



NEW JACK KING

Teddy Riley is a musical prodigy. A product of Harlem, Teddy was already turning out hits for hip-hop pioneers Kool Moe Dee and Doug E. Fresh while still in his teens. Shielded from the streets, Teddy sharpened his skills at his uncle's Rooftop Skating Rink, which then became ground zero for Andre Harrell's Uptown Records. Creating New Jack Swing as an amalgamation of the various sounds he loved, Teddy's collaborations with Bobby Brown, Guy, and Janet and Michael Jackson ruled '90s R&B. Paying it forward, Teddy discovered the Neptunes in high school, leaving his stamp on the next decades of popular music.

by **Chris Williams**
photography by **Todd Gray**

Teddy Riley is one of the greatest masterminds in the history of modern music. During our phone conversation from his new residence in Atlanta, Georgia, the trailblazing forty-five-year-old producer, composer, mixer, arranger, and songwriter responded to my questions with the same precision and originality that have made his music a staple in the pantheon of urban and pop music for the past two-plus decades.

Coming from humble beginnings in the St. Nicholas projects located in Harlem, New York, Riley found his musical gift at an early age. "My mother told me I climbed on top of an old record player," he says, referring to when he was just eight months, "turned it on somehow, and stood on the turntable. She said I was trying to figure out where the sound was coming from." This would be a precursor of things to come for Riley. By the time he was four years old, he became a child prodigy playing the piano. A few years later at nine years old, he was the organist at his local church and had mastered six instruments.

Riley, unlike many of his peers, didn't become a victim of his circumstances. He was sheltered from the devastating violence taking place in Harlem during the crack epidemic of the early and mid-1980s. He began playing with a local band called Total Climax in nightclubs and developed his knack for creating music that would make the crowd move. Neighborhood guys named Stanley, Dwight, Big Al, Little Shawn, and his godfather, Gene Griffin, provided protection for the young Riley while he focused on making music out of his uncle Willie's Rooftop Skating Rink and his mother's first-floor apartment.

The Rooftop Skating Rink became the breeding ground for Riley honing his craft and finding his first group, Kids at Work. There he met and worked with some of hip-hop's greatest pioneering MCs such as Kool Moe Dee and Doug E. Fresh. He produced his first hit record at seventeen years old for Kool Moe Dee with "Go See the Doctor" in 1986. After that moment, the hits kept on coming for the young genius. Since then, he has constructed songs, albums, and remixes for Johnny Kemp, Keith Sweat, Bobby Brown, Boy George, Heavy D and the Boyz, Deborah Harry, and Janet and Michael Jackson, among countless others. What is still evident is Riley's ravenous hunger for creating more music.