

A NEW DIRECTION

BRYAN BARBER'S LIFE TURNED AROUND
WHEN HE **TRADED CRIME** FOR THE CAMERA.

BY CHANDRA R. THOMAS

IT'S JUST AFTER MIDNIGHT, AND in one house on an otherwise sleepy Druid Hills street, there's a party going on. Well, sort of.

A horde of nubile women in flashy designer outfits and stilettos crowds the porch of the charming old home. Young men with cornrowed hair, baggy jeans and expensive athletic shoes mill around, plastic cups in hand.

Out on the lawn, two teens converse quietly, moonbeams sparkling off their platinum and diamond jewelry. But these are not just any rich kids out late on a school night; they're rapper Bow Wow and crooner Omarion.

It would be *perfect*, a young hip-hop fan's fantasy—but there's no music. The neighbors complained to police about the noise.

But the party goes on; after all, this soiree is actually the scene for a new Bow Wow music video and there's a deadline to meet and a huge budget at stake. The man hosting this affair, a stocky guy sporting a Mr. T-esque Mohawk, burnt orange Adidas jacket, baggy jeans and immaculate white sneakers, isn't deterred. From behind a video monitor Bryan Barber orders the young performers to lip sync the lyrics without the music.

"Act like you're having a good time," he barks at the hired "partygoers," many now ferociously rubbing their

own arms in an attempt to keep warm in the chilly evening air.

"And don't look like you're cold," he adds, his eyes never straying from the video monitor.

His assistant, a middle-aged, balding white guy in a T-shirt, chimes in, "Remember you're at a party, you're chilling with your boys and having a great time."



The orders—like the "keep off the vegetation" signs the homeowner has placed around the lawn—seem bizarre to this bunch of extras, now desperately pretending like they're listening to their

THE FINAL CUT

In directing music videos and ads, Bryan Barber discovered a life-altering career path that's led to movies.

favorite song at *the party* of the year. For Barber, however, it's just another day on the job.

Barber's name may not ring a bell, but his work certainly does—especially for music video fans. At 31 years old, he has already directed more than 50 music videos, and his resumé also includes commercials for Victoria's Secret, Burger King, Heineken and Nokia. Although he's

worked with some of the biggest names in the music industry—including Missy Elliott, Lil Jon & The East Side Boyz, Nelly Furtado, 'Nsync's JC Chasez, Jagged Edge and Dr. Dre—he's best known as the creative force behind Atlanta-based duo OutKast's best-known videos. Throughout their years as collaborators, Barber and OutKast's Andre Benjamin (Andre 3000) and Antwan Patton (Big Boi) have pushed the form of the hip-hop video, eschewing the easy clichés of bling, booty-licious babes and big cars in favor of conceptual mini-movies that draw from clas-

sic Hollywood and Broadway more than street stereotypes.

The trio catapulted into mainstream pop culture—big time—in 2004, propelled by the genre-busting video for the hit song "Hey Ya!" With a motif inspired by The Beatles' first appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, Barber revived a complex camera technique in order to create the neo-sixties fantasy

PHOTOS COURTESY OF BRYAN BARBER

I just got back from Boston, and I took the "T" everywhere. Why isn't MARTA like that?

Atlanta will never be a Boston or New York in terms of rail transportation. Their subway systems were built long before cars were the norm (Boston's—the first in the United States—opened in 1897), so the cities essentially evolved around the subway stops. Sherman's rampage back in 1864 put us behind, so Atlantans were more concerned with developing big business and surviving Reconstruction than digging tunnels for an underground mass-transit system.

But we did need something to help people get around, so the city built an electric streetcar. The first one ran along Edgewood Avenue to downtown, just as the east-west MARTA rail line does today. As the city grew, everyone used the streetcars or their own cars. No one was going very far—Ansley Park was considered the suburbs—so traffic wasn't an issue.

So what happened to the streetcars?

