

Ashanti

Although she's signed to a label formerly known as Murder Inc, hop hop and R&B mega star Ashanti still lives with her parents.

"I kinda prepared myself for it a month or two before because everything was 100% perfect," reflects self-proposed Princess of R&B Ashanti. "We were getting great feedback, everything was a success, and I was having fun. But I knew, along with the good comes something bad."

The 24-year-old's sense of foreboding proved to be all too accurate. Two years ago record label

Ashanti Views The INC

Written by Robert ID681

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Murder Inc was riding high. Gravel-voiced rapper Ja Rule was celebrating multi-platinum sales from his third solo album, Pain Is Love. Murder Inc's star R&B artist, Ashanti, had sold some 10m copies worldwide of her debut disc, Ashanti. Label co-owner and renowned producer Irving "Irv Gotti" Lorenzo was busy creating smash hits for artists from Fat Joe to J-Lo and lining up the next generation of Inc stars, including Biggie Smalls' ex-girlfriend Charli Baltimore. Murder Inc was hot and life at the label was great. Opulent properties were purchased, artists were bought brand new Benzs and champagne was chugged at parties around the world. "The whole experience was overwhelming, shocking," remembers Ashanti. "Murder Inc was so hot, it was ridiculous."

The success was somewhat short-lived, however. In February 2003 a cocky kid from Queens, New York, called Curtis Jackson released a record called Get Rich Or Die Trying. 50 Cent's debut album not only shifted eight million copies, it also opened up old wounds for Murder Inc. Lines like "The games you playin", you get killed like that/Actin" all hard, you ain't built like that... Murder, murder, your life's on the line" were said to be spat specifically at Ja Rule. The two had been beefing for several years; one of Rule's label-mates had stabbed 50 in retaliation for one of 50's friends robbing Rule of jewellery. Yes, he had had fights with 50, responded Rule during a televised mediation session with Minister Louis Farrakan, but it was a jealous 50 that started it by recording the above lyrics. Farrakan had hoped to talk to both sides in an attempt to calm the situation, but Cent never showed.

Simultaneously, it emerged that federal prosecutors were investigating links between Murder Inc and convicted crack cocaine kingpin Kenneth "Supreme" McGriff. Court papers, including an affidavit signed by an Internal Revenue Service agent, alleged McGriff, 43, was the true owner of the label, laundered drugs money through the business and supplied Gotti with "muscle". McGriff's lawyer insisted his client had seen the light while serving a 10-year stretch for dealing as head of the Supreme Team and was now as pure as the driven snow. Gotti's attorney likewise maintains that the business is legit.

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McGriff is already back in jail, serving two concurrent sentences for gun possession, but the investigation is still gathering pace. Last November, Ja Rule's manager and the label's book-keeper were arrested and charged with laundering over \$1m. Both are pleading not guilty.

"I'm not too worried about it," insists Ashanti of the various legal woes. "I have completely nothing to do with it." Pushing her on the subject is pointless: she's too well media-trained. "Come on, that's so old now. I don't know what it is that people are looking for, but I don't think they're gonna find anything. Anyway," she snaps, with a flick of her hair. "I'm just focused on right now."

The IRS affidavit also alleged McGriff was involved in the gun attack that left 50 Cent with nine bullet wounds in May 2000. A former small-time drug dealer who grew up in Queens, near the patch controlled by McGriff, 50 Cent decided to leave behind the criminal life when offered a recording deal in 1996 with Run DMC DJ Jam Master Jay, who was murdered, execution-style, in a Queens recording studio in October 2002. Although the music plans didn't work out with Jay, and 50 was initially questioned after Jay's murder, there were no hard feelings, insists Cent. In 1999, he signed to Columbia Records. However, scared records execs withdrew his contract in light of the shooting and some apparent bad-mouthing on the part of Irv Gotti. Still, Cent survived the bullets and the loss of a record contract, going on to sell gazillions of records through a joint deal with Dr Dre and Eminem.

Throughout, there have been a number of physical and verbal altercations, ostensibly between 50 and Ja Rule but which quickly spread further afield. Eminem weighed in on diss records, as did 50's G-Unit crew. 50's main charge was that Ja had committed hip-hop's most heinous crime - he wasn't "keeping it real". The public seemingly agreed, and abruptly stopped buying Rule's records.

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As the disses increased, so did the risk of violence. Many wondered whether the situation would go the way of Biggie and Tupac. "I didn't want it to escalate," says Ashanti. "I hope we have hit the high point already. We should have learnt the lesson." Was the teeny 5ft 2incher ever worried about her safety? "I mean, it was a little scary at times," she acknowledges. "But none of that stuff would intimidate me because I know who I roll with," she says, doing a fabulous impression of a gangster's moll. "Irv and Ja and everyone are real, so I knew they were gonna protect me. I had nothing to worry about."

But if the drama hasn't affected her physically, then it has hit where it hurts most - financially. Ashanti's follow-up, Chapter Two, sold half as much as its predecessor as Murder Inc saw its profit margins slide. Hardly helping the situation, Gotti was arrested for possession of ecstasy and, more embarrassingly, Viagra backstage at an R Kelly concert (he pleaded not guilty and prosecution was deferred), while his brother, Christopher, suffered gunshot wounds in the lobby of Def Jam, to which Murder Inc is signed. Although police believe he may have shot himself accidentally, enough was enough for Def Jam, who threw the label out of their expensive offices. Murder Inc relocated to the charmingly titled Crackhouse studios.

Some serious damage limitation was needed for an outfit easily living up to its early tagline of "the world's most dangerous label". Gotti called a press conference announcing a name change - from now on they were to be called The Inc. Rule and Ashanti, wisely, went underground, keeping their profiles low, making no TV appearances and rarely guesting on other people's records.

And then the incredible happened. 50 got booed at a New York hip-hop concert, before being bottled offstage at the Reading Festival. Quietly, Ja released the R Kelly and Ashanti-assisted Wonderful, which went to No 1 in the UK and No 5 in the Billboard. In a clever move, Rule enlisted two of rap's most respected rhymers, Fat Joe and Jadakiss, for a track called New York, which has also proved a success.

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After a brief break from the beef, rumours abound that 50 is about to stir up the situation once more with a comeback track to New York. But already attention has shifted from him to Dre's new west coast gangsta rapper, The Game. Ashanti is feeling philosophical. "Everything is not golden and that's what makes us stronger people. Imagine how Ja feels. Even me, I got the little wafts of it," she says of the two-year drama. "It's just a wonderful feeling to be back and have this great reception from the public." One thing Ashanti knows though: you can never be over-confident. "It's such a cut-throat world, this wonderful industry," she sighs, letting the guard down, a little. "It's such a cut-throat, shady, snaky, vile corrupt world. Sometimes the public can be fickle. One day they love you, the next day they hate you." And now no one likes 50? "Hum," she laughs, mindful to maintain impartial. "It's very fickle," she shrugs, with a sly grin. "Very fickle."

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