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## Odom seeks reason to smile

By Sam Alipour  
Special to Page 2

EL SEGUNDO AND HOLLYWOOD, Calif. -- He's bowed his head, eyes toward the artwork in my hand, speaking in a hushed tone.

"Yeah," says Lamar Odom, a bead of sweat trickling down his chin after an October practice. "It's a little extreme."

Yeah, just a tad.

I wouldn't want to get in a street fight with the dude whose image is emblazoned on Lamar Odom's soon to be unveiled T-shirt line. And that's partly because it's the image of The Dude, himself. Jesus, with "white like wool" hair, eyes of "blazing fire" and feet -- or, in this case, face -- of "burnished bronze." So, is it extreme? According to Odom's interpretation of Revelation, Chapter 1, Verses 14 and 15, it's accurate.



But you'll have to forgive Odom of any extreme behavior, for these are intense days for the Lakers forward. They come on the heels of an offseason that saw him bury his infant son Jayden in June, the same East Coast swing that saw him bury his aunt, followed by a robbery at gunpoint in his Queens stomping grounds.

You might have heard these stories, or seen it on his battle-worn face this preseason, but what you might not know is how Odom is channeling his energy to turn his tragedy into a message of hope.

First up, Odom's line of religious apparel, dubbed "Son of Man," that will include polos, jeans and T-shirts designed by artists he commissioned.

"For years I've been seeing my young brothers wearing Scarface T-shirts, John Gotti T-shirts, Rick James T-shirts," Odom says. "We don't have any icons or idols to look up to, just rappers and professional athletes. Before us, it was pimps and drug dealers.

"Remember when Jay-Z wore a Che Guevara T-shirt? Nobody knew who Che was. Then Jay-Z wears it, and it's everywhere," Odom explains. "That's what I'm trying to do with this. My Man don't get his props and he's the biggest icon in the world."

The idea for the religious apparel line came to Odom when he returned to New York following the Lakers' first-round playoffs ouster in May.

"It was like the mid-'80s again, a terrible economy without the crack," he explains. "The young men in the inner city are without guidance, robbing and shooting each other with no remorse. ... Our system is crazy because we're planning to fail. Everybody needs something to grasp on to."

Odom, who was suspended in 2001 while with the Clippers for violating the league's drug policy twice in eight months (he tearfully admitted to smoking marijuana at the time), is hoping that his T-shirt line -- and the man whose mug adorns it -- bridges that gap.



**Revelation 1:14**

"Where I'm from, you're a square if you go to church, or if you decide to read the Koran or Bible. You're not cool unless you're standing on the corner selling drugs or smoking weed," Odom says. "If we can get some of their idols wearing this T-shirt, then maybe my brothers will want to talk and walk like Him."

**Odom's T-shirt line is sure to draw attention -- and controversy.**

Odom's son died in his crib of sudden infant death syndrome soon after his T-shirt idea. Was the timing a coincidence? Not to Odom, who calls himself "a spiritual dude," having been raised by a religious grandmother after the death of his mother at the age of 12. Odom has made it his mission to educate himself on the world's religions, including enlisting the guidance of a Muslim cleric and family friend to learn about Islam. The lesson was driven home when Odom visited Istanbul, Turkey, during the '04 Olympics.

"There's unity in Istanbul, where 99 percent are Muslim," Odom says. "In America, we're divided, even within Christianity. Presbyterians, Catholics, Baptists -- there's no unity. Too often, religion means infighting and holy wars and territory."

Odom's spirituality was bolstered by yet another harrowing incident. Shortly after burying his child, Odom was walking near a family member's home in Queens when he was held up at gunpoint. The alleged assailant -- whom Odom said he recognized -- helped himself to a watch and cash, then fired a shot in Odom's direction.

"I thought I was going to die because I could see the Devil was in that dude that night," Odom relays. "I was talking to my Man, saying that's what is going on -- that's the problem -- that some stupid a-- is going to get props for robbing me with a gun. It's crazy that a young man like myself who's in the NBA has to go home and deal with that. I doubt Dirk Nowitzki has to go through that in Germany, or Tim (Duncan) in the Virgin Islands, or Manu [Ginobili] when he goes home."

Shortly after the mugging, Odom hit the fashion world with gusto. He enlisted the help of a pal at the high-profile Sean John and Echo lines for tips on design and material, and consulted with a boutique-owner friend on his own plans to open a Son of Man store at the glamorous Beverly Center in Beverly Hills by the new year.

But will religious apparel make waves in a hip-hop nation? Given what some would consider the controversial nature of the images, will there be wide appeal for his apparel? After all, the Man, according to Odom's artwork, is black.

First, Odom takes exception to the term "black."

"He's black, if you tend to think of black as race of people. I try not to think of myself as 'black,'" Odom says, citing Malcolm X's teachings regarding the American dictionary, which defines black as gloomy, soiled and

lacking of brightness. "When people think 'black,' they usually think negative or bad."

Beyond the color of Jesus' skin, the artwork sports other peculiar details. Odom readily acknowledges this before defending his interpretation of the Bible.

