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Road trippin' with Tru Warriars

By **Sam Alipour**
Special to Page 2

INDIANAPOLIS TO CHAMPAIGN, Ill. -- You can learn a lot about a fella by the way he deals with stress.

Me? I suck down a smoke -- and then cut and run. Not Ron Artest. No, when Ron's number is called, the Sacramento Kings forward goes to the hole. Literally.

"It happens whenever I get nervous," Artest admits.

This is a peculiar yet telling statement. See, Artest didn't feel this way before walking the aisle and most certainly not before NBA contests, playing in the All-Star Game or even before Game 6 of Round 1 in the Western Conference playoffs last season. No, Artest can roll with all that.



But this is a different tale altogether. Sitting in a fast-moving stretch H2 for a three-hour Indy-to-Champaign trek, flanked by eight of his closest Queensbridge Projects pals, Artest is forecasting a nervous night because in several hours he'll open for Ludacris at a rap concert at the University of Illinois -- where many people will be holding drinks and other potentially airborne projectiles.

Right now, I'm feeling a smoke won't cut it. Hanging with the Tru Warriars will do that to a fella.

For years, stories have circulated around the NBA, and they all add up to one conclusion: Ron Artest, the man behind the most famous brawl in the history of American professional sports, is the baddest dude in the NBA.

The plan was to fly to Champaign for Artest's show -- one of 30 tour dates in a summer spent promoting "My World," Artest's new rap album from his own Tru Warriar label, due for release Oct.

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31 -- and fly back in one piece. Then I got the call.

"Ron wants to know if you want to fly into Indianapolis instead," says Big Kap, an entourage member and a NYC DJ of some renown, asking if I want to join Artest and his crew as they drive from Indianapolis to Champaign. "There'll be 10 of us, so it's a tight squeeze. But it'll be fun."

I tend not to talk with my airplane neighbors. Too many nuts. But this is a rickety ride with bad vibes, so I start blabbering. Because most of my fellow passengers are deaf -- no joke here, there are six rows of people signing to one another -- I engage a guy named Eric sitting next to me.

"Ah, Ron Artest, our forgotten son," says Eric of the former Indiana Pacer. "I only want to know one thing: Is he crazy?"

Eric, I certainly hope not.

That's how I found myself outside Artest's Indy mansion, where Ron and his pals are already on board a silver stretch H2. Artest greets me at the door.

"Welcome to the Tru Warrier family," he says through cigar-clenched teeth. "Grab a seat."

I pass the two empty wet bars and sit among Artest's blinged-out, crooked cap-wearing, Philly Blunt-smoking entourage. They're all eyeing me with utmost suspicion. Time to get the lay of the land.

Artest points at one of the men: "Well, that's a famous drug dealer right there."

My god, I'm sitting next to a narcotics kingpin. What's worse, I don't know who he's pointing at.

"He's the biggest dealer in America," Artest continues. "Moves the most coke in Eastern Carolina." This sends the clan into a fit of laughter. "Naw, I'm just playing," Artest explains.

He gives me the Holyfield on his boys: There's the strong/silent entourage leader Gotti, massive Big Kap, music producer Miles, videographer Lucky, cousin Adam, his very white assistant Stacey and MCs Ruc Da Jackal, Challace and a dude who goes by "S." They all double as security. From what they tell me, at least one, Ruc, served jail time.

Our first stop is a convenience store where the Tru Warriers will bolster their liquor war chest.

Listen to Artest

Ron Artest's album "My World" will be released on Tru Warrier records on Oct. 31. Here are three tracks to check out:

- ["Fever"](#)
- ["Haterz"](#)
- ["Coroner"](#)



Sam Alipour for ESPN.com

The Tru Warriers know how to have a good time.



"You getting something, yo?" Artest inquires.

Mr. Artest, I'm a top-level representative of the Worldwide Leader embarking on a serious mission into The Mind of You. Do I want something? Is that a joke?

Yeah, some Heineken and a pack of smokes. Good lookin' out.

