

Lil Wayne- Mixtape Messiah or Mixtape Pariah?

By: Christopher Malo

"I'm against mixtapes. I'm an anti-mixtape dude... So fuck y'all, fuck mixtape DJs." That wasn't how the interview with Lil Wayne was supposed to go, but that's how it went.

Then he picked up the magazines off the pool table and shoved them at me. As he took another hit off the spliff of some clearly high-potent weed, I packed up my gear and Lil Wayne's publicist escorted me out of the game room of the legendary Patchwerk Studios in Atlanta as his manager, crew and bodyguards looked on.

There has always been a love/hate, tenuous relationship between artists, mixtape DJs and labels. The labels want the mixtape DJs to generate a street buzz, but often abandon them once they do. The artists reach a wider audience through the assistance of mixtape DJs, who also occasionally find themselves left behind or forgotten by artists once the MCs achieve greater levels of success. The mixtape DJs gain a level of exposure and prominence through association with artists who give them exclusive tracks, who later become upset when their music is leaked to the public. Knowing how the game works, was Lil Wayne's statements and anger justifiable?

"Fuck mixtape DJs," he blasted. "I don't fuck with the mixtape game."

There are a handful of rappers who have really made it to that *next* level. They are larger than life, even in the hierarchy of hip-hop. People argue and debate if Lil Wayne is more quality, or simply more quantity. There is a lot of people that love Lil Wayne. There is a lot of people that hate Lil Wayne. But there is a fucking ton of people that listen to his music. When he was a fifteen year old from the Hollygrove section of New Orleans, he formed the Hot Boys with Baby, Juvey, BG and Turk. While the group as a whole and the rappers themselves have gone through ups and downs -drug problems, murder charges, etc.- Lil Wayne the solo artist's trajectory exploded over the past year and a half with his consistent slaying of mixtapes. The *Dedication* series with DJ Drama is legendary. And Lil Wayne just would not stop dropping tracks, feeding the streets and feeding mixtape DJs.

I had been flown to Atlanta by Universal to meet with Lil Wayne for the interview. He was about to release his long awaited and highly anticipated new studio album, *Carter III*, but I was more interested in his predominance on mixtapes. In 2007 and 2008, Lil Wayne owned the game. On one of the most popular mixtape sites online, he had 25 of the top 50 mixtapes downloaded and played. Not mixtapes that he only had tracks on, but mixtapes consisting of *all* his material. So with popularity unsurpassed by anyone else in the game, why exactly did Lil Wayne turn his back on the very people who helped to establish him as a solo artist and force to be reckoned with?

The day itself was pristine - picture perfect weather you could see through the studio windows. From the outside you may mistake the studio for something shady. At the end of a short dead-end street, tinted windows, several security cameras and a gated driveway filled with high-end European sports cars. But inside revealed a gorgeous studio full of hundreds of thousands of dollars of state of the art equipment. The walls displayed framed gold and platinum albums recorded there. There was the dimly lit studio itself, with adjacent connected rooms. One housed a drum kit. The other, the storied mic booth. This one, specifically, was Wayne's home away from home. He loved this studio and had cut countless tracks here.

Situated above the recording studio itself was an overlooking room. Most studios have a game room, where artists can take a break from the countless hours spent here. These are usually filled with huge flat screen TVs, leather couches, video games, pool tables, food and entourages. This one was no different. Except that standing next to the billiard table was Lil Wayne. When he had arrived, the air in the studio changed. Figuratively and literally. Walking into the room I was greeted first by a cloud of premium weed, and then Wayne himself. Bluejeans, white tee, diamond chain, hair pulled back in a rubber band and a pair of sunglasses over his eyes with reading glasses perched on his forehead.

Initially the room was only occupied by us, and one of his bodyguards.

It may sound insane, especially in light of how things eventually went, but initially Lil Wayne was gracious. Saying what up, introducing himself, exchanging pounds. Even at the time, it seemed odd. Looking back I wonder if it had anything to do with the fact there was only a small number of us in the room. All was quiet.

As we stood next to the pool table he took off his sunglasses, put on his regular glasses, took sips from a styrofoam cup no doubt filled with syrup, and pulled from the joint as he skimmed through the latest issue of our magazine. More people began to file into the room, and fill the spots on the sectional sofa. After the obligatory small talk about what he had been up to as of late and the upcoming *Carter III*, the questions turned to mixtapes. And this is where things took an interesting turn. Flipping through the magazine, he stopped at a mixtape review of The Empire's *The Drought Is Over 2*. A litany of anger, profanity and threats ensued.

"This nigga right here? The Empire?" yelled Wayne. "When we see you we gonna cut your fuckin' throat out you pussy bitch."

Someone inside Lil Wayne's camp later said that he suspected the engineer in the studio where they cut *Carter III* had sent the tracks as soon as they were recorded to The Empire, who put them on *The Drought Is Over 4*. Basically, the album in it's entirety had been leaked causing the need for new material, pushing back the street date and angering the label and the fans.

"He needs to check the people around him," The Empire said when contacted regarding Lil Wayne's statements about him. "I have no ties to Universal. I'm not in the studio with him everyday. It's one of his people who gave me the music. It's someone who he keeps near him that stands next to him every day. For him to say that is kind of crazy because mixtapes has him in the position he is in right now."

