

# rap Roundup

WORDS BY ANTHONY Q. CASASNOVAS

## AFU-RA Keeping the Gang Starr Legacy Alive

In an era when younger cats in the hip-hop game would be hard-pressed to list hip-hop forefathers beyond Biggie and Pac, it's refreshing to see older legacies live on through others. Such is the case with 27-year-old lyricist Afu-Ra. Born Aaron Philip, this New York-bred rapper became affiliated with the Gang Starr foundation way back in 1994 as a disciple of Jeru the Damaja. Much like his student, Jeru had been a pupil of the legendary duo of Guru (also featured in this month's Rap Round-Up) and DJ Premier.

Afu-Ra made his debut on Jeru's 1994 hit "Mental Stamina," but would not drop his own full-length debut, *Body of the Life Force*, until 2000. As a Rastafarian, loving father, dedicated Tae Kwon Do student and intelligent MC, he made sure the wait was well worth it. Since his debut he's dropped cuts produced by Premier (which has become a rare, but always welcomed occasion) and got the likes of Big Daddy Kane, GZA, Masta Killa and the Cocoa Brovaz to trade verses with him. He's continuing the legacy of pure New York-styled hip-hop with his third full-length release, *State of the Arts*. Featuring even more intelligent rhymes, sharp production from DJ Premier and cameos from the likes of Royce Da 5'9 and Masta Killa, Afu-Ra is keeping the lessons of his teachers alive.

### Straight From His Rhyme Book:

*"Times is kinda critical, that's why I gotta keep it lyrical/Simple and plain, 'cause I don't wanna riddle you/I'm tryin' to black out, 'cause I'll blow your back out/Pullin' my axe out, do a M.O.P. mash out/With my dreads out, an' I ain't no type of boy scout/Mr Life Force, but you call me The Count/Got so many names, that I can't even count." — from "Lyrical Monster"*

## GURU

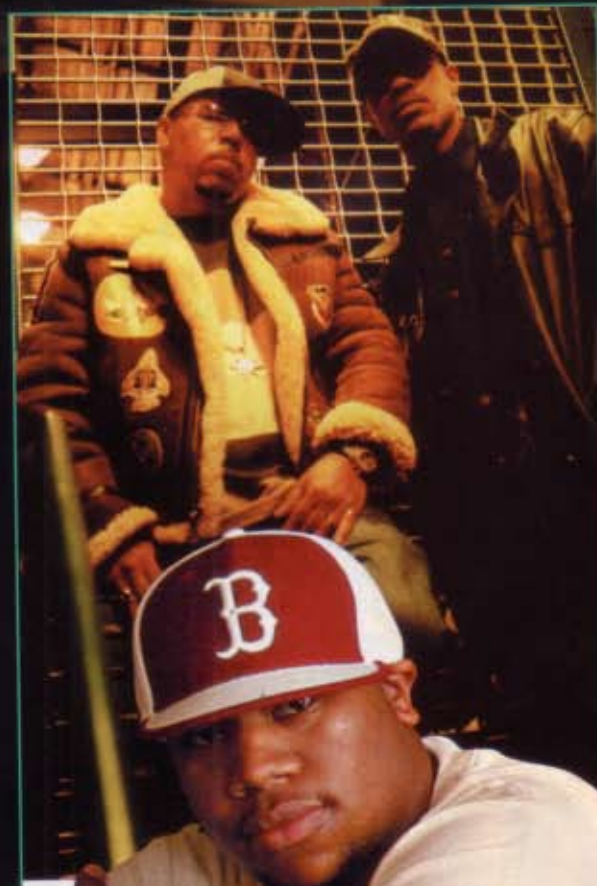
### Legendary Gang Starr Spits Street Scriptures

**H**eed the word of one of hip-hop's living legends: "Be honest with yourself, be original, be open to criticism and be careful not to be surrounded by 'yes' men." Guru, for those of you who are unfamiliar, was one-half of the legendary Gang Starr — which featured superstar producer DJ Premier. In the latter half of the '80s, the group helped revolutionize the sound of hip-hop by fusing jazz with rap for music that was at once smooth and gritty. The combination worked and spawned that oh-so-familiar New York/East Coast sound of '90s (remember, Premo was also a contributor to the legacies of Biggie Smalls, Jay-Z and Nas.).