According to Atlanta Streetcar Inc., a non-profit organization hoping to reintroduce the streetcar to Atlanta, during World War II the city's streetcars were converted to "trackless trolleys"—electric-powered buses, basically. Atlanta's last streetcar ran in 1949. By the 1960s, suburban development and an increase in two-car families put the trackless trolley out of business. The car was officially king.

If we get the new streetcars, where would they go?

The track would run down Peachtree Street, from Buckhead to downtown. The organization also recommends a loop around downtown attractions, such as Centennial Olympic Park, the Georgia Aquarium and Auburn Avenue.

I have to admit, with the waiting and crowds smushed up against each other, I'd rather be in my car with my A/C and NPR.

So would just about everyone else. As of 2003, only 2.6 percent of Atlantans used public transportation at all. Although MARTA carries around 500,000 people per day—evenly split between bus and rail—there are millions of drivers heading in and out of the city every day in their cars. We're adding more than 40,000 residents annually, but less than half of the 13 counties that make up metro Atlanta have any form of public transportation.

So is there anywhere MARTA does make sense?

Yes. If you live intown and work intown, and your home and office are within a five-minute walk to a rail station, and you don't have to transfer anywhere, MARTA should be ideal for you. Chances are, you'll hop on a southbound train and be at your downtown office in 15 minutes, with another few chapters of *Anna Karenina* under your belt. ☺

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featuring Andre 3000 as a rock star *and* as all the members of his own band.

"Hey Ya!" was followed by "The Way You Move" (featuring Atlantan Sleepy Brown), which singlehandedly transformed voluptuous Atlanta model Ki Toy from a virtual unknown into a bona fide video vixen, and "Roses," inspired by a *West Side Story* meets *Grease* theme of a fifties high-school talent show showdown.

Along with creating new buzz for the group that had already been recording for more than a decade, Barber's skills have earned him plenty of notable awards, including 2004 MTV Video Music Awards for Video of the Year, Best Special Effects and Hip-Hop Video of the Year for "Hey Ya!" OutKast's "The Way You Move" also nabbed BET's 2004 Video of the Year.

He's not a household name just yet, but being one of the top music video directors in the country definitely includes many of the same perks as full-fledged celebrity status. Barber is often spotted at highbrow events like BET and MTV award ceremonies alongside OutKast—whom he calls his "best friends."

He "kicks it" with Atlanta producers Jermaine Dupri and Dallas Austin and periodically chats on his cell phone with hip-hop mogul Russell Simmons. And he recently sold VH1 the rights to what he calls a "*Seinfeld*-like" television series based on his experiences as a music director.

Early next year, Barber and OutKast will take their creative marriage-made-in-heaven to new heights with the release of the feature film Barber co-wrote and directed for HBO. *My Life in Idlewild*, which he penned in about three weeks, features Andre 3000 and Big Boi in lead roles alongside Ving Rhames, Cicely Tyson and Macy Gray.

Idlewild, Barber's biggest undertaking to date, is set in the 1930s American South. The musical tells the story of a speakeasy entertainer and a pianist who battle gangsters.

The buzz is that the HBO film will be released in theaters. Sitting at the helm of a \$15-million production is quite a

feat for any young director, but it's even more impressive when you consider how dangerously close Barber was to taking a quite different path in life.

It's been quite a journey for Barber, who first met Andre 3000 and Big Boi while a student in the Atlanta University Center.

A DECADE EARLIER, BARBER SEEMED to be more likely headed for the electric chair than a director's chair. His life more closely resembled the stereotypical images of young African-American men seen posturing and profiling in those *other* rap videos. However, unlike many of the performers who often spew profanity-laced tales of their purported street exploits, Barber's thug status was far from make-believe.

"At that time in my life I honestly thought the only way I would ever make

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some real money was robbing a drug dealer or winning the lottery," explains Barber between bites of casserole and fried chicken during a brief dinner break at the Bow Wow video shoot. His directorial duties impinge upon his meal several times. First, it's fashion stylist Tameka Foster Glover (who also dresses Usher) bemoaning her futile attempt at convincing Bow Wow to don some swanky \$500 designer shoes that he's never heard of. Then Barber's assistants for the shoot, both middle-aged guys, stop by for approval on an idea for the next shot being set up in a nearby room.

