



Glug life: Freddie Gibbs (left) and Madlib take the taste test at a coffee roasters company, LA, June 2019.



Freddie Gibbs & Madlib

Wake Up And Smell The Coffee

The recording alliance of rapper **Freddie Gibbs** and producer **Madlib** is an aural alliance made in heaven. But their latest LP was cooked up in hell – or rather, the Austrian prison that Gibbs found himself in for five months on sexual assault charges. **Eve Barlow** meets them for a rare audience.

Photography: **Rachael Wright**



You can't get a word in edgeways with rapper Freddie Gibbs.

Just as well for Madlib (aka Otis Jackson Jr) who isn't the type of guy to try. Over a morning in the stockroom of an LA coffee roasters, the 45-year-old producer speaks less than 100 words and oh so quietly. Gibbs (aka Fredrick Tipton) is eight years his junior. He's not shy.

"This is like a crackhouse," he says, speaking like someone who knows. The owners walk the pair through a coffee tasting. They find Gibbs's commentary hilarious. He has an easy charm, bouncing about in a pair of Kappa pants. Gibbs is not showy, with only a small pendant round his neck. Madlib dresses for a winter's day in Bulgaria, sporting a do-rag and wool trenchcoat. It's June in Los Angeles.

Today's is the only in-person interview they've agreed to for the release of their second album, *Bandana*, follow-up to *Piñata* in 2014. For Gibbs, the intervening half decade has been a crude awakening. He wrote this in prison – in Austria. Hence the apprehension talking to press. The other issue is logistical. Madlib doesn't own a phone. Gibbs says he's the only rapper who can summon him.

"So do we snort the coffee?" Gibbs asks the coffee pros. As they sniff their way down a line of blends, Gibbs says he isn't a coffee guy. "I don't know the game. One time I heard a girl go, 'Yo, can I get a latte?' So when

"I'm in prison with guys with swastikas tattooed on their chests – and they think I'm a rapist. Of a white woman!"
Freddie Gibbs

I'm around girls I say, 'Give me a mocha latte.' Makes me sound like I know."

Madlib finds Gibbs hysterical. He's his hypeman, echoing everything Gibbs says, offering a "goddamn!" or a simple "m-hmm!" Having someone to back him up whatever the

weather isn't something Gibbs takes for granted. Not since the night he got arrested in Toulouse in June 2016.

I was on tour," he begins, recounting being handcuffed after a show. "I was ambushed by a goddamn French SWAT team. They swooped me." He was informed the allegation was an "American matter" and assumed it was drug-related. Some old snitch. He was later informed the arrest was for a sexual assault in Austria in July 2015. The claim was that he and a bodyguard had exploited two women whose drinks were spiked. "When they told me that I was like, 'Aight cool! I'll be outta here in five minutes.'" Five minutes became five months.

The French authorities indicted him, then extradited him to Austria. In Austria he served a further two months before being granted bail. He recounts it breathlessly, and all down pat. The US Embassy visited his cell and told him there was nothing they could do. "Fuck the US Embassy," he says. "They said, 'We'll contact your mom.' Motherfucker, what you talking bout? I'm an American citizen being held hostage by some Europeans for some shit I didn't do. Get me outta here."



Muscle man: "I wanted to be the best rapper on his beats," says Gibbs (right) of his "sensei", Madlib.



"This is like a crack house..." Gibbs and Madlib cook up a brew.

Gibbs says his arrest was politically, racially and financially motivated during an Austrian election year (although judges are appointed in Austria, not elected) – that he was a trophy and a scapegoat for a judge who was using him to secure his position. "He was riding with whatever racist bullshit they got going on over there," he claims of the judge (Gibbs in fact appeared in front of more than one judge). In 2017, Austria made a lurch further right, and Gibbs makes a compelling case for being targeted as an American rapper. "They made an example outta me because I'm black. I'm not gonna let somebody objectify me."

His ultimatum came: admit to the crime and get a three-year sentence, or go to trial and risk 10 years' imprisonment. He chose the latter. "I'm not about to admit to some shit I didn't do." Gibbs says he cried recently watching the documentary on the Central Park Five who were falsely accused of rape in 1989 and served between six and 13 years in jail. For Gibbs, being overseas compounded his trauma.

He was sent to the yard alone, kept out of general population in case he was attacked. His mug was on TV in the cells. He was the news. "I couldn't even speak the fucking language," he says. "I'm in prison with guys with swastikas tattooed on their chests – and they think I'm a rapist. Of a white woman!" Madlib pipes up: "Did they rape somebody too? Shh. Come on, man. I wanna know what happened to her. What she got?" Gibbs responds. "Yeah bro. The girl's name is..." He says her name. "Let's put her name out there." He says her name again, twice.