When we return, Artest breaks down his summer strategy: Hit the road to build a fan base and pull some strings to secure album cameos from heavy hitters. Mike Jones and Juvenile appear on "My World" courtesy of a manager friend and a club encounter, respectively, and his former Rucker tourney coach **P. Diddy supplies a 16-bar intro**. He's even got Elton Brand's vocals on one track. Seems Artest is picking up the game.

"When I first started rapping eight years ago, I'd throw away people's business cards," Artest recalls. "But I learned that just like anything else, you need to plan it out."

That plan included marathon studio sessions, bus rides and much time away from the court. Artest admits he didn't touch a single orb during a two-week European tour.

"If I just focus on basketball, wow, I'd be so much better," Artest confesses. "I'd be a hell of a player."

So the guy has his hands in a few cookie jars. No big deal. I ask him about his top goal, his end-all moment.

"I'll put my feet on the table when I make a good album," Artest says. "All I care about is for people to like my music, whether I sell 10,000 records or a million."

Cool. But you've got some sports goals, right?

"It'll take five or six years of training, but I want three or four pro boxing fights," he says. "And I want to play in the NFL for one or two years, for the love, not even for a check."

I was warned. This is Ron The Loon, they said. The dude who swims immediately after eating, carries Cutco knives during all windsprints. Basically, this is a man, I was strictly notified, who defies all common sense.

So, screw it, I'll cut to the chase: Are you crazy?

Artest on ...

The Pacers

"When the Pacers gave me \$6 mil a year, I was grateful for the money and I thank (GM) Donnie Walsh, but I wasn't getting what I deserved. I should've been getting \$14-15 million, so I never wanted to give them that extra \$9 mil. That extra nine is my mind and leadership. Sometimes I felt I was giving too much. I mean, I was an All-Star and Defensive Player of the Year, but I never wanted to give them an MVP-type season because they didn't treat me like one. But I'm not worried about the money no more. I'm grateful now and I'm going to give the Kings my all."

Selling drugs as a kid

"I told [Detroit-area schoolkids] I sold drugs at 13 because a lot of kids sell drugs at 13. I told them 'I did it, but I know it was wrong.' I felt uncomfortable with people killing their brains. If you make a mistake, serve your time and try to make a better life for yourself. Everybody is capable of doing bad things. There's people in high positions, millionaires, that kill people. Big-time bank owners owned slaves back in the day. Nobody is perfect. You can change."

The Maloof brothers (Kings owners)

"The Maloofs wanted to visit me in Queensbridge earlier this year, and with no security. So I took them to my projects, inside the ghetto. ... At one point, they had to go to the bathroom, but there ain't no bathrooms in the ghetto. So they went into a pissy elevator, knocked on a random door, and went in someone's apartment. How many owners do that? That's crazy. I love those guys. I want to be in Sacramento forever."

His new album

"'Coroner' is my favorite song. It may not be some perfect Jay-Z rap, but it touches me. It's about my murdered childhood friend. This was a guy who I played ball with, got in fights with,

"I know that's what they say," he says, laughing. "But we're all crazy. When white people have fun, what do they do? They drink and bang their heads and they grab you and go, 'Come on, Ron! Let's go!' I'm like, 'Now, these mother----- is crazy.'

"But that's how white people grew up," he says. "We're all crazy."

Artest admits he's got some pills for his brand of crazy, dating back to his days with the Bulls.

"Back then, I was a hood mother-----, spending all of my money and never thinking twice," he says. "I was thinking, 'I'm a gangster, so f--- everything.'

"So of course the doctors were like, 'This guy is crazy, what's wrong with him?' They found that I have a history [of mental instability] in my family, going way back.

"But I've never taken that medication because I'm not crazy," Artest says. "I'm me. You just gotta understand me."

"After I was suspended, I cried," Artest continues. "But then I said, f--- it. Certain things aren't worth your career, but nothing is worth selling your soul for. If I can be myself and still be successful, I can connect with people on the real. I've got people in ghettos across the world that I want to touch. They can relate to me. If I change, they can't."

