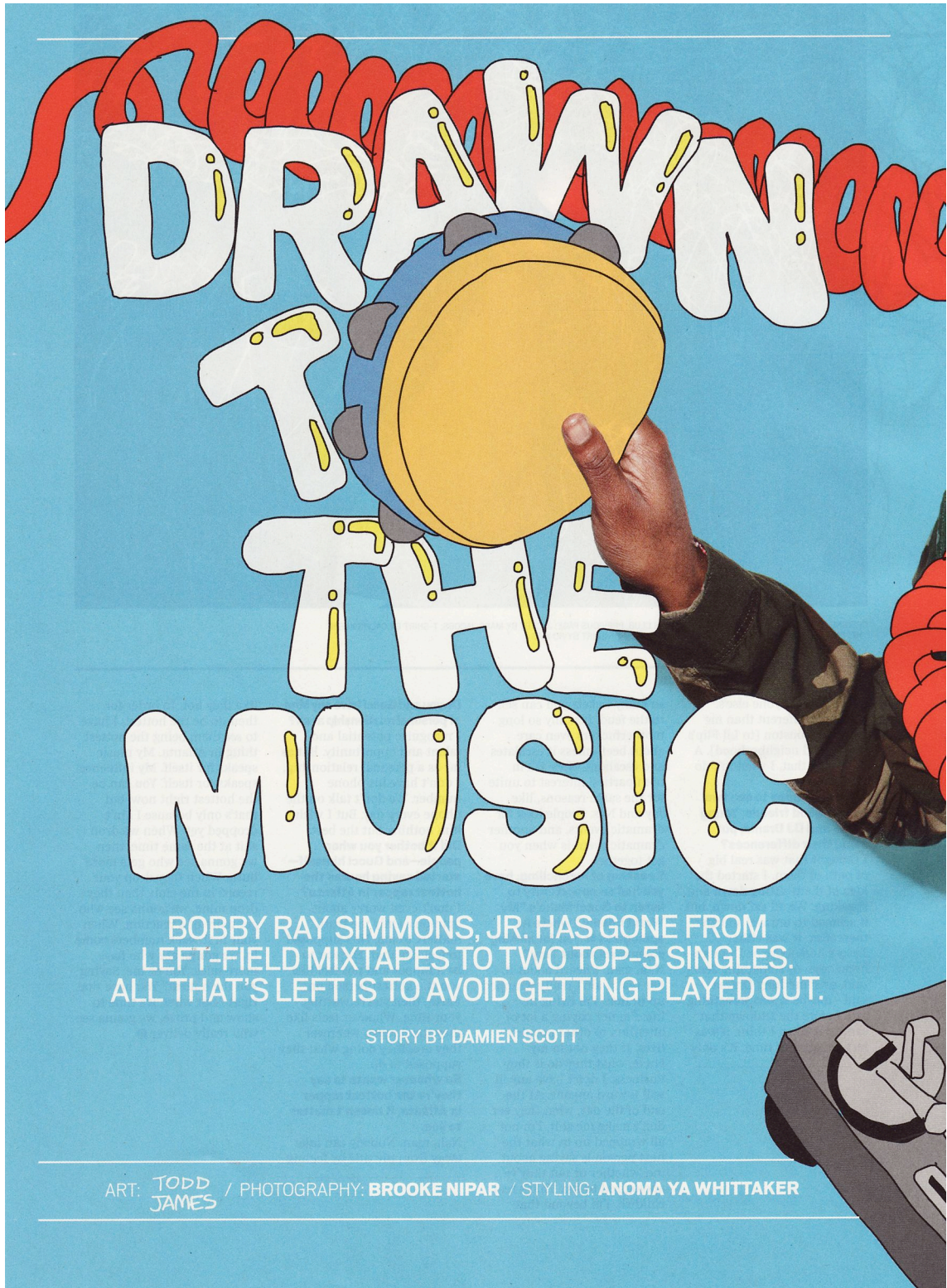
GERING & LÓPEZ GALLERY



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FAX 646 336 7185
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BOBBY RAY SIMMONS, JR. HAS GONE FROM
LEFT-FIELD MIXTAPES TO TWO TOP-5 SINGLES.
ALL THAT'S LEFT IS TO AVOID GETTING PLAYED OUT.