"I hope somebody find her, talk to her and give her some game." He cracks a laugh. "Karma's a bitch." Gibbs thinks it was "fucked-up" that during the case he couldn't identify the alleged victim by name. "I'm the fucking victim," he says. "She deleted her Instagram. This bitch was posting bikini pictures during the trial. This is not conducive with somebody who got raped." He alleges that when she left the scene of the crime, she asked her taxi driver and the hotel's bellman for their phone numbers. "She was trying to fuck them





Right said Freddie: Gibbs performing at Roskilde Festival, 2017.

too,” he bleats. “She was never in my room. She was in another guy’s room. Then she went in another guy’s room, got drunk with him and vomited on his bed.” That man testified. “Everybody testified in my favour.”

When Gibbs utters the word “rape”, there’s a rasp. He says it like someone who’s sick of speaking it. “Rape” is a word many victims can’t get past their throat, because of shame, because proving it is a losing battle, because a stigma tells them their behaviour meant they’d asked for it. Gibbs talks about the #MeToo movement like it’s a personal foe. “My thing happened right on the cusp of all that shit. No matter how many times you explain it, everybody attaches me with it. When I see all that #MeToo shit I’m like, ‘What the fuck?’ I seen so many guys’ careers go.”

As a father of two kids, his eldest a four-year-old girl, you have to ask – does he not see value in the movement? “Hell yeah,” he says. “I hate guys that misuse women. I don’t even yell at women. I’m a protector of women. If anybody look at my daughter crazy, tell me, report it, don’t wait. I understand why some women don’t go to the authorities immediately because they’re scared or embarrassed.”

Nevertheless, Gibbs seems more interested in the male casualties of female empowerment and would rather use this experience to advocate for the falsely accused. “Bro, I never gave this girl a hug. I never even smiled at her. Man, if they could indict me with zero evidence they can probably imprison me with zero evidence.”

“I got a good heart, I’m a family guy, but I’ll leave the Martin Luther King shit to Kendrick and J Cole. I ain’t trying to save the world.”

Freddie Gibbs

Bandana features Gibbs spitting as fast he talks. He began to write it in his cell where his only focus was on “rapping my ass off”. He’d already learned beats from Madlib by heart. “I was rapping like it was about to be my last album,” he says. “Let it all hang out.” He wrote it from a place of appreciation for civil liberties, which had become distant memories. “Getting out yo bed when you want, doing what you wanna do with music. I couldn’t do none of that.”

As soon as he was on bail in Austria, he went to a studio found for him by a woman

named Sophie. Everything spilled out. Gibbs had written ideas on the back of lawyers’ documents but he only ever pens mental cues, not full raps. “I plug the words as I go,” he says. “I don’t read when I rap. I gotta have sex with the mic.” The work is his rawest lyrically. He had nothing to lose.

The song Situations is about murder, theft and drug dealing. “I’m talking about shit I could probably get arrested on,” he laughs. Another song – Practice – is about infidelity. “I’ve dealt with a lot of women. I don’t pursue it. I’m not a ‘Hey baby yo’-type of guy. It comes my way. I got two baby mothers. I love them both. I’m not a womaniser or woman abuser. Like I said, I don’t even yell at women.” This is Gibbs’s first release with RCA. He says he left out the real

“crazy joints”. “When you [re] opinionated, everybody so quick to cancel you,” he says, feeling hamstrung.

When it comes to supporting others’ causes, he shows reticence. “I don’t give a fuck what race you are, what your sexuality is. I’m not gonna amplify. I don’t give a fuck about those issues. Everybody thinks they’re Superman. I don’t give a fuck about motivating nobody. I got a good heart, I’m a family guy, but I’ll leave the Martin Luther King shit to Kendrick and J Cole. I ain’t trying to save the world.” He breaks his anger to crack a joke. “I’m like Tiger Woods. I’m not a champion of all causes, I just wanna play golf.”

On the track Flat Tummy Tea, he raps about his blackness: “N****s won’t let you live in peace/But love to see you rest in peace.” Talk turns to gun violence. Gibbs escaped a shooting in Brooklyn unscathed in 2014 after performing at Rough Trade. “I hate to see it,” he says of shootings. “But sometimes that shit’s necessary.” Gibbs argues that it’s a result of slavery. “They put us on boats and chained us up together. We pissed and shit on top of each other. So our mentality is that whenever we get a piece of something we wanna have it to ourselves. We selfish.”