Last month, Artest raised a few eyebrows when he tried to connect with 50 Detroit-area school kids during a community-service gig. There, he defended his actions in the brawl, but Artest says the media didn't relay the whole story.

"This kid was like, 'Ron, I live in the hood and I don't want to carry a gun, but I gotta protect my family,'" Artest recalls. "He said, 'What do I do? How do I get out of that situation?'"

Artest bows his head and lowers his voice.

"I'm sorry to say, but David Stern can't answer that question," he continues. "I don't think Tim Duncan or Kobe Bryant can answer that question.

"I know if someone came at my family, I'd kill them," he continues. "But what I told the kid was, 'If you can avoid that situation, avoid it. But hold your family down, keep your faith in God and watch the friends around you.' Sometimes in the ghetto, you have to have a gun on you, so I told him, 'Try to stay away from guns, but if you have to protect your family, protect your family.'"

who I could talk to forever. He was much smarter than me, but he veered off. A few years later, I find out he's a full-fledged thug, made some wrong moves, and got murdered. I think about him all the time. A lot of my friends are either dead or in jail. It makes you realize you need to mature and get your life in order."

What might have been

"Getting traded to the Lakers would have been great for my career. Just from a business standpoint, that's a million records sold. The Lakers pushed real hard. I was talking to Kobe a lot, and I never talked to Kobe ever in my life. He reached out, was like, 'Come to the Lakers.' He said, 'We're going to get you here.' Next day, I got an apartment in Hollywood, I moved some of my stuff, and I was in L.A. for two months, just waiting to be a Laker. Kobe would have done the scoring, Lamar does the passing and triple doubles, and we can all play the point. That would've been dangerous."

Team USA

"I think we would've won if I was on the team. The opportunity wasn't given to me. It should have been given to me. Never got an explanation and that's not fair to America. I'm from a ghetto in America. I should be able to represent, no matter what they think. Even if I wasn't in the NBA, I should be able to play. It's not the 'NBA Olympic Team.' It's the 'USA Olympic team.' Anyone should be able to play, streetballers, everyone. We should all be allowed. It's political. But there's still a chance I'll play. I hear there's a lot of guys who'll play in '08 who didn't this summer. Shaq says he'll play. I'm definitely going to play, but I'm never going to shut up about not being on this team right here. It's all on the committee, so maybe I gotta get President Bush to step in. He's the only one who can change their mind."

Still, Artest admits that the melee did earn him some street cred, a major asset in the rap game. And yes, America, Artest says he's got the fight on cue.

"Oh yeah, I got it on TiVo, and I hear a lot of people do," Artest says. "America is crazy. Dudes are always like, 'Yo, that was a crazy fight! You're awesome!' I'm like, 'You're crazy, I got in so much trouble over this.' People love that damn fight."

As with any road trip, this one features many pit stops that will allow the Warriers to empty bladders and restock the wet bar.

"Excuse me, are you rappers?" a clerk asks the baller at one stop.

"Yup," Artest confirms, pointing to Challace. "That dude is Ludacris." It's true, the man looks like Luda, but this does not comfort the clerk. She looks positively terrified.

During another impromptu stop, S attempts to hose down a cemetery.

"You're going to get us all arrested," Big Kap warns. "They're going to think you're Tupac jumping out of the grave into a Hummer."

There's much laughter, but Artest has seen enough.

"We've got a sound check in two hours," he says resolutely. "No more stops."



Sam Alipour for ESPN.com

"Are you guys rappers?"

We're back on the road, rushing past farmhouses and trailer parks, wandering like hip-hop gypsies through the Midwestern landscape. As is always the case when Devil Juice flows on a male-heavy road trip, the Warriers share tales of recent sexual exploits and camera-phone slide shows -- including a cartoon porn of a half-naked Fred Flintstone getting his game on -- but with Betty, not Wilma.

Beware, Flintstone. Barney's hammer looms.

