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# Jay-Z's Former Partner Kareem 'Biggs' Burke Plots An Empire Of His Own



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Biggs' Plans: Kareem Burke, the 'silent partner' who cofounded Roc-A-Fella Records with Jay-Z and... [+] COURTESY OF KAREEM BURKE

Kareem Burke is sitting in the sky lobby of the W Hotel in Times Square, and he's not happy with his Diet Coke. "This is disgusting," he declares. "Super-flat. It's ... syrupy."

Taste has always been a calling card for Burke, better known as “Biggs.” Back in the mid-1990s, he cofounded Roc-A-Fella Records and the Rocawear clothing line with business partners Jay-Z and Damon Dash; Iconix eventually [bought](#) the latter brand for \$204 million. Though Burke was known as the “silent partner” of the trio, he’s now stepping out on his own after a series of twists and turns in his business career and personal life.

Last November, Burke collaborated with Nike to launch a limited-edition Roc-A-Fella Air Force 1 for the Nike sneaker’s 35th anniversary. He’s also working on several clothing lines: denim brand Fourth of November, as well as ReDo96 (formerly Roc96) and Reasonable Doubt, the latter two inspired by Roc-A-Fella and Jay-Z’s debut album on the label. He’s even involved in a caffeinated chocolate snack called BEON.

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Not a bad roster of business ventures, especially given that he was [sentenced](#) to five years in prison back in 2012 after pleading guilty to conspiring to distribute 100 kilograms of marijuana (he declines to elaborate on this part of his past). Perhaps most remarkable of all is the fact that he's been able to come to an understanding with his former partners and Universal, the company that currently controls the Roc-A-Fella brand, allowing him to use the label’s name and logo along with the Reasonable Doubt moniker.

“Everybody signed off, and they were all cool with it,” Burke explains. “Roc-A-Fella as a label ... it's really not anything that’s active. So anything that's being done outside that creates energy is beneficial for the label anyway.”

Burke became an entrepreneur in his early teens, often following his older brother from their Harlem home to Chinatown, buying fireworks and reselling them at a profit in the Bronx. But it was in his own stomping grounds where he found the most success. In Harlem, he and several dozen peers formed a collective known as Best Out. They'd throw parties at places like the Cotton Club, charging revelers \$100. ("That's actually where the name Biggs comes from," says Burke. "Because I was four or five years younger than everybody ... they can say you act like you're too grown, too big for your age.")

One of Burke's comrades in Best Out was Dash, then working as a manager for a handful of up-and-coming hip-hop acts. Brooklyn-based DJ Clark Kent suggested Dash link up with Jay-Z, who'd given up rapping to focus on the more lucrative opportunities available in the drug trade at the time. After the introduction was made, Dash brought in Burke, figuring they could take the marketing savvy they'd used with Best Out and apply it to music. The three agreed to launch Roc-A-Fella together.

As Jay-Z's recording career took off with Reasonable Doubt in 1996, the Roc-A-Fella cofounders began to look beyond music, launching their Rocawear clothing line after they couldn't get Iceberg, one of their favorite brands, to offer an endorsement deal. Rocawear gave Biggs his official introduction to the fashion industry, teaching him everything from how to build relationships with vendors to the impact of the Chinese New Year on production calendars.

"I would identify Biggs as a gentleman whose versatility extends from the gutter to the boardroom, with integrity and morals," says Branson "B" Belchie, [a fellow Harlem](#)

**entrepreneur**, praising Burke's "pulse for sharing his success with the demographic from which he came."

Indeed, while Jay-Z and Dash occupied most of the ever-growing spotlight on Roc-A-Fella, Burke mostly kept quiet—and in tune with the world his business partners were quickly leaving behind. "I did the boardroom meetings with [Jay-Z]," explains entertainment attorney Bernie Resnick. "But on the streets, it was Kareem who was an important liaison to the artists." To some observers, he put a little too much effort into telegraphing his underworld credentials. Says music lawyer Donald David: "He tried to come across as someone who was dangerous."

And yet, Burke also made a name for himself as a big-hearted and supportive executive. Resnick remembers that, when one of his clients had a run-in-with the law—resulting in a crucial hearing taking place in Philadelphia—Burke came all the way down from New York to be there for the court date as an expression of solidarity ("That was not necessary, but indicative of the kind of guy that he is," says Resnick).

The Roc-A-Fella run came to an end in 2004, when Jay-Z accepted an offer to run Def Jam, a much larger label within the Universal family; in 2008, after Jay-Z bought out Burke and Dash's Rocawear stakes, Iconix purchased the brand, by which point each member of the trio was pursuing his own projects. After Burke's 2012 incarceration and subsequent release, the three were able to come to an understanding that allowed Burke to use the names of companies and albums they'd launched together.

But what would motivate Jay-Z, who drives a notoriously hard bargain, to make such concessions? "Me and Jay have a great relationship," says Burke, who adds that he's on

good terms with Dash as well. “We're all 40-plus. Everybody's all living life and doing great. I know there's not any problems.”

It's also worth noting that Jay-Z has lately been [speaking out](#) about the perils of mass incarceration in America. He's putting his resources where his mouth is, from funding projects like the documentary *Time: The Kalief Browder Story* to supporting friends including Burke and fellow Roc-A-Fella alum Emory Jones in the wake of prison stints. With Jay-Z now worth \$900 million by [our last count](#), there's plenty to go around. Says Burke: “More than enough.”

And so, Burke was able to use the Reasonable Doubt name to roll out his clothing brand for the album's 20th anniversary, straddling the line from music merch to something with a deeper fashion world footprint. Similarly, he had access to the Roc-A-Fella name when Nike came calling for last year's Air Force 1 collaboration. The white-on-white low-top was the bestseller of five limited edition versions created by Burke, rapper Travis Scott, Off-White founder Virgil Abloh and designer Don C, crashing Nike's app twice in one day.

Up next: Burke is planning to tell more of his story—as well as the story of Roc-A-Fella—in a documentary of his own. He says his cofounders will “play a part.”

“At the end of the day, everybody's brothers,” Burke explains. “We built something that was huge, right? And that's still living on today. And it's probably going to live on forever.”

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