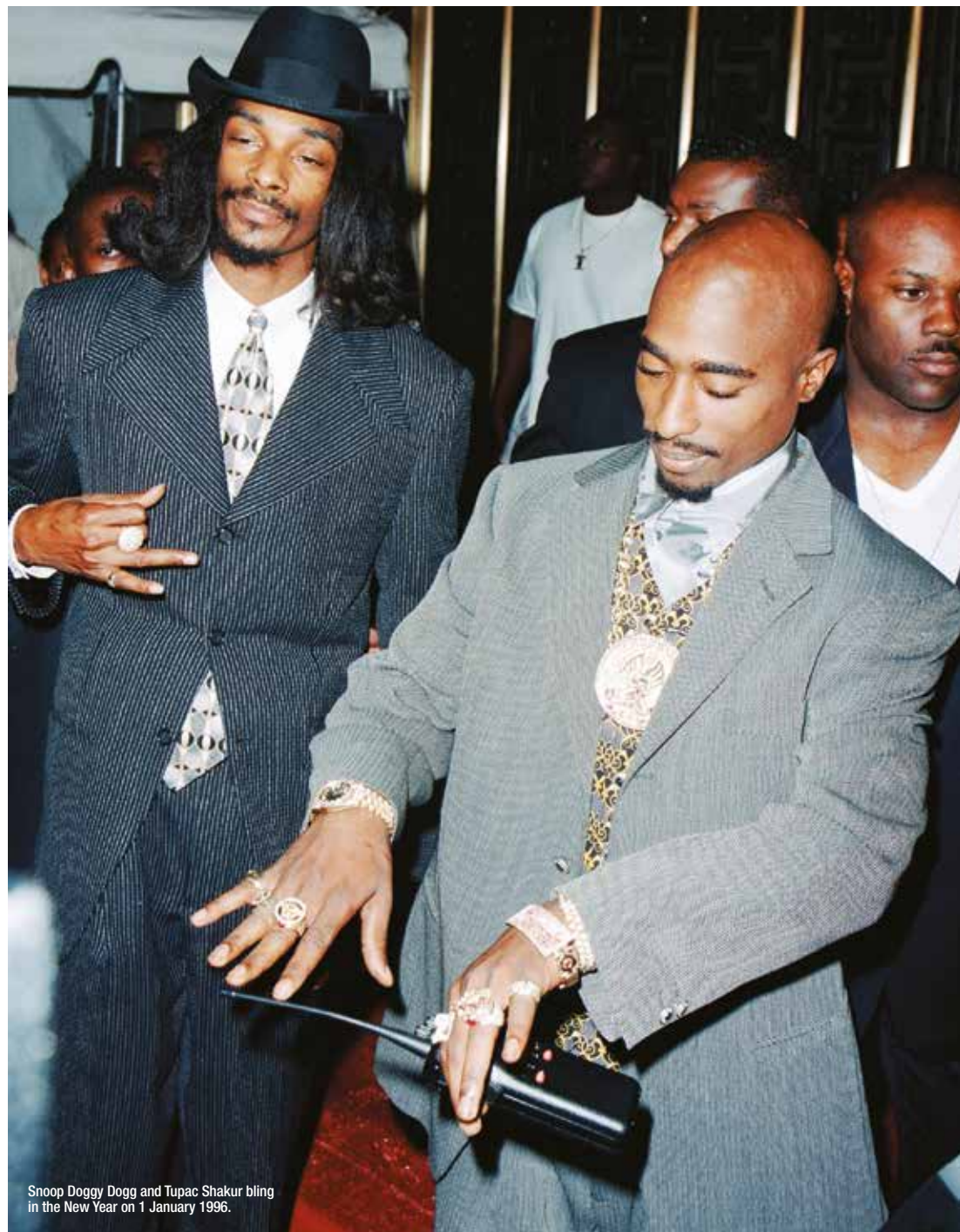


RAP AROUND THE WRIST

The rapper fraternity caking beautiful timepieces with glittering clusters of gemstones has long been something of a joke to horological connoisseurs. But hip-hop's relationship with the watchmaking world is now entering a new, more mature era.

by **nick scott**



Snoop Doggy Dogg and Tupac Shakur bling in the New Year on 1 January 1996.