It all seems unbelievable when you consider the type of future for which Barber was once headed. It was a bleak

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mindset that led Barber, who grew up in East Palo Alto, then known as the murder capital of the country, to make the most stupid decision of his life—and one that turned out to be his most important.

It was 1991 and Barber, 17, wasn't good at much other than being bad. While most of his fellow high-school graduates headed off to college or the military, Barber set his sights on dealing drugs. The occupational hazards, however, proved too much for the aspiring crack dealer. On his first day out, he narrowly escaped arrest in a police raid.

With a twisted sort of "if you can't join 'em, beat 'em" philosophy, Barber had conjured up the harebrained idea of robbing a drug dealer for some quick cash. He borrowed his grandmother's car early one morning, claiming that he was going to a job interview. He picked up two friends and headed straight to a neighborhood liquor store. Parked out front, they anxiously waited for their intended target to arrive at a nearby street corner.

"HE HAD THE DRIVE AND TENACITY SPIKE LEE HAD WHEN HE WAS IN SCHOOL HERE," SAYS A FORMER PROFESSOR. "HE'S COME FULL CIRCLE—FROM POTATO CHIPS TO CAVIAR."

A police officer making rounds in the area grew suspicious, convinced that the young men were planning to rob the store. He thwarted their plans when he approached the car, asking them to show ID. A search of the car later turned up the rubber gloves and the shotgun they had planned to use in the robbery.

Barber and his friends were immediately arrested and thrown in jail. It was during that long day and night behind bars that Barber literally made a deal

not with the devil, but with God.

"I prayed all night and told him that if he got me out of this situation that I would turn my life around," recalls Barber.

The next morning, he woke up and immediately noticed a small orange card lying face down on the floor of his holding cell. Curiosity got the best of him, so he picked it up.

"It was a 'get out of jail' card, you know, like the ones that are in the Monopoly game," he says. "I held it in my hand and thanked God. I knew it was the miracle I had prayed for. I still have that card to this day."

Barber was released from jail hours later and the charges were eventually dropped due to lack of evidence. He immediately got to work on fulfilling his promise.

At his grandmother's urging, he moved to Atlanta and enrolled in Clark Atlanta University. The timing was bittersweet, as Barber had just become father to a baby girl, Jazmin. But his grandmother, Beulah May Barber, encouraged him to forge ahead with school. "I had been looking at five years in prison and my grandmother knew that this was my chance to turn things around."

Grandma was right. The Atlanta University Center, a consortium of historically black colleges and universities in southwest Atlanta that includes Clark Atlanta, proved to be the haven Barber needed.

"It was like a whole new world opened up to me," he says. "I saw something I had never seen before, black people all together getting educated. It was so uplifting."

At Clark Atlanta, Barber was mischievous, not criminal. He quickly earned a reputation as a ladies man who often led "panty raids" in the female dormitories. Fortunately, he also became known as a young man serious about pursuing a film career.

"When you saw Bryan you saw a camera in his hand," recalls Marshall "D.J. Mars" Thomas, a well-known Atlanta deejay who has been friends with Barber ever since they lived in the

TIDBIT
In homage to his grandmother, Beulah May Barber, Bryan sneaks a picture of her into each of his music videos.

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same freshman dormitory. "Every time I deejayed celebrity parties and events in college he was there."

Barber tagged along with Thomas to a bevy of high-profile events, including a party for producer Sean "P. Diddy" Combs, an album release party for Faith Evans, rapper Notorious B.I.G.'s performance at the Velvet Room and a New Year's Eve bash at the Fernbank Museum of Science and Natural History, hoping to land his big break.

"His goal would always be to holler at the rapper to convince them to shoot their video," recalls Thomas, who now heads The World Famous Superfriends, a well-known Atlanta-based company that markets deejay services.