Guru has yet to hang up his mic. In 1993, he officially started his solo career with the release of *Jazzmatazz, Vol. 1*. Seven Gang Starr albums and three *Jazzmatazz* volumes later and Guru is still on the grind — this time around doing it all from his own label, 7 Grand Records. Partnering up with business partner and producer Solar, Guru is an advocate for artist control and presenting true hip-hop across the globe. With that in mind, his label debut *Guru Version 7.0: The Street Scriptures* is a testament to quality hip-hop that also features the likes of Talib Kweli, Jean Grae and Cypress Hill's B-Real. Over a decade and a half in the game, yet still going strong, maybe Guru truly is the international "ambassador of hip-hop."

#### Straight From His Rhyme Book:

*"Actions have reactions, don't be quick to judge/You may not know the hardships people don't speak of/It's best to step back and observe with couth/For we all must meet our moment of truth." — from "Moment Of Truth"*



## LITTLE BROTHER

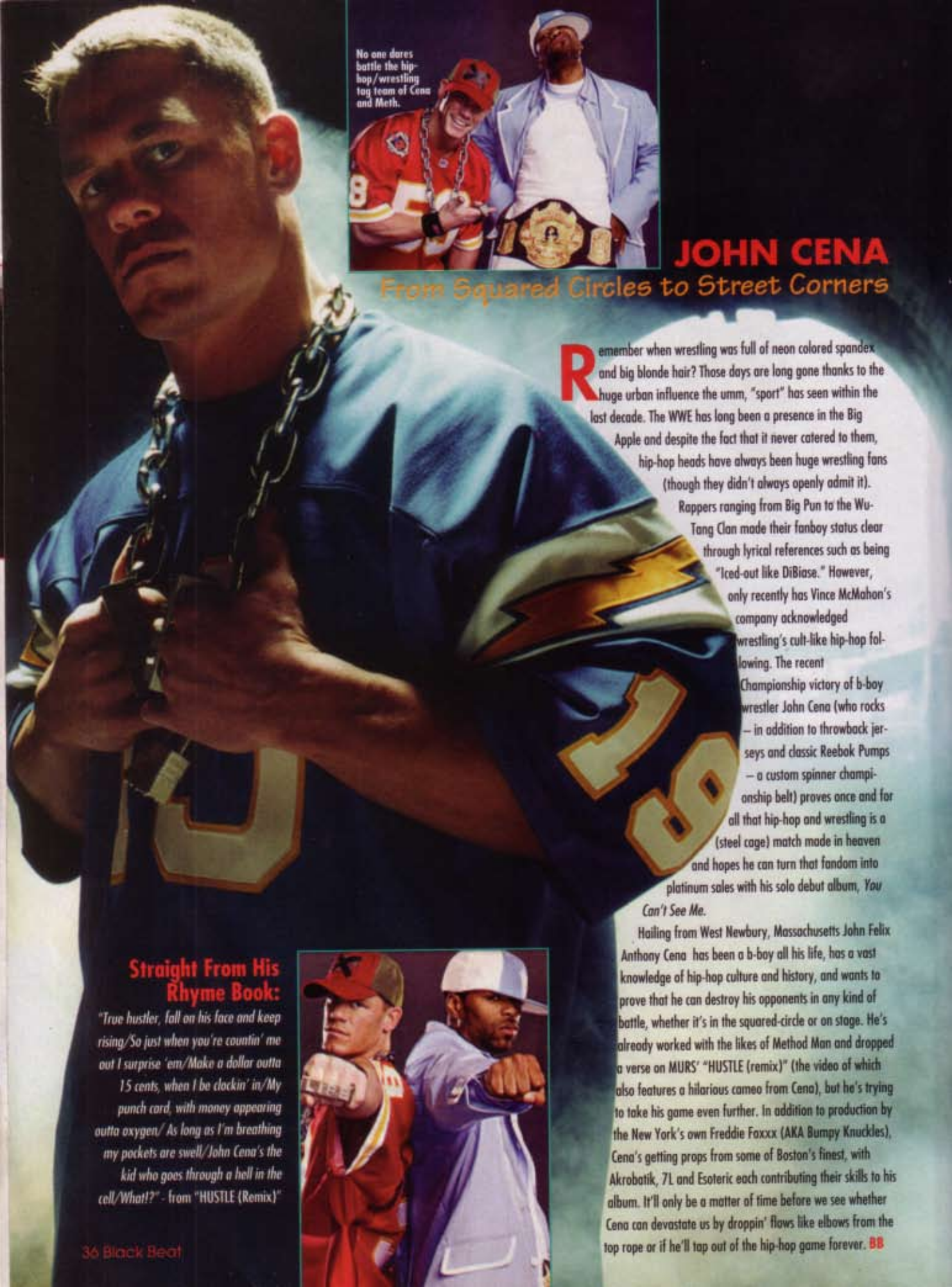
### Out to Put an End to this Minstrel Show Called Hip-Hop

**A**s hip-hop heads patiently (and some might say foolishly) await the resurrection of the Native Tongues collective (after all, Q-Tip, Mos Def, Talib Kweli and De La Soul are still active, right?!), a new wave of Tongues-inspired hip-hop popped up all over the map at the turn of the century. With most of these new "alternative" rap outfits hailing from the West Coast, many were quite surprised to find out that Little Brother — with their smooth, laid-back flows and souled-out samples — actually hailed from North Carolina, a place you'd most likely expect to get a dosage of crunk from.