Around mid-2010, a behind-the-scenes clip did the rounds on the web depicting New Orleans rapper Birdman – who, mostly thanks to his founding of Cash Money Records, is worth an estimated \$170 million, and once boasted that his orthodontics alone were worth a cool half a million – “flossin” his new \$1.5m watch to his entourage. Given that Chopard, a company at the top of the *haute horlogerie* tree, made the timepiece in question, an exceptionally sophisticated movement would have been lurking beneath the mass of diamonds clustered, barnacle-like, around its case. Yet Birdman’s simplistic appreciation of his new toy was all about the watch being heavy, foreign (“straight from overseas” – no specifics here) and exclusive (well, almost – much to Birdman’s chagrin, Elton John owns the only other one in existence).

The clip neatly exemplified a collision of two very different worlds. On one side is the achingly traditional mechanical watch industry whose esotericism is precious to misty-eyed aficionados who like to envisage their timepieces being assembled by apron-wearing Mastro Geppetto types in remote Swiss cottages. On the other is a raw, hard-edged musical genre rooted in urban poverty and sometimes homicidal civic rebellion.

Of course, Birdman’s acquisition of a lavishly expensive, jewel-laden timepiece from a much lauded watchmaker was nothing new: as early as 1997, in *Mo Money Mo Problems*, The Notorious B.I.G. rapped: “Throw your Rollies in the sky, wave ‘em side to side and keep your hands high.” Jay-Z’s 1999 single *Girl’s Best Friend* referenced the “iced out” creations purveyed by Jacob & Co., whose founder Jacob Arabo has been dubbed “Hip-Hop’s Jeweller” for providing not only watches but jewel-encrusted crucifixes and Jesus pendants to much of the rap fraternity.

Conspicuous wealth

But it was about a decade later that the marriage of wristwatches and hip-hop became commonplace. Rap music, having started out as an expression of downtrodden and dispossessed African American communities’ rebellious angst, had become firmly ensconced in