Barber's former college professor and longtime mentor, Herbert Eichelberger, an associate professor of film at CAU, remembers all too well his former student's focus. "He was always dedicated to seeing his dream fulfilled," says Eichelberger, who jokes that Barber would call him almost weekly for professional advice after he graduated. "He had the drive and tenacity that [Morehouse grad] Spike Lee had when he was in school here. He's come full circle—from potato chips to caviar."

Eichelberger brags about his former student like a proud father, noting that Barber often returns to speak to students on campus and once donated three semesters worth of film for student projects.

Atlanta provided the educational environment for Barber to nurture his art, and the city's then-budding music scene also served as the foundation for many of the relationships that would ultimately catapult him to success. He met Benjamin and Patton at a northwest Atlanta apartment complex where he lived while a student. They built up a friendship over time, with Benjamin even starring in one of Barber's student films. Finally, Barber worked up the nerve to approach them about shooting a video.

"I had \$1,500 from a tuition reimbursement check and I told Dre [Benjamin] I wanted to use it to make a video for them," says Barber, chuckling. Benjamin loved the idea and pledged \$3,000 of per-

sonal money on his and his partner's behalf. But Patton disagreed, insisting that they petition their record label for \$7,000 for the shoot.

Barber was convinced that LaFace Records execs wouldn't entrust an inexperienced, recent college graduate with a music video for one of its star acts, but his buddies assured him that they would not shoot *any* video without him.

So the trio went to the record company offices for a meeting. Barber vividly recalls his torturous time waiting in the LaFace reception area while the musicians talked with the suits. Like a suspect awaiting a verdict, Barber shifted in his chair as minutes that seemed like hours ticked away.

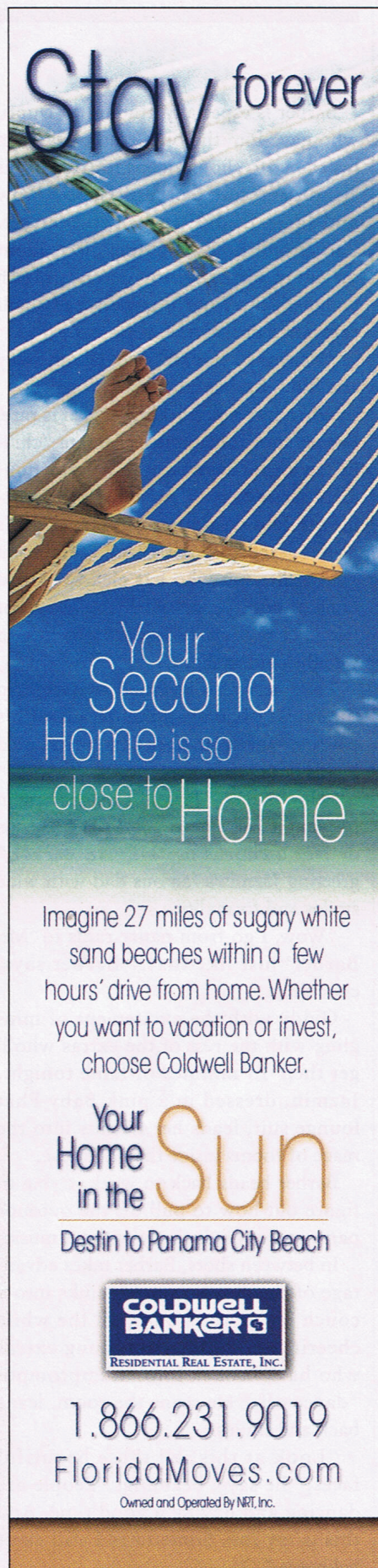
"I was so nervous waiting for them to come out of that meeting," he laughs. "When they walked out they said, 'Man, we got you \$200,000 for this video!' I couldn't believe it."

