

THE CURRENT

M A G A Z I N E DOCUMENTING THE CULTURE AS IT HAPPENS

ISSUE 004

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98 MASTER P

ESC DEEZ

CHICAGO'S NEW WAVE
I REMEMBER WHEN

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Chicago stories, Midwest perspective and culture in motion

THE CHICAGO EDITION

A city that turns pressure into sound, structure and lasting influence.

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Chicago owns the story because Chicago built the language

THE CURRENT POSITION

THE CITY IS THE SOURCE

Issue 004 documents what happens when local identity becomes global infrastructure.

Chicago has never needed permission to influence the culture. The city has produced movements that arrived with their own language, their own visual system and their own business model. This issue follows that pattern from drill music and independent media to beauty, fashion, finance, sports and neighborhood tradition.

Esc Deez leads the issue with 'I Remember When,' a record built around memory, survival and the responsibility of carrying experience forward. His upcoming Code Red conversation with KB THEPLAYMAKER BARRELL gives the feature a second layer: not just what the record sounds like, but what it took to reach this chapter.

The reporting also addresses an active federal trial involving Lil Durk. Allegations are identified as allegations, the defense position is represented and the presumption of innocence remains clear. Documentation requires discipline, especially when public reaction moves faster than verified facts.

Across the remaining pages, Chief Keef's global blueprint, Noname's return to Telefone, Caleb Wilson's arrival with the Bulls and Mellody Hobson's investment strategy show different forms of leverage. The common thread is ownership: of the voice, the audience, the institution or the next opportunity.

THE MIDWEST CONNECTION

Every issue will retain a Milwaukee presence. This edition recognizes TRUE Skool's Summer Park Jam and its work connecting hip-hop culture with youth development, creative entrepreneurship and public space. Chicago is the focus; Milwaukee remains part of the operating map.

THE CITY MAKES THE MOMENT. THE RECORD PRESERVES IT.

COVER STORY

ESC DEEZ - I Remember When

CHICAGO'S NEW WAVE

ESC DEEZ REMEMBERS WHEN

A new single turns lived experience into a statement about survival, growth and staying power.



PHOTO: ARTIST-SUPPLIED COVER SOURCE

THE RECORD IS THE RECEIPT

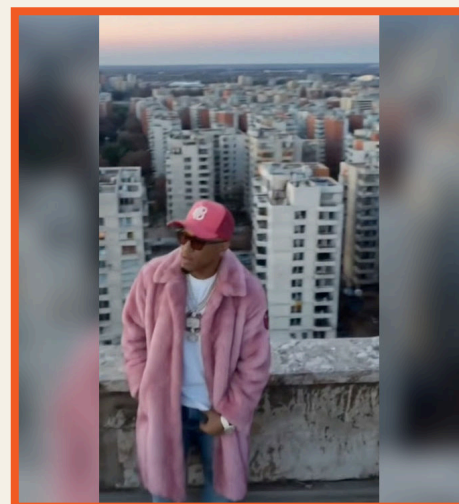
'I Remember When' is built around the power of looking back without getting trapped there. Esc Deez delivers the record from the position of somebody who understands that memory can carry both pride and pressure. The title invites nostalgia, but the performance is not soft. It sounds like an accounting of the road, the people who were present and the distance between the beginning and the current chapter.

The visual reinforces that position. The neighborhood setting, the deliberate wardrobe and the direct camera presence place the artist inside a world rather than on top of a generic backdrop. That specificity is important. Chicago records travel farther when they keep their address.

FROM A SINGLE TO A PLATFORM

For an independent artist, a strong single has to do more than generate a temporary reaction. It must clarify identity, create a reason for deeper conversation and provide a foundation for the next release. 'I Remember When' gives Esc Deez that foundation because its central idea can extend across performance clips, interviews and future storytelling.

The operating opportunity is to connect the record to documented history. Fans should understand not only what the title means, but which sacrifices, lessons and relationships shaped it. When the campaign carries the same emotional truth as the song, attention becomes trust.



ESC DEEZ / I REMEMBER WHEN VIDEO

MEMORY BECOMES LEVERAGE WHEN THE ARTIST OWNS THE STORY.

SOURCES: Official 'I Remember When' video; artist materials supplied to THE CURRENT.

COVER STORY

The upcoming Code Red conversation

CODE RED IN-DEPTH

THE INTERVIEW BEHIND THE RECORD

KB THEPLAYMAKER BARRELL sits with Esc Deez for an in-depth conversation designed to preserve the complete chapter.