Things are getting wild and unruly and I, too, am succumbing. It isn't easy to hotbox a stretch H2, but these talented Philly-Blunt-smoking Warriers pulled it off, and now I'm feeling woozy.

That's when I notice a ghastly site: Artest has spent the majority of the drive sprawled across my luggage.

"Dude, you're sitting on my laptop!"

Artest quickly leaps off. Thankfully, we're on the same page: The madness must stop.

Artest's new rule: Smokers of strange substances to the front of the H2, Ron and I in the back with the window open. Of course, with his partition open, Artest's new decree assures that the driver will operate under a haze of smoke, and if I'm feeling unsteady back here, that dude must be a wobbly mess. What's worse, I can't find a single seat belt.

Artest notices I have to pee. He breaks his rule. We pull over again.

I'm starting to like Artest. He's a conscientious fellow, worried about his friends and tonight's gig, incessantly pestering his assistant Stacey about the backstage cuisine and the number of CDs she'll distribute.

"I need my boys fed," he reminds her.

He's assured the pregame steaks will be bountiful.

Finally, the bass from our H2 reverberates through Champaign as we pull up to the university. The mostly white, college-sweatshirt-clad student body is wide-eyed and open-mouthed with the arrival of the Tru Warriers. Yes, when the Tru Warriers get done with 'em, these prepsters will all be running around like naked cowboys and Indians in a holy war, eating their pets and each other. No doubt in my mind.

Smiling with childlike wonder, Artest is already handing out album postcards.

"You coming to the Ludacris concert tonight?" he asks one girl.

"No, I have to work," she says. "But my friends are going."

That's good enough for Artest. "I'm starting to get chills," he says.

We park behind Assembly Hall, home of the Fighting Illini, where our once awesome H2 is reduced to rubble alongside Ludacris' massive Vikings Love Boat. Before I can request a trade to Luda's camp, the Warriers are already marching into the building and down a tunnel, passing the women's locker room (Yung Joc's digs) before parking across from the men's locker room (Luda's digs) inside a humble dressing room.

There we find several flower arrangements, but no sodas, no bubbly and no sign of steaks. "What the f--- is this?" inquires S. "In Europe, they'd have bottles of Cristal."

"This ain't Europe," Artest reminds.

No time for gripes. The gang heads to its sound check, where they'll work out kinks, of which Artest claims there are many. He's examining mics, peeping the sound quality and barking a few orders. During the chorus of his gruffest track, "Nasty North," he hears too many voices and far too much yelling.

"Someone get Ron out of here until we're ready to perform!" chill Big Kap pleads. "He's freaking me out."

"I'm nervous as hell," admits Artest, even though he opened for Fat Joe before 30,000 in Germany. "I'm very hands-on in general, but tonight I'm opening for Ludacris. Doesn't get any bigger than this."

Thankfully, the food has arrived, so we make our way back to the dressing room to dine on those promised steaks.

We find stacks of pizza boxes instead. "I hope that's steak pizza," kids Big Kap, but Artest isn't amused.

"I told you I need my boys fed," he reminds no one in particular, before blowing through the door and leading his men on an angry march toward the VIP dining area where Luda's boys are munching on BBQ chicken and potatoes. The Warriors don't have the required wristbands, but the overmatched doorman wisely turns his head.

S, for one, has seen this all before.

"The media makes [Artest] out to be a monster, but I swear you'll never meet a nicer guy than Ron," says S, 32, who met Artest in the late '80s, when they were neighbors. "Get to know the man before you judge him. He'd give up his shoes before we walk barefoot."



Sam Alipour for ESPN.com

Where are the steaks? The group has to settle for pizza before the show.

In return, S says the Warriors help keep Artest on the straight and narrow. "We basically try to take the pressure off by keeping away outside distractions," he explains. "That's why you'll never see Ron in no sex scandals or that other BS that surrounds other athletes."

Artest is sitting before the tube, watching the Disney Channel's "Simone." His dressing-room banter includes riffs on falling record sales, the value of education and the emergence of both iTunes and Arab extremism.