He raises the death of rapper Nipsey Hussle who was shot and killed in March. Gibbs posted one RIP message. He’s angry about the outpouring from his peers. “People are capitalising on his name. Y’all are making Nipsey posts every day for attention. N****s keep making songs, saying they’re donating the proceeds to Nipsey. Bro, Nipsey [s] family all good. They don’t need y’all. They didn’t need y’all when he was alive.”

He switches his focus from social media grief to the current call-to-action surrounding the war in Sudan. “I understand you gotta bring social awareness,” he says, of efforts in the West to expose the loss of innocent life while the Sudanese military bans all internet access. “But then I see motherfuckers that don’t even know how to point to fucking Sudan on a map posting Instagram bullshit. Are you gonna go send aid? Shut the fuck up unless you’re gonna do something.” Gibbs insists he’s a community guy. “I do shit for my mom, and the Nation Of Islam. I don’t give a fuck about telling you. I don’t need to be a hero.”

Gibbs and Madlib grew up in very different places, both outsiders. Madlib is from Oxnard, California. His father was a bandleader, his mother a songwriter, his uncle the jazz director at Carnegie Hall. He’s produced since the early ’90s, making spaced-out, hazy beats that were at odds with the slickness of the era’s hip-hop successes. After a break in 1999 as part of trio Lootpack, he’s made beats for Erykah Badu, Kanye West and was a peer to the late J Dilla. His biggest accolades are for his work with masked rapper MF Doom. His connection to Gibbs is faux familial. “He’s like my cousin,” he says. “He has me laughing all day.”

Gibbs is from Gary, Indiana, birthplace of Michael Jackson. He disputes the Indiana element. “Indiana is that KKK farm town ass shit,” he says. “Gary is its own thing.” His younger brother is a doctor. Gibbs was always involved in crime. When Piñata was released he didn’t have kids. He created a cartoon zebra as his alter ego. “I came up with that while I was chopping cocaine on a black table. ‘Man, this shit look like a zebra!’” In the video for Thuggin’, the camera follows his typical day. In one shot he puts a gun to a man’s head. “I was out here


wild shooting. I was still selling crack when we made that album. Crack, heroin, all that.” Is he going to explain that to his kids? He nods. “I don’t regret it. It made me who I am. God put it in my face and I was strong enough to handle it. God don’t put nothing on your shoulder that you can’t handle.”

His foray into music hasn’t been straightforward. He was dropped by Interscope in 2006 before his finished debut LP was released. He signed with Young Jeezy’s label CTE World for a few mixtapes before going it alone in 2013. His manager had already introduced him to Madlib in 2011. “I didn’t know if Madlib would wanna make a beat for me,” he says, referring to the producer as his “sensei”. “I wanted to be the best rapper on his beats. I’m sizing up every rapper like a boxer, thinking about who can fuck with me. Just like I look at every woman’s ass when they walk by. It ain’t no thing.”

Gibbs says there’s only “two or three n*****s on Earth” who can match him. Who is he scared of? “I ain’t scared of none of these motherfuckers,” he says. He cites Jay-Z. Madlib interjects, joking that Riff Raff meets him, too. “Yeah, Jay-Z and Riff Raff,” chuckles Gibbs. “There’s a new rapper born every fucking minute. It’s like some John Wick shit – I gotta shoot so many people when I come in a room cos everybody’s a fucking rapper.” Like Madlib, he’s dedicated to standing out, to not following trends. “I told Snoop [Dogg], ‘Me and Michael Jackson showed y’all what Gary sounds like.’ I’m the most versatile rapper, period.”

The duo are already working on the follow-up to Bandana, intending to finish out a trilogy of LPs. It’s called Montana. “I’m doing this one from a mansion in the Hills,” laughs Gibbs. Still he feels like an underdog with a chip on his shoulder. “There’s always some motherfucker with a big ass hit. They’re walking down the street with six chains on, two purses, you don’t even know who the fuck they are.

Ain’t no disrespect. It’s the truth. Straight-up. These n*****s have no staying power.”

Conversely, he threatens to stick around. “I’m not gonna stop this shit till I’m 80,” he says. “Willie Nelson’s still making records. He’s fucking 80-something years old. How come a rapper have to have a shelf life?” He celebrated his 37th birthday a few days ago and has rented a Ferrari. He shows a picture of it from his iPhone. He’s going to drive it to Santa Catalina and go jet-skiing. Freddie Gibbs is free to do whatever he wants. 



Gibbs and Madlib feel the caffeine buzz; (inset) the duo’s new album, Bandana.