PHOTO: ARTIST-SUPPLIED COVER SOURCE

CODE RED GOES PAST THE PROMO

The upcoming Code Red interview is positioned as more than a release-day appearance. The format gives Esc Deez room to explain the experiences behind 'I Remember When,' the meaning of the 98 Master P identity and the decisions that shaped his current direction. That context is the difference between promotion and documentation.

KB THEPLAYMAKER BARRELL's in-depth approach is built around sequence: where the story started, what changed, what was lost, what survived and what the artist intends to build next. Those questions allow the single to function as an entry point rather than the entire conversation.

WHY THE LONG FORM MATTERS

Short clips can create discovery, but they rarely preserve complexity. A long-form conversation lets the audience hear tone, hesitation, conviction and contradiction. It also creates an archive that can outlive the immediate campaign.

For Esc Deez, the business objective is clear: use the record to bring people into the story, use the interview to deepen the relationship and use the next release to prove consistency. Each asset should move the audience one step closer to understanding the brand.

WATCH THE RECORD

The official 'I Remember When' video is available now. The Code Red in-depth interview with KB THEPLAYMAKER BARRELL is scheduled to air soon. Together, the two releases establish the music and the testimony as parts of the same campaign.

THE SONG OPENS THE DOOR. THE CONVERSATION PRESERVES THE LEGACY.

SOURCES: Official video: youtube.com/watch?v=SEo7V6wM2AQ; forthcoming Code Red interview materials.

THE TEA

Lil Durk's federal trial

THE FEDERAL TRIAL

THE CASE MOVES TO A JURY

Lil Durk faces federal allegations in Los Angeles while the court tests evidence, intent and accountability.



COURTROOM IMAGE / THE MEDIZINE

WHAT IS ALLEGED

Federal prosecutors allege that Chicago rapper Durk Banks, known as Lil Durk, participated in a murder-for-hire conspiracy connected to an August 2022 shooting in Los Angeles that killed Saviay'a Robinson. The government says the intended target was rapper Quando Rondo and ties the alleged plot to retaliation following the 2020 death of King Von.

Durk has pleaded not guilty. He and his attorneys have challenged the government's evidence and several aspects of the prosecution. The trial places disputed communications, travel records and alleged financial activity before a federal jury.

THE STANDARD IS EVIDENCE

Public familiarity with the artists and events does not decide a criminal case. Prosecutors carry the burden of proving each charge beyond a reasonable doubt. The defense is entitled to test the reliability, context and legal meaning of every piece of evidence.

That distinction matters in hip-hop coverage, where lyrics, online posts and neighborhood associations can quickly become a substitute for verified facts. THE CURRENT will identify allegations as allegations and will not treat social-media commentary as a verdict.

WHY THE OUTCOME MATTERS

The case is consequential for Durk, his co-defendants, the victim's family and an industry still debating how creative expression intersects with criminal evidence. The proper record will be built in court, not in the feed.

THE COURTROOM REQUIRES PROOF - NOT POPULAR OPINION.

SOURCES: U.S. Department of Justice; Associated Press; ABC7 Chicago; federal court reporting.

WHO'S TRENDING

Noname brings Telefone home

TEN YEARS OF TELEFONE

TEN YEARS LATER

A landmark Chicago mixtape returns to the stage while its creator keeps building outside the usual industry lane.



NONAME / PHOTO: THE FADER

A PROJECT THAT GREW WITH ITS AUDIENCE

When Noname released *Telefone*, the mixtape felt intimate without being small. Jazz textures, conversational writing and precise observations allowed the Chicago rapper and poet to address memory, grief, friendship and Black life without flattening any of them into slogans.

Ten years later, she is touring the project and bringing the anniversary run home to Chicago. The return is not merely nostalgia. It gives a new audience the chance to hear how much of today's reflective independent rap was already present in the record's language and structure.

THE LIBRARY AND THE STAGE

Noname's work has expanded beyond music through the Noname Book Club, which centers Black literature and reading communities. That decision reinforces the same principle found in her records: culture is stronger when attention is connected to study, memory and access.

Her new single 'Squatter,' featuring DRAM, arrives ahead of the forthcoming *Cartoon Radio* mixtape. The timing makes the anniversary campaign useful rather than ceremonial. The catalog introduces the foundation; the new work proves that the voice is still developing.