Like its author, "My World" is surprisingly tame and entirely void of lyrical feuds, save one. The lone object of Artest's scorn? Matt Lauer. On a track titled "Haterz," he calls the "Today Show" host a "girl."

"From the start, Lauer was totally against me," Artest explains of his post-brawl appearance on the "Today Show." "I'm like, 'What's wrong with you? You ain't even trying to understand me.'"

"I wanted to call Lauer something else," he continues. "But I didn't want to curse. Whenever rappers curse up a storm, I'm like, 'OK, we heard you the first time.'"

That's right, the baddest dude in the NBA isn't prone to cursing -- and neither is his album.

"From a business standpoint, it's not smart because you want to get radio play," Artest explains. "I basically try to make the best image I can for myself and the league."

Ah, the almighty League. The NBA's rappers face no shortage of haters, but it was commissioner

David Stern who helped put the prerelease-kibosh on Allen Iverson's single "40 Bars." Artest would rather sidestep that land mine. "David didn't like Al's stuff because he's talking about (homosexuals) and killing people," Artest explains. "I'm not really like that."

In fact, in 2002 Artest chose not to release his first expletive-laden album. "I've got kids, and that's exactly why I don't let them listen to rap," says the father of four. "They have a lot of influence on me."

Finally, it's showtime. The roadie says we've got five minutes, so Artest springs to action -- and nervously towards the john.

Moments later, he's ready to rock. "I've got chills going down my body," he says. "I'm anxious to see how the crowd responds."

So am I. Since I'll be positioned near the stage, I ask Artest whether he anticipates any hiccups from the audience -- like, say, airborne projectiles.

"I know somebody'll throw something, and I'm ready for that s---," Artest warns. "But people need to realize, this ain't the NBA. Where I'm from, people get shot for things like that. I know somebody who killed his own brother for laughing at them.

"You throw something at me tonight," he adds, "I'm going to kick the s--- out of you."

With these reassuring words, the Warriors gather for a group prayer, and I silently join them:

Please, God, don't let anyone throw a single thing in Ron's direction. Not a friggin' feather.

I make my way to the foot of the stage, sandwiched between the audience and burly security guards. I tell security director Tony D. that if hell breaks loose, I won't hesitate to leap into his arms and beg for safe ground.

"We know exactly who Ron is, but we're not doing anything different tonight," Tony D. shrugs. "We're a good group, but we don't really have the means to do anything special for this show."

This is not reassuring. I am, however, comforted by the presence of nearly a dozen concertgoers in Artest jerseys. Some of them even have blinged-out grilles, which is nice. New game plan:

In the event of an emergency, stick close to any Furniture-Mouthed Artest Fans.

Finally, Artest runs onstage and the crowd goes ape-spit, 7,000 strong and getting louder by the curse word. "Make some mother----- noise!" Artest growls.



Sam Alipour for ESPN.com

Before the show, a group prayer.

For his first song, "Rap Game," Artest harvests his nervous energy by gyrating about and righteously hyping the crowd. By the second, "La La Ladies," the madman throws caution to the wind, leaping off the stage and barreling through the crowd. The fans love it and, even if they didn't, he's moving at too great a clip for any evildoers to keep up.

The next tune is called "Working the Pole," which is exactly what it sounds like (no, not an ode to firefighters). Here, the savvy showman pulls three women to the stage to serve as impromptu dancers. It's working, because the ladies are bouncing and the crowd is too.

Finally, Artest gives it his all for the dance joint "Fever," the album's first single.

And that's when my gnarliest nightmare comes to fruition: Midsong, a water bottle is sent soaring through the air before splattering much of its contents across my face.

I'm soaked, but I ain't mad'atchya, Ron. See, it was Artest, and not the crowd, who was the culprit. With this classic "wink" to the audience, it's official: Artest is a very, very good live rap artist.

