

ME, MYSELF AND IVERSON

Philly star keeps his friends, fans and attitude
by Glenn Minnis

Art is indeed imitating life on this breezy summer afternoon, as Allen Iverson, mic in hand, cruises through his old Newport News, Va. 'hood dropping lyric after lyric laced with the same kind of brash bravado he's revered for on the hardwood.

"People think that AI is supposed to be this nigger the ghetto can relate to," says Iverson, raising his voice just a notch above the curb-trembling echoes blasting from his fully loaded \$300,000 Bentley sound system. "I'm not sweating that because being Allen Iverson is the only way I know how to be."

And indeed the Philadelphia 76ers star guard will now look to deliver that same vibe through his music. He's now in the studio working on his debut album (tentatively scheduled for fall release on Universal).

"I'm not trying to criticize nobody, but some of the guys in the League who've already tried this rap thing have fucked it up for the rest of us," he says. "It was tougher for me to get a deal, and that's because of some of the wack shit that's been put out there before by ballplayers. My goal is to show the world that there are some guys in this League who can do some nice shit with the microphone too."

Either way, don't look for Allen Iverson to start apologizing for being Allen Iverson. That wouldn't be his way. Never has been and never will be.

"As long as I don't see myself as being some kind of fucked up person to me everything is everything," he says. "I'm a good father, a good brother, a good son and a good friend. Why would I want to change who I am just because a few people may not understand the way I look or where I'm coming from?"

Hear that Larry Brown? Hear that David Stern? Allen Iverson feels only God can judge him. All the haters can just be damned.

And altering photos of him---like a recent Hoops Magazine cover in which all 16 of his tattoos were airbrushed away did or conspiring to keep him off the Olympic Dream Team as NBA honchos have done---won't change that.

"My dream was to play in the NBA," says Iverson. "I'm doing that, all the other stuff like how strangers perceive me and rather they think I'm a good guy that's really not important to me. I know who I am and my family knows who I am. That's all that really matters."

That's not to say friendships aren't important to Allen Iverson--- which leads us back to the whole issue of perceptions.

Rumors now have the Sixers desperately trying to trade the League's second top-scorer, the rationale being management is fed up with what they see as his immature ways and questionable lifestyle.

"I've played in Philadelphia now for four years and every summer it seems I'm hearing the same rumors about being moved," he says. "I want to stay in Philly and in my heart I believe I will but I'm not going to turn my back on my friends and the people I care about just because some people might think they're bad people. I'd rather die first."

At no point has the epic become more dramatic than this off-season. Things have gotten so bad that Iverson hired Magic Johnson as an advisor in dealing with Philly management.

"Larry Brown and me are not friends," he says of the veteran coach. "How can I consider him or anyone in management a friend when all these rumors have been circulating without one person in the front office

calling me to talk about them? I've laid it on the line every year I've been there," says Iverson, who led the 76ers into the second round of the Eastern Conference playoffs this year despite playing with a broken toe, a shoulder separation, a bad thumb and a bum ankle.

"I've earned my respect," he says. "Any one of those injuries would have sidelined a whole lot of other guys. But hey, where I come from we believe in a day's work for a day's pay."

Which leads us back to the music thing and just how the pint-sized guard plans to reach out and touch an entire community. "The people that are true fans of mine understand I'm just a brother trying to make it," he says. "To me, the money isn't everything. That'll come across in my music. That is my music."

That is Allen Iverson.