

'The Return Of The ROC' Bleek's '534

Written by Robert ID1202

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For hip-hop rap artist Memphis Bleek, the first artist ever signed to the legendary Roc-A-Fella Records, everything has come full circle. With the May 17th release of his new album 534, named for the Marcy Projects apartment building he and close friend Jay-Z called home, Bleek once again finds himself as the team's lead-off hitter.

And once again, like on his '99 debut single "Memphis Bleek Is," M.EZ finds himself riding with master-producer Swizz Beats on the blazing club track "Like That," 534's first single.

"I feel like in some ways, this is like the first album of a new career," says Bleek. "Back in the day, I was the first artist besides Jay to come out of the Roc-A-Fella camp, and I had a hot beat from Swizz. Fast-forward: Jay's the president of Def Jam, Roc-A-Fella's back in order, and I'm the first to come out again, with a Swizz-produced joint. It's crazy."

Featuring production by Swizz, longtime Roc-A-Fella hitmaker Just Blaze and underground hip-hop sensation, 9th Wonder, and appearances by rap artists Jay-Z, the Young Gunz and M.O.P., this album is the most crystal-clear representation of Bleek to date.

The recording of the 534 began at the home of Roc-A-Fella A&R Gimmel "Young Guru" Keaton. According to Bleek, the bare-bones studio setup was key to defining the tone of the album, "I just wanted to get back to the place where I started. Go back to what I'm all about. It's like when I first started rhyiming. I had a friend who was a DJ and we'd make records at his place. We'd use the headphones as a microphone. We just wanted to be making music; we had to be doing it. We were that hungry."

Bleek's hunger, and redefined vision, hits like a sledgehammer throughout 534. On tracks like the street banger "First, Last & Only" featuring M.O.P., the "dro anthem "Gimme A Light" and the infectious, summertime bounce of "Infatuated," Bleek displays a refined and tightened flow, and a new lyrical dexterity.

The real core of 534, however, is the emotional depth that Bleek finds on songs like, "Straight Path," a chilling picture of loss and the tug of war between the trife life and the straight path. It's a stark portrait of a life where, "when the gun burn, everything thing you were taught, you must

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unlearn," as Bleek breaks it down with desolate wisdom.

It's the kind of insight that an artist can only find when he breaks everything down to the essence.

"It's like this is an opportunity for me to kind of remind everyone where I'm coming from, and who I am. I'm ready," says Bleek. "I already ate what they gave me on the plate, and I'm hungry for more."

Memphis Bleek's '534' will be released May 17th.