"The book says his hair was 'white like wool,' which doesn't sound like long stringy hair to me," he explains. "It doesn't talk about blue eyes. Hopefully, these shirts will be a big-time history lesson as well. The description of Jesus in the Bible is never used. He made people nervous, scared. He didn't look ordinary."

What, eyeballs of raging fire aren't ordinary?

"Yeah, the first thing people say is why's there fire in his eyes? It's kind of demonic," Odom admits. "But if you read the Bible verse, I don't think the Son of Man will be too happy when he returns. The world has been flipped upside down."

Odom is confident that the artwork -- which will also include an image of Christ on a cross ("It'll be horrific, hard on the eyes") -- is accurate. What's more, he believes all should wear it.

Odom sizes up this reporter, who is not African-American and stands a not-too-shabby 5-foot-9.

"I want this to be for everybody, all types, for guys my size all the way down to your size."

Watch it, Chuck.

"What are you trying to say about my size?" I inquire, mildly perturbed.

Odom laughs. Thirty minutes into our sit-down, this marked his first smile.

The usually jovial Odom admits he's a changed man. Subtle and quiet. Most nights, he sits alone in his Marina Del Rey condo staring at family photos. Not even a light-hearted, three-day trip to Vegas with the Lakers in October could snap him out of his funk.

"The night I came home from Vegas, I just sat in my room looking at pictures of my son," he says. "I've kept myself busy with the T-shirts, trying not to cry, keeping everything in. It's not healthy. I didn't give myself time to mourn. But now I'm starting to really feel it. I'm coming to the realization."

He pauses for a breather.

"Man," he finally says. "My little boy passed away."

Still, Odom elects to go it alone, choosing solitary living to let his longtime girlfriend Liza Morales and their children, Destiny, 8, and Lamar Jr., 5, live near their family in New York.

"I want to see her happy," Odom says of Morales. "She has family around and a support system, and my children have other kids to play with. And maybe I need time to myself to reflect."

For Odom, that includes plenty of reflection on his basketball career. See, Odom is quitting basketball.

No, wait ... he's not.



**Odom has started out red hot, averaging 28.0 points as the Lakers won their first two games.**

Actually, yes, he is. Just not today, anyway.

"Sometimes I still don't know if I'm prepared to go through the entire season, dealing with the different personalities, the crowds, the politics," Odom says, his eyes to the floor. "I think about it all the time."

The last time Odom, who turns 27 next week, seriously contemplated retirement? Immediately following his first camp press conference, the one he conducted with a Bible in tow.

"I was still thinking about leaving then," Odom says. "Being with the guys is good, but that's only three hours a day. I told my man, Aaron McKie, if I was his age, in the last year of my contract, I could have easily said, 'I'm gone.'"

For Odom, the battle in his head and heart rages daily, even on the court. He admits that during a recent preseason game against Sacramento he was overcome with emotion.

"It was weird, in the middle of the game, I found myself way too emotional," Odom says. "I had to catch myself. You can't carry this with you like this. I'm a mentally strong dude -- I've been suspended twice, my mother died, my grandma died as soon as I got to the Heat -- but there was one time where I thought I might mentally break down and really lose it."

So while Odom isn't planning to retire, he admits he's continually altering his timetable.

"I wake up thinking about this all the time," Odom says. "I hope that I'll gain strength from what happened, but who knows? Basketball is a dream I've been living for a long time, but I also need to do things that'll make me happy. There's so much more to Lamar than basketball."

"If some of my off-the-court endeavors are successful, maybe it'll take me away from basketball."

Those non-basketball activities also include Rich Soil Entertainment, Odom's music and film production company.

Seems some things can, indeed, bring a smile to Odom's mug.

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IT'S A SUNNY October day in Hollywood, where a city that bleeds purple and gold is giving Lakers owner Dr. Jerry Buss his due the only way it knows how -- by awarding the iconoclast the 2,323rd star on the Walk of Fame. The Lakers players, execs and alumni have joined celebs Snoop Dogg, Paris Hilton and, um, Tom Arnold for a field trip to Hollywood Boulevard.

Buss' star has been given prime real estate, nestled alongside that of Destiny's Child at the foot of the grand staircase at the Hollywood and Highland complex.

The Lakers players, however, have zero real estate, standing behind the Buss family in a cordoned-off area. Thus, some of the more overzealous players, including Odom, are playfully jostling over the two open chairs. Who wins?

Ronny Turiaf -- because if there's a team hustle award, it's called the Rambis/Madsen/Turiaf Hustle Award -- and Luke Walton.

"You're not actually sitting down, are you?" Odom says, before pulling rank. "I know someone is getting up."



**Odom admits there are times when it's difficult to focus on basketball.**

That's right. Today, Odom is smiling and breezy, having what appears to be a good time, due no doubt in part to the setting. See, Buss has what Odom wants (and no, we're not talking about a bushel of young gal pals).

"When I got traded to L.A., I figured it was for something bigger," Odom says, surveying his surroundings. "It's the one of the biggest media markets, so as a Laker, you've got a chance to do beautiful things."

Odom says he wants to be "the Puff Daddy of the NBA," and he might be well on his way. After Rich Soil releases its first album by Odom