Barber admits that he was intimidated by the massive budget, but "Skew It on the Barbie" (which he co-directed with J. Swain) turned out to be a great success. Most importantly, that video ignited the creative chemistry he still shares with the duo. Their secret formula, Barber insists, is a mixture of true friendship and a shared desire to create videos that challenge the perception of hip-hop music and African-American culture overall.

"Bryan is dope as a director," explains Patton. "I don't know what it is, but when we all get together and put our minds together we make magic. He's truly like a brother to us."

That magic, Patton insists, shines through in the HBO film tentatively scheduled for release at the end of the year. Although *Idlewild* marks a major milestone in his relatively young career, Barber says his success wouldn't have been possible without the support and opportunities provided by Atlanta's close-knit music family—Dupri, Austin and "Dungeon Family," a group of local performers that includes OutKast.

"We all look out for each other, we help each other out," says Barber. "I am so grateful. These people have been there for me since before the beginning."



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Barber is especially grateful to Dupri, who gave him the opportunity early in his career to shoot videos for two of his So So Def record label artists, Bow Wow and Jagged Edge. In fact, on the set, Barber and Bow Wow reminisce about an early video shoot when a much younger Bow Wow nearly crashed a golf cart into a crowd of extras.

"He was so embarrassed, he ran away and hid," Barber quips.

When he's not working, which is rare, Barber spends his time in Atlanta "chillin'" with his wife (whom he affectionately refers to as "Ladybug"), their 11-month-old daughter, Skylar, and his now 15-year-old daughter, Jazmin, an avid Usher fan who has clearly earned eons of cool points with the group of friends she's just brought by to join in tonight's video shoot.

Their arrival is ill-timed as Barber, in the midst of sharing the details of his college panty raid antics, is interrupted by his daughter's sweet voice.

"Hey, daddy," Jazmin says, leaning in to plant a kiss on his cheek. Her friends deliver a chorus of "Hi, Mr. Barber," greeting Jazmin's famous dad with wide smiles and formalities.

"Wow, I go from panty raids to 'Mr. Barber' just like that," Barber says, chuckling.

Giddy with the excitement of mingling with the rest of the extras who'll get their 15 minutes of fame tonight, Jazmin, dressed in a pink Baby Phat lounge suit, leads her friends into the maze of rooms inside the old house.

Barber heads back to work, trying to figure out how to pull off the outdoor party scene convincingly without music.

In between shots, Barber takes advantage of the down time. He sinks into a couch inside the house, all the while cheering on a group of young extras who have broken into an impromptu "dance off." He scans the room, leans back and smiles.

"Look at this, all these beautiful faces," he says, beaming. "People are dancing and having a good time. And this is my job. Sometimes I still can't believe it." 🍀

BRYAN BARBER VIDEO FILES



Video: "Hey Ya!"

Theme: Andre 3000 stars as a pop star and *all* of the musicians in the band. The concept was inspired by a vintage clip of The Beatles' first appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show*.

Tidbit: Andre 3000 had to perform the song from top to bottom 23 times because he plays eight different characters. He had to do each character three times in order to shoot each one from three different angles.

Video: "The Way You Move"

(featuring Sleepy Brown)

Theme: Big Boi takes his car into a body shop staffed by ladies (including Atlantan Ki Toy, Big Boi's ex-girlfriend's sister) with beautiful bodies. He and Sleepy Brown let the fantasies roll.

Tidbit: Big Boi decided to change the concept the night before the shoot, causing a last-minute scramble. Barber created the concept from the clothing Big Boi brought to the shoot—safari gear, karate suits and tuxedos. Everything was shot on green screen.



Video: "Roses"

Theme: A high school rumble with Andre 3000 as the talented charmer and Big Boi as the athletic leader. Their quest is for the flirtatious Caroline, and it's going to lead to some conflict.

Tidbit: Lots of cameos from eighties B-list celebs—and Paula Abdul!

Video: "The Whole World"

(featuring Killer Mike)

Theme: Big Boi and Andre 3000 are the ringleaders for a circus where the audience laughs on cue.

Tidbit: This is Barber's favorite video.