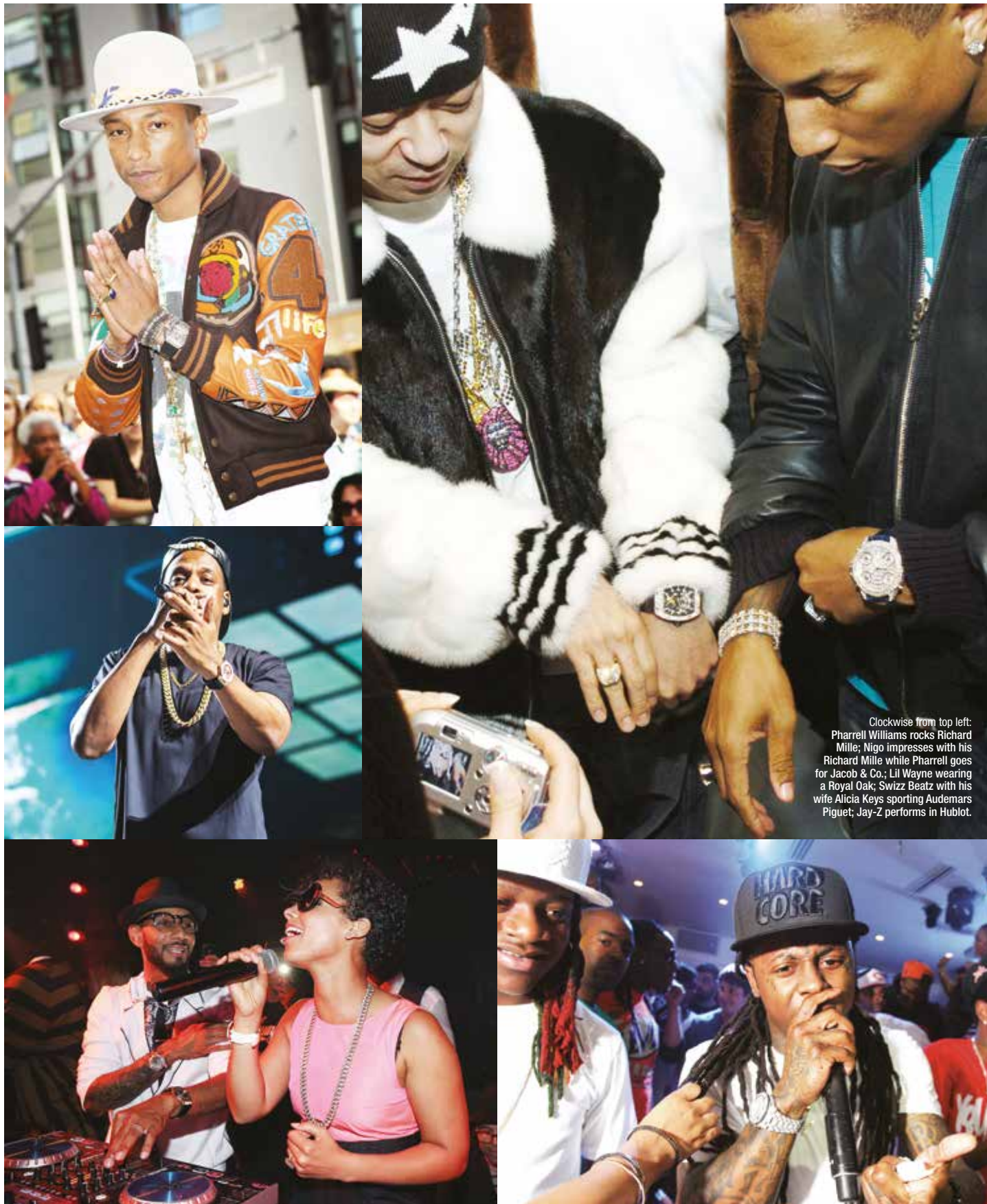
the mainstream. It had toned down the references to violence, misogyny, guns, drugs and hostility toward authority and, its artists having achieved a kind of amplified version of the American Dream, turned its focus instead to conspicuous hyper-consumerism. (In a sense, the hip-hop world’s propensity towards showy, “f*ck-our-former-oppressors” materialism can be traced back well-beyond its 1973 roots in New York’s South Bronx and Jamaican-born Kool DJ Herc, to the ships sailing between Massachusetts and the African continent in the early-17th century.)

With that new yen for grandiose displays of wealth, hip-hop’s relationship with horology reached a new apex, hence a new glut of lyrical testimony to luxury watch ownership – especially, it seems, in any recording in which Jay-Z was involved – around 2010 and 2011. “New watch alert, Hublots, or the big face Rollie, I got two of those” in *Otis*, by Kanye West and Jay-Z; “I got a Hublot, I call it Tebow, I strap that bitch with a gator band” in *Mr. Nice Watch*, by J. Cole featuring Jay-Z; “Bueller had a Muller, but I switched it for a Mille” in *Gotta Have It* by Kanye West & Jay-Z, featuring Otis Reading.

Make no mistake: the watch industry has never balked at celebrity endorsement, official or otherwise. It has surely always revelled in Hollywood associations – not least the Omega La Magique belonging to Tony Montana (Al Pacino) in *Scarface*, the Cartier Santos de Cartier Galbée worn by Gordon Gekko (Michael Douglas) in *Wall Street* and the gold-plated TAG Heuer Series 1000 sported by Jordan Belfort (Leonardo DiCaprio) in *The Wolf of Wall Street*. But it’s reasonable to assume that, looking upon Rolexes, Franck Mullers and Cartiers being blinged up to a point that went well beyond gaudy and into the realms of being cartoonish, largely by people who didn’t know a column wheel from a gyromax, the watch industry, in private, affected a collective grimace.

A new acceptance

Now, though, there are signs that things have changed, that the affiliation between what many observers have proclaimed the most popular music genre on the planet and the highest echelons of the



Clockwise from top left: Pharrell Williams rocks Richard Mille; Nigo impresses with his Richard Mille while Pharrell goes for Jacob & Co.; Lil Wayne wearing a Royal Oak; Swizz Beatz with his wife Alicia Keys sporting Audemars Piguet; Jay-Z performs in Hublot.

horology scene is entering altogether more mature, sophisticated and mutually respectful – and beneficial – territory. For a start, many in the hip-hop fraternity can now be considered serious collectors, who genuinely understand the technological ingenuity of what they’re putting on their wrists.