Talking with The Empire there seems to be a mix of thoughts about his role in pissing off Wayne, and causing troubles for the album release. He feels betrayed because according to him the two were supposed to connect to put out *The Leak* as a mixtape together, which never happened. The Empire claims to have turned down opportunities to release *The Drought Is Over 4* in large chain stores, and even says people have attended Lil Wayne concerts where Wayne has used tracks with Empire drops in the background.

He feels "used."

"I went extra lengths to get the stuff," explained The Empire, "and if he knew what I had to do to get it, I think he would respect it."

Despite being the initial target of Wayne's vicious words, Lil Wayne is still his favorite artist – who he met one time at a concert years ago.

"His album was delayed even before the leak stuff happened," The Empire explained when asked if he felt responsible at all for getting his album pushed back. "I'm not sure. A lot of those joints I played had crazy samples not clear. I'm sure I played some stuff that was penciled in to be on the album, but... it could have something to do with it. I'm not gonna say no."

When Lil Wayne's camp was able to isolate who they believed the culprit was back in November, he was fired. Since that time, no material has been leaked. Wayne's people also take other precautions now. The music recorded for *Carter III* was not kept on CD. It's sole place of existence was on one person's iPod. Nowhere else. Tracklistings and pics of the *Carter III* began appearing almost a month before the album's July 1st release date.

But Lil Wayne's anger was not solely aimed at the one DJ though. When Wayne's voice started to elevate, and fists started pounding the slate of the pool table, I initially misunderstood this as merely emphasis and enthusiasm.

"I created the mixtape game, but I'm not into that no more," snapped Wayne. "I'm against

mixtapes. Fuck you if you a mixtape DJ.”

His anger is understandable, righteous and justified. At The Empire. But with the litany of threats aimed at The Empire aside, why was the entire mixtape industry suddenly in his scope?

These weren't tapes directly sanctioned by Lil Wayne, but with a continuous flow of tracks supplied to mixtape DJs, it is surely not something that Wayne did not know was going on. If you can even go by the words he has previously said, he was well aware of where some of the tracks he was making were going, and the impact on his career.

It would be naïve to say that mixtapes built Wayne or made him who or where he is today. But it's not a stretch to say they played a part. A big part.

So why was he standing there shitting all over the game? It seemed - and sounded - like blasphemy. It felt sacrilegious.

But it wasn't the first time.

When DJ Drama got knocked for mixtapes, there was a huge outpouring of support from his fans and mixtape DJs. But for whatever reason, the rappers were silent. At least at first. Some support eventually came from the likes of Young Jeezy, TI and Jim Jones. But then there was Wayne's comments to MTV.

“Smarten up,” said Wayne. “It's a bad thing, but you gotta play the game fair. If you don't play fair, all kind of things can happen. You gotta watch people like DJ Clue, watch people like DJ Khaled. They do it right.”

To everyone it seemed like he had turned his back on Drama, but the two seem to remain on good terms. At the time it had sounded like a betrayal to at least an associate, at most a friend, and definitely to the mixtape DJs who put Wayne's music out to the streets and on the airwaves. Now all this. Even when asked about the rumors of an upcoming *Dedication III* mixtape with DJ Drama, Wayne became evasive.

“You have to ask Drama because I have no say so. He put those out,” answered Wayne. “Of course there's gonna be one if he said there's going to be one.”

DJ Drama declined to comment on Lil Wayne's statements.

So what does the future hold for Wayne when it comes to mixtapes. Surely the mixtape DJs will have their say. As far as Lil Wayne goes?

“I don't fuck with it no more because it's flakey,” said Wayne.

His temper began to rise when I mention that people believe he co-signs at least some of the mixtapes out there with his music. Wayne made it abundantly clear this is not the case.

“I stopped doing the mixtape thing. I don't fuck with it no more. They get no more mixtapes from me because of the way the mixtape game is. It's too salty. Everybody frontin', lyin'... Stop puttin' my face on the front of your CDs to make money,” Lil Wayne mumbled in a Southern syrup drawl. “No more mixtapes from Lil Wayne. Fuck you!”

It's a clear case of the dog biting the hand that feeds it, but who is playing which role is not clear yet. Is Lil Wayne attacking exactly who fed him and made him relevant, or is it the other way around? Last than fifteen minutes after we began the interview Lil Wayne said, “I don't like this interview anymore, this mixtape shit.”

I was ushered out, left wondering what the fuck happened.

The last thing I heard Lil Wayne say as I crossed through the doorway was Wayne addressing his people.

“I'm pissed off at the mixtape game... They sucking my dick and ain't letting me cum!” Lil

Wayne yelled.

No one in Wayne's camp seemed to offer an apology or explanation for what happened. Or maybe everyone just knows it's Wayne and that's how it goes sometimes. Aside from his publicist jumping up quickly off the coach, meeting me halfway across the room, and walking me out the door of the game room in the studio, I have never heard from her or the Lil Wayne's label since. Out the door, past a bodyguard and other people from Wayne's camp, down the stairs, back into the studio where the people in the room asked, "How'd it go?"

And all I could say was, "It went."