A CLASSIC RETURNS STRONGEST WHEN THE ARTIST STILL HAS SOMETHING NEW TO SAY.

SOURCES: Pitchfork; Choose Chicago; Noname tour announcements; The FADER.

CURRENT SPORTS

Caleb Wilson joins the Chicago Bulls

CHICAGO'S NEW CORE

THE NEXT FOUNDATION PIECE

The fourth overall pick arrives with size, production and the confidence to embrace Chicago's expectations.



CALEB WILSON / NBA ROOKIE PHOTO SHOOT

CHICAGO BETS ON UPSIDE

The Chicago Bulls selected North Carolina forward Caleb Wilson with the fourth pick in the NBA Draft, positioning a 6-foot-9 athlete with two-way potential at the center of the franchise's next phase. Wilson's lone college season produced 19.8 points and 9.4 rebounds per game while establishing him as one of the country's most productive freshmen.

His hand injuries shortened the season, but they did not erase the traits that made him a top selection: power in transition, activity around the rim, defensive range and a willingness to carry responsibility.

SUMMER LEAGUE SENT THE FIRST SIGNAL

Wilson opened Summer League with a 35-point performance and continued to show improved perimeter shooting, rebounding and defensive playmaking. The exhibition schedule cannot predict an NBA career, but it gave Chicago evidence that his confidence can translate against stronger competition.

The Bulls do not need him to solve every problem immediately. They need a development system that protects his health, improves his decision-making and gives his versatility a defined role. Star potential becomes franchise value only when coaching, roster construction and patience move together.

THE PICK CREATES HOPE. THE DEVELOPMENT PLAN CREATES THE FUTURE.

SOURCES: NBA.com; Chicago Bulls; Basketball Reference; North Carolina athletics.

BEHIND THE GAME

Cole Bennett enters long-form film

VISUAL INFRASTRUCTURE

THE CAMERA GETS A LONGER MEMORY

The Lyrical Lemonade founder is moving from viral videos and Summer Smash into a Chief Keef documentary.



COLE BENNETT / PHOTO: ASHLEE REZIN, CHICAGO SUN-TIMES

FROM BLOG TO INFRASTRUCTURE

Cole Bennett built Lyrical Lemonade by treating emerging artists as visually important before the mainstream industry agreed. Music videos, interviews and a recognizable lemonade-carton identity became an independent discovery system with Chicago at its center.

Summer Smash expanded that system into live events. The festival now places global headliners beside artists whose careers were shaped by the same internet-first ecosystem Bennett helped organize.

THE CHIEF KEEF FILM

Bennett's first feature documentary follows Chief Keef's rise, distance from Chicago and eventual hometown return. Kenya Barris and Khalabo Ink Society are attached to the project, giving the film both cultural proximity and large-scale production support.

The assignment carries responsibility. Chief Keef's story has often been reduced to controversy or influence without enough room for contradiction. Long-form film can preserve the environment, the political resistance, the losses, the creative breakthroughs and the growth visible in his return.

Bennett has said he is moving toward practical world-building and away from relying exclusively on digital spectacle. That evolution suggests the documentary may be less interested in decorating history than in letting the history hold the frame.

THE NEXT LEVEL OF VISUAL CULTURE IS NOT A BIGGER EFFECT. IT IS A DEEPER RECORD.

SOURCES: Chicago Sun-Times; Variety; Billboard; Rolling Stone; Lyrical Lemonade.

CURRENT BEAUTY

The Black Beauty Collective builds in Chicago

BLACK BEAUTY ECONOMY

BLACK BEAUTY BUILDS THE MARKET

A Hyde Park retail platform turns cultural influence into shelf space, founder support and ownership.



THE BLACK BEAUTY COLLECTIVE / PHOTO: BEAUTYMATTER

FROM INFLUENCE TO OWNERSHIP

Black consumers have long shaped the language, products and rituals of the beauty industry without receiving equal control of distribution or shelf space. The Black Beauty Collective answers that imbalance with a Chicago retail and incubator platform centered on Black-owned brands.

Founder Leslie Roberson opened the Hyde Park concept to give emerging companies more than a temporary product table. The model combines physical retail, education, visibility and direct customer contact, allowing founders to learn what moves in a real store while shoppers discover products in a space designed around their needs.