When the music stops, the crowd roars, and they're joined by former Illinois hoop stars Dee Brown and Deron Williams, and tonight's headliner, Ludacris. Backstage, there are heartfelt hugs all around.

"Thank you, Luda," Artest says. "You're the man."

"You did your thang, Ron," Ludacris replays. "I'm happy for you."

"I knew he'd be alright," Luda tells me. "Rap and basketball are similar in that they're both extremely competitive environments, and you have to have your business right in both.

"Ron was good," Luda adds. "But he'll be even better over time."

The dressing-room celebration has begun. With a towel draped across his shoulders, Artest makes the rounds, whispering words of thanks and even apologizing to this reporter for his unconscionable act.

"Sorry, I got you wet, didn't I?" he inquires, before grading his performance. "I was nervous as hell, but the crowd was hype. It was definitely a great show." Just then, Gotti bursts through the door with bottles of Grey Goose, and the Warriors cry tears of joy. It's been a long day so they're ready to let loose, and though I'm soaking wet, I am too.

This being a postgame rap show, I'm told there'll be no rules, save one: All 18-and-older humans with breasts are certainly welcome. Entourage members are hard at work recruiting a revolving door of scantily-clad lasses, who are all trying to catch Artest's eye. But the married man isn't looking.



Sam Alipour for ESPN.com

In concert, Artest showed he had the stage presence to get the crowd going.

This is a good development for a chump like me. I may not have much bling, but I am a Warier, and maybe that's why a young woman who would identify herself as Sandra makes her way across the room.

"Hey baby," Sandra says. "Are you Ron's manager?"

"No, ma'am, I'm just a reporter."

This is met with the rolling of eyes and flapping of heels.

"Anyways," she says, moving on to greener pastures.

Amidst the chaos, Artest finally appears to be at ease. "I couldn't be happier," he says. "I've had some tough times, but I'm at peace now, you know?"

"Even if the NBA suspended me for the rest of my career, I'm good," he continues. "I believe in God, and as long as you have God and family, you're good."

Artest then leaps to his feet. The night is not over.



It's a Tru Warier -- and NBA star Ron Artest.

"Wariers, we out!" he exclaims. "Time for the after-party."

Excuse me?

Artest isn't kidding. The wet, tired and plastered Wariers are filing back into the grimy limo, which is now a smelly collage of spilled ashtrays, damp carpet and stained leather. Before we can pull away, a young lady demands entry, but there's some talk of a husband.

"Mamma, you wanna roll with the Warier click, no husbands," Ruc explains.

And that's that. Back on the road, Ron's working the tunes but he's out of CDs, so we're listening to a toxic mix of Willie Nelson and Clay Aiken.

My cigarette, their smoke and this warm Goose aren't helping matters. I'm barely hanging on to my sanity now, and Artest can tell. In fact, he's laughing at me.

Is something funny?

"You crack me up," Artest giggles.

"What reporter comes into my limo smoking cigarettes and drinking my beer?" he inquires. "You're alright, man."

I'm more than alright, Chuck. I'm a Warier.

From here on, my scribbled notes suggest there was an impromptu rap show at Jack's Bar & Grill, where shots and steaks were served, many rap video-type girls fought for elbow room and Artest performed from atop the bar counter. At 2 a.m., the lights are on and the Tru Warriers have left for Indy. I remember a handshake and a reminder that the album would drop on Halloween.

Now it's 4 a.m., still waiting for my cab. I think I hear a frog, which is strangely scary.

Finally, the taxi arrives. The sign on the door reads: "Corky's Cab." The driver (Corky, I presume) has brought along his wife. He barks something inaudible. "He says this is a side job," his wife relays. "He does this on Fridays and Saturdays."

Cool, I respond. Wifey feverishly wiggles her fingers, then he cackles, and I realize Corky is deaf.

So, is Ron Artest crazy? Eric, no crazier than you or I or a husband-and-wife cab-driving team. See, Ron has practice in Sacramento in 11 hours.

Now, excuse me. We've driven into heavy fog and I need to sign my way home.

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