The three members of Little Brother formed at a location that's growing more and more rare in hip-hop: college, North Carolina University — to be exact. Emcees Phonte (Phonte Coleman) and Big Pooh (Thomas Jones) had already worked with producer/DJ 9th Wonder (Pat Doughit) as members of the Organization since 1998. When that crew fell apart, they quickly formed the still-thriving Justus League. By 2001 the trio decided to form Little Brother and began pumping out recordings locally, then creating a buzz for themselves by releasing music over the internet. Their down-to-earth, non-thug approach coupled with 9th's sample-driven productions (reminiscent of DJ Premier and Pete Rock) quickly won them a dedicated following. By the time their debut LP, *The Listening*, dropped in 2003, critics and hip-hop fans were already in love. 9th quickly went on to produce "Threat" for Jay-Z's *Black Album* and Murs' critically-acclaimed *Murs 3:16: The 9th Edition*. As fans wait for their much-hyped follow-up, *The Minstrel Show*, they've dropped *The Chitlin' Circuit (Version 1.5)* as an appetizer featuring the likes of Kanye West, Big Daddy Kane and other members of the Justus Crew. They might not be the Native Tongues, but there aren't many who can proudly carry that torch like it was their own.

#### Straight From Their Rhyme Book:

*"Music was my sanctuary so I take a long listen/To hip-hop living out my life in songs wishin'/My parents, I could get along with them/So I would go inside my room and dig deep inside the strong rhythms/Back when fresh was the word and raw was an prism/Marley on the boards, plus Kane was long livin'/G Rap and A spittin' murderous/Bought Long Live The Kane, sat down and learned every word of it/Sneakin' my walkman in the homeroom, playin' it/Listen for punchlines, delivery and cadences/But nowadays it's like nigg@z wanna play with it/They hear some good sh!t but don't stop to savor it." — from "The Listening"*



No one dares  
battle the hip-  
hop/wrestling  
tag team of Cena  
and Meth.



## JOHN CENA

### From Squared Circles to Street Corners

Remember when wrestling was full of neon colored spandex and big blonde hair? Those days are long gone thanks to the huge urban influence the umm, "sport" has seen within the last decade. The WWE has long been a presence in the Big Apple and despite the fact that it never catered to them, hip-hop heads have always been huge wrestling fans (though they didn't always openly admit it). Rappers ranging from Big Pun to the Wu-Tang Clan made their fanboy status clear through lyrical references such as being "Iced-out like DiBiase." However, only recently has Vince McMahon's company acknowledged wrestling's cult-like hip-hop following. The recent Championship victory of b-boy wrestler John Cena (who rocks — in addition to throwback jerseys and classic Reebok Pumps — a custom spinner championship belt) proves once and for all that hip-hop and wrestling is a (steel cage) match made in heaven and hopes he can turn that fandom into platinum sales with his solo debut album, *You Can't See Me*.

Hailing from West Newbury, Massachusetts John Felix Anthony Cena has been a b-boy all his life, has a vast knowledge of hip-hop culture and history, and wants to prove that he can destroy his opponents in any kind of battle, whether it's in the squared-circle or on stage. He's already worked with the likes of Method Man and dropped a verse on MURS' "HUSTLE (remix)" (the video of which also features a hilarious cameo from Cena), but he's trying to take his game even further. In addition to production by the New York's own Freddie Foxxx (AKA Bumpy Knuckles), Cena's getting props from some of Boston's finest, with Akrobatik, 7L and Esoteric each contributing their skills to his album. It'll only be a matter of time before we see whether Cena can devastate us by droppin' flows like elbows from the top rope or if he'll tap out of the hip-hop game forever. **BB**

### Straight From His Rhyme Book:

*"True hustler, fall on his face and keep rising/So just when you're countin' me out I surprise 'em/Make a dollar outta 15 cents, when I be clockin' in/My punch cord, with money appearing outta oxygen/As long as I'm breathing my pockets are swell/John Cena's the kid who goes through a hell in the cell/What!?" - from "HUSTLE (Remix)"*