THE SHELF BECOMES INFRASTRUCTURE

For a young beauty company, placement is only the beginning. Sustainable growth requires inventory discipline, packaging, customer service, marketing and enough data to understand why a buyer returns. A collective environment can shorten that learning curve by putting entrepreneurs beside peers facing the same operational questions.

Chicago gives the idea additional weight. The city is a national beauty market with deep Black entrepreneurial history, yet independent founders still compete for attention against companies with larger advertising and distribution budgets. The Collective makes discovery local and ownership visible.

The long game is not simply getting on a shelf. It is building the demand, systems and repeat business required to remain there—and creating a market where the people who set the trend also participate in its value.

BLACK BEAUTY DOES NOT JUST SET THE TREND. IT BUILDS THE ECONOMY AROUND IT.

SOURCES: The Black Beauty Collective; BeautyMatter; Chicago retail reporting; official company materials.

MODELS MAKING MOVES

Sharaun Brown builds beyond the runway

CHICAGO TO THE GRAMMYS

THE MODEL BECOMES THE PLATFORM

Chicago's Grammy trophy presenter turns visibility into hosting, mentorship, wellness and ownership.



SHARAUN BROWN / OFFICIAL ARTIST SITE

THE WORK BEHIND THE WALK

Sharaun Brown returned to the Grammy Awards as an official trophy presenter, a role that appears effortless on television but operates as part of the production system. Timing, movement, camera awareness and live-show discipline all have to align before the winner reaches the microphone.

The Chicago model first reached a national audience through America's Next Top Model. Her career since then has included fashion campaigns, hosting, red-carpet reporting and motivational speaking.

OWNING THE NEXT LANE

Brown's larger move is The Model Tribe, a mentorship and development platform designed to help women and aspiring models build confidence, technique and industry readiness. The business recognizes that talent alone is not a career system.

She has also expanded into wellness and coaching, positioning presence as something that can be developed internally as well as performed publicly. That approach allows the brand to serve people who may never walk a professional runway but still need the tools to enter a room with clarity.

The strategic lesson is straightforward: the model can be the face of a campaign, but ownership begins when she controls the curriculum, the community and the next opportunity.

THE RUNWAY BUILDS VISIBILITY. OWNERSHIP BUILDS THE CAREER.

SOURCES: Sharaun official site; Screen Magazine; The Model Tribe; Select Model Management.

STREET STORIES

Chief Keef: The Sound That Left the Block

CHICAGO'S GLOBAL BLUEPRINT

CHIEF KEEF: THE SOUND THAT LEFT THE BLOCK

A teenage voice from the South Side rewired rap before the industry understood the distribution model.



CHIEF KEEF RETURNS TO THE CHICAGO AREA / SUMMER SMASH

THE BLOCK BECAME THE BROADCAST

Chief Keef did not wait for Chicago's traditional music industry to approve him. Before streaming became the center of the business, a teenager from the South Side was already using neighborhood-shot videos, mixtapes and YouTube to move directly from a local audience to a global one.

Born Keith Cozart, Keef built early momentum with projects including *Bang* and *Back From the Dead*. The records sounded less like an attempt to enter rap's existing system than a transmission from a world the system had rarely heard on its own terms.

A NEW DISTRIBUTION MODEL

The breakout 'I Don't Like' made the strategy impossible to ignore. Kanye West's remix widened the record's reach, but the movement already existed. The audience had found the music, memorized the language and circulated the videos before major-label infrastructure arrived.

That sequence demonstrated that an artist could build demand first and negotiate from visibility. The camera did not need to leave the neighborhood. The message did not need to be softened. The internet could carry a hyperlocal sound farther than a conventional campaign.

THE INTERNET CARRIED THE SOUND. CHICAGO GAVE IT THE ADDRESS.

SOURCES: Chicago Sun-Times; The Guardian; Pitchfork; Chief Keef official materials.

STREET STORIES

Remembering Milwaukee rapper Funny \$Money

MILWAUKEE REMEMBERS

FUNNY \$MONEY: THE WORKHORSE WHO HELD THE SCENE TOGETHER

Quentene Williams gave Milwaukee rap consistency, character and the connective energy that kept a generation moving.



FUNNY \$MONEY / IMAGE: YOUTUBE VIA PITCHFORK

A VOICE BUILT FOR MILWAUKEE

Funny \$Money, born Quentene Williams, became one of the steady forces behind Milwaukee's recent hip-hop rise. His records carried slick punchlines, conversational confidence and an instinct for R&B; samples and grooving slap beats. Beyond the personality, his larger contribution was consistency.