When Pharrell Williams performed at the Grammy Awards in January, the horologically savvy’s eyes were diverted from his vintage Vivienne Westwood hat by the Audemars Piguet Royal Oak Carbon Concept Tourbillon on his wrist: a distinctly geek-chic choice, and a far cry from the weapons-grade gaudiness that once governed hip-hop’s main protagonists’ sparkling wrist candy.

The N*E*R*D man’s timepiece collection still includes the odd artefact that looks like it belongs on a velvet cushion in a Vegas recreation of the Tower Of London – his diamond BAPE X Casio G-Shock and typical fare from Jacob & Co., for example. But beyond these are the genuine connoisseur’s choices including the Audemars Piguet Royal Oak Skeleton Perpetual Calendar. Similarly, for every \$180,000 Tired with his face faithfully recreated on the dial in diamonds you’ll find in Kanye West’s collection, you’ll also find a Rolex Day-Date, a Bulgari Diagono GMT, several Audemars Piguet Royal Oak Offshores, a Chanel J12 Chronograph and a Bulgari Carbon Gold Chronograph.

The Z list

Perhaps the man at the top of the hip-hop-horology tree, though, is Shawn Carter – aka Jay-Z – who is the proud owner of pieces including a Rolex Day-Date II in platinum and yellow gold, an IWC Portugieser Rattrapante Split-Second Chronograph, two Richard Milles and a Vacheron Constantin Malte Tourbillon. Jay-Z is now something of a mentor not only to basketball ace LeBron James but also to California rapper-turned-singer Aloe Blacc. Blacc is himself a “friend” of IWC Schaffhausen, having been persuaded to make his love of the north-eastern Switzerland-based brand official by his unwavering passion for the notably tasteful and relatively understated limited edition Portugieser Tourbillon (see page 160).

The Shawn Carter by Hublot timepiece, which launched in October 2013, is also all the more conspicuous for its distinctly non-garish elegance (the yellow gold version is especially graceful). Based on Hublot’s Classic Fusion model, it features a cutaway dial depicting Jay-Z’s logo – which sounds potentially nasty, but in fact

is extremely refined, with its subtle evocation of a Maltese cross. Featuring Hublot’s ultra-thin HUB1300 manual-wind movement, the piece is also something of a mechanical marvel.

With these artists wearing and appreciating so much more sophisticated wristwatches, shrewder brand leaders realised that there was considerable commercial perspicacity by reciprocating their affections. Jay-Z is an official ambassador for Audemars Piguet – an association that CEO François-Henry Bennahmias says is all the more profound for the fact that the relationship is genuinely heartfelt. “People like Jay-Z were already wearing Audemars Piguet before the relationship officially started,” he says. “He actually had 14 of our watches when we first met. Kanye West also loved the brand before we got to know each other, and this is the case with the majority of our ambassadors or friends – that’s why the partnerships are authentic, which is pretty unique in today’s world.”

Mutual respect

Is he concerned by hip-hop’s status as one of life’s grittier musical genres – one, in fact, that’s traditionally thrived on shock value? “Everything is relative,” he points out. “Jazz was considered edgy when it was born, but is that still the case now? The important thing is that we’re proud to be embraced by people representing a culture that’s meaningful to the majority of people on the planet. We feel extremely lucky to have been chosen by people who are right at the top of their game.”

Jean-Claude Biver, President of the LVMH Watch Division and Chairman of Hublot, agrees. “Rap today belongs to our culture just as blues or jazz belonged to the culture of the 20th century,” he says. “As we want to be connected to tomorrow and tomorrow’s customer, it is essential for us to consider rap music as [being just as] important as we consider classical music.”

On the subject of watchmaking’s reputation as a doggedly traditional industry, Biver points out that Hublot has always strived to be unique and disruptive. “One cannot any more ignore rappers, football players or basketball players – all of these people are becoming trendsetters for the new generation and for our future customers,” he says.

Any observers who still insist that the watch industry is sluggish when it comes to adapting to change take note: the new hip-hop-horology dynamic tells a very different story. ★