STORY BY DAMIEN SCOTT

ART: **TODD JAMES** / PHOTOGRAPHY: **BROOKE NIPAR** / STYLING: **ANOMA YA WHITTAKER**

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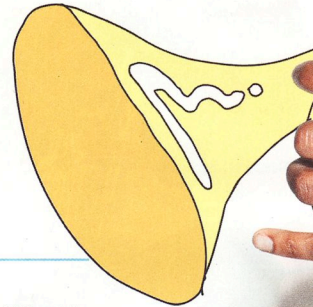


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hat the hell happened to B.o.B.? When we first got wind of the kid from Decatur, Ga. (by way of Charleston, S.C.) with a cloudy acronym for a name, he was a new rapper with a mean spit game and Andre 3000 sensibilities. His mixtapes featured songs that had him carrying the ATLieN torch into rap's new era. Early tracks "Haterz Everywhere" and "Cloud 9," while not smash hits, garnered plenty of attention and set up the young producer/rapper for what seemed like inevitable success. Then everything changed. Citing frustrations with label politics and trouble dealing with his newfound fame, B.o.B. came close to quitting the game before he even released an official album. A short while later, the 21-year-old born Robert Ray Simmons, Jr. retracted his plans and returned with all-new everything: a new moniker (Bobby Ray); a new musical direction (rock 'n' roll); and a new mentor (T.I.). Then—again—everything changed.

The second single from his debut album, *B.o.B. Presents: The Adventures of Bobby Ray*, "Nothin' On You"—a syrupy, overtly pop ode to down-ass chicks—went stratospheric, grabbing the top spot on the Billboard 100. His next single, the Paramore-assisted "Airplanes," followed suit, reaching #2—and that was before Eminem added a verse. Suddenly, the MC who everyone thought might go the way of Charles Hamilton ended up becoming the most successful artist among his non-Drake peers. How'd that happen? A wise, rich man once said, "You can accomplish anything if you don't bellyache." Instead of complaining about how no one understood him, Bobby Ray took it upon himself to change what needed to change. So what happened to B.o.B.? Simple: success.



How has your European tour been?

There's a lot of love overseas. I was playing a show at Kings College in the U.K., and they knew every word to every song. The album's not even out over there yet.

Do you feel that Europeans understand your music as well as people in America?

Everything is more about the music overseas. There's not so much weighing on status.

What do you mean by status? You mean how popular someone is?

Yeah, popularity. You know how that goes. I mean, I guess it's a necessary evil.

Do you feel that you don't have the status you want in the U.S.?

I remember going to Norway and Germany years ago; the crowd would go crazy, and they didn't even know who I was. In the States, you gotta kind of prove yourself, win the crowd over. That's what I meant in terms of it being more about the music in [Europe]. 'Cause here, you come onstage and

it's more like, "OK, what does the music sound like?"

Listening to your early stuff and listening to your music now, there's been a big change in the sound, which has turned out to be very successful. Do you feel gratified?

Definitely. The gratitude is through the roof. And it's great because it's a reversal. I just love being an underdog, I guess. It kinda feels like a *Slumdog Millionaire* moment.

Can you really be an underdog when you've got T.I. and Jim Jonsin co-signing you?

You can't make people like your music, you know what I mean? You can't make the radio stations play your song. I could have Obama on my side but if the fans don't like it, they won't really listen. [Laughs.]

But you do admit that it helps to have those kinds of heavyweights in your corner.

It's a complement. Sometimes people may want a stamp of approval that kinda outshadows them. They just want the huge

In a recent XXL article, there was a small bit about how you and T.I. initially argued over the sound of your music. Could you elaborate?

Oh, man. [Laughs.] I'm so glad you brought that up, 'cause I feel like my words got twisted up a little bit. We actually never argued about making songs. It's never really been an argument. In the studio, it's always gonna be a productive type of environment, you know what I mean? And Tip, he's the type of person who always stresses to me: "Do what you do—do what you feel comfortable doing. I'm not here to change you up at all."

So he was supportive throughout the whole process of making the album?

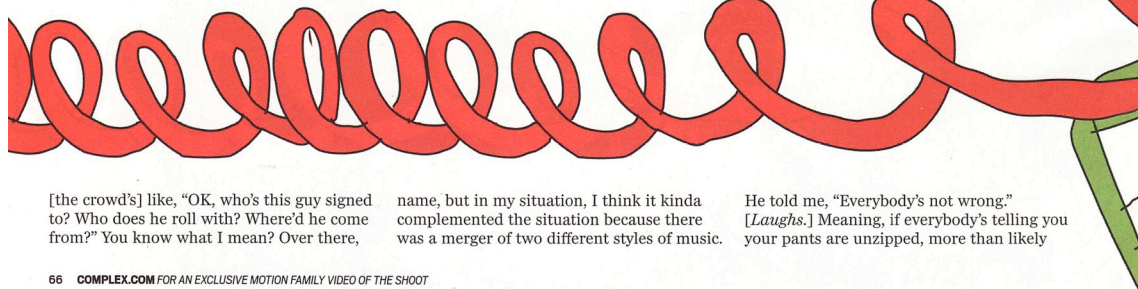
Definitely. He gave me a lot of good advice, good business advice, and just a good reflection to gauge what I'm doing.

What kind of advice did he give you?

[the crowd's] like, "OK, who's this guy signed to? Who does he roll with? Where'd he come from?" You know what I mean? Over there,

name, but in my situation, I think it kinda complemented the situation because there was a merger of two different styles of music.

He told me, "Everybody's not wrong." [Laughs.] Meaning, if everybody's telling you your pants are unzipped, more than likely



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your pants are unzipped. It's just a reminder that you can't ignore reason.

You were saying that T.I. was giving you business advice. With movies and clothing, T.I. has made himself into a brand. Do you have any intentions of following in his footsteps?

It's like his sixth album or something? Just to be around someone who's been in the business for so long, to have him talk to you, I definitely wanna be like [T.I.]. It's starting now, but I feel like it's good it didn't start as trying to make a brand. It started from a really genuine point, and honestly, I'm just making sure it stays that way. To make sure that it stays at a genuine point, and continue to grow a brand based on integrity and the things that make you real.

Would you consider it "selling out" if you were to do an endorsement deal or license your music for ads? "Nothin' On You" could easily be a Diet Coke commercial or something.

Not really. I mean, honestly, it's not all gonna change. For example, I have a lot more girls coming at me, a lot more people talking to me, a lot more attention gravitating toward me, but I still have to keep the frame of values that got me here. I can change—you know, wear different clothes—but if I lose my values, it's going to slowly fall apart.

You don't talk about the stuff you buy as

the situation is.

You talk about fame a lot in songs and interviews. You seem almost averse to it. But you're one of the most popular rappers of the moment. How are you dealing with that?

It's funny to hear you say that because honestly, I haven't—I've never really thought of it like that. I don't think I realize the extent of what has happened. I may not realize until next year.

So you don't feel yourself being any more famous than you were last year?

Exactly. I feel like I felt a year ago. It'll be crazy, because I'll run into a young teenage girl, and she'll be gasping, holding her chest. And I'm like, "What? Who is she? What's going on?" Meanwhile, I'm standing right here, and it's just weird. Not weird, but just...different.

Well, before your two hits, there seemed to be a point where people started to think that you might not be able to pop at all.

Oh, definitely. It was coming to a head. I don't understand what happened. A lot of the songs [on the album] are old. Not old in a bad way, like stale, but I recorded them a while ago. And they've been sitting around because I didn't know when my album was coming out. I would say my career changed the most when I opened up to critique a little bit more—and that's a little bit.

And that's critique from the label?

audience has seen the growth. And it's more of a family thing—there's more of a connection with a lot more people, because they've seen me grow from the early prime stages to now.

Do you think you could've had the same success today with the mixtape songs that you were making when you first came out?

Definitely not. And I wouldn't have the same success with the songs I have now, back then.

Why not?

Not to take away from any of my songs, but the timing of everything is crucial. Songs like "Lovelier Than You," "Magic," and "Ghost in the Machine" are songs I recorded years ago. "Lovelier Than You"—[the label] hated it a few years back, and then put it on the album. Gotta find the right time to release songs to appeal to the tone of things.

Do you fear being pigeonholed into making songs that sound like your hit singles?

Honestly, even if I did get put into a mold, I just wouldn't fulfill it. At this point, I don't think I *can* get pigeonholed, because it's expected to do something that's unexpected. But I think that you can sometimes be too

"EVERYBODY'S NOT WRONG. IF EVERYBODY'S TELLING YOU YOUR PANTS ARE UNZIPPED, MORE THAN LIKELY YOUR PANTS ARE UNZIPPED."

much as other rappers. Is that a conscious decision on your part?

It's not because I don't like it. It's just because I'm not really into it, I guess. In "Fly Like Me" on *B.o.B. vs. Bobby Ray*, I'm kinda going off and being extensive about wardrobe, and being fresh or whatever. But it don't matter who you are, if you open a brand new box of Js and you put 'em on, there's a significant feeling that comes along with that. [Laughs.] Especially being somebody who never had Js growing up, you know what I mean?

How would you describe your style?

My fashion sense has definitely evolved tremendously from when I first started. It's moreso an expression, you know what I mean? I take a lot of hints from different stylists I run into, and different things I see, and what's comfortable. If I'm doing a certain type of thing or a certain type of set or venue, I'll wear a different type of outfit. But usually for clubs, when things start to get real wild, I wear real loose clothing. If it's an acoustic session, I'm not gonna be moving that much. It just depends on what

Just in life—anyone I run into, even a fan at a show. I actually had a fan who came up to me after a show in New York: "Well, you know, Bob, I loved the show, but I think you need to change this part up a little bit. It would probably make it flow better." [Laughs.] And I took that hard. And usually, I'd be like, "Man, I don't know what you're talking 'bout." But that doesn't matter because those are the people you're playing for—if they're not satisfied 100%, you should figure out what you need to do. They don't care how you make it, they just want you to change it.

So when you sensed your window of opportunity was closing, did it force you to concentrate on making a hit single? Or did everything just unfold as an organic process?

Very organic process. Basically, it came to be that. What was different is the fact that everybody saw [the process]. A lot more people saw the story unfold, as opposed to nothing happening, and then exploding out of nowhere. Even though, to some people, it did just explode out of nowhere, my core

broad, which I don't wanna do. I'm really trying to make my own type of sound. When I go to record the next album, I'm just gonna keep recording. Because I feel like the hard part's out of the way. Now is the easy part. Now is making music, which is what I've been doing already—but to actually get to the point where the people who need to hear my music can hear it, I need to do a lot more work that doesn't involve music. A lot of politics, a lot of touching different worlds, a lot of traveling.

You no longer want to retire, but how long do you see yourself being in the industry?

Ten years, maybe? I don't know, I'd be limiting myself. Maybe by 40? I don't know. You know what's funny? I feel like I'll be in the music industry for the rest of my life, like Quincy Jones. He's not necessarily at the forefront of everything anymore, but he's in it for the long haul. I could be in it even after I'm an artist. I love performing, I love playing music on the stage for people. So even if I got older, maybe I'd just start a band, and be a drummer in the band. I don't know. [Laughs.] @

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