He recorded with artists including Sme Taxfree, Chicken P and Superthrowed Fay Fay, becoming connective tissue in a scene built through relationships, repeated appearances and the willingness to keep releasing music when wider industry attention moved elsewhere.

THE CATALOG KEPT MOVING

The 2022 project Don't Talk 2 Much included 'Rocky Balboa,' pairing distorted soul and R&B; textures with direct street humor. In 2024, I Got the Hook Up Vol. 1: Big Bucks No Whammies saluted the No Limit tradition and reinforced his place among Milwaukee rap's dependable workhorses.

AUTHENTICITY WAS THE POSITION

Williams spoke openly about pursuing rap seriously after serving time. He believed Milwaukee needed authentic voices that represented the city without manufacturing an image. That choice gave the music weight: ambition arrived with experience and an understanding of what the streets had already cost.

Funny \$Money died at 33 after he and 21-year-old Dequaiseon Evans were found fatally shot in Milwaukee on August 17, 2026. The loss belongs first to their families and loved ones. The music community's responsibility is to preserve the work and ensure a vital Milwaukee voice is remembered beyond the headline.

THE HEADLINE MARKS THE LOSS. THE MUSIC PRESERVES THE LIFE.

SOURCES: Pitchfork; WISN 12 News; Billboard; Funny \$Money interviews and official releases.

WHAT THEY MISSED

Bud Billiken in Chicago • TRUE Skool in Milwaukee

BLACK MIDWEST TRADITIONS

THE CULTURE MEETS IN PUBLIC

Two cities use gathering, performance and memory to build the next generation.

**BUD BILLIKEN: 97 YEARS FORWARD**

The Bud Billiken Parade began in 1929 through the Chicago Defender tradition and remains one of the country's largest Black public celebrations. The 97th edition moved down King Drive through Bronzeville before ending in Washington Park, with LisaRaye McCoy serving as grand marshal. The deeper purpose remains back-to-school readiness, youth visibility and the public affirmation of Black Chicago.

The parade survives because it is more than entertainment. Bands, dancers, families, civic groups and neighborhood institutions meet in the same corridor, turning history into something young people can enter instead of merely study.

**MKE CURRENT: TRUE SKOOL**

Milwaukee's TRUE Skool applies the same principle through hip-hop education. Its Summer Park Jam pairs performances, breakdancing, graffiti, vendors and community connection with CEO Sessions focused on creative careers and the business of the arts.

That structure matters. Culture becomes sustainable when celebration is connected to training, mentorship and opportunity.

TRADITION STAYS ALIVE WHEN THE NEXT GENERATION CAN STEP INSIDE IT.

SOURCES: Bud Billiken Parade; Choose Chicago; TRUE Skool; Marcus Performing Arts Center.

BOSS MOVES / HUSTLE TO BUSINESS

Mellody Hobson invests in the next league

CHICAGO CAPITAL

CAPITAL MEETS WOMEN'S SPORTS

Ariel Investments turns an undervalued market into a \$250 million institutional strategy.



MELLODY HOBSON / THE CHICAGO NETWORK

THE THESIS

Mellody Hobson has spent decades explaining that long-term value is often built where the market is not paying enough attention. Project Level applies that principle to women's sports through a dedicated investment fund led from Ariel Investments.

The fund reached an initial \$250 million close and is designed to acquire stakes in teams, leagues and businesses supporting women athletes. Early investments include Denver Summit FC and League One Volleyball.

FROM ADVOCACY TO OWNERSHIP

Women's sports have gained attendance, media coverage and sponsor interest, but the strongest business position is not simply supporting the movement from the outside. It is owning part of the infrastructure that grows with it.

Hobson's strategy connects capital with the full ecosystem: professional competition, youth participation, facilities, services and media rights. That creates multiple ways for value to compound.

THE CHICAGO LESSON

Ariel was built in Chicago around disciplined investing and patient ownership. Project Level carries that tradition into a market whose cultural importance has moved faster than its capital structure. The boss move is recognizing the gap before everybody calls it obvious.

THE MARKET CALLS IT EMERGING AFTER THE CULTURE HAS ALREADY PROVEN THE DEMAND.

SOURCES: Ariel Investments; Wall Street Journal; University of Chicago; Project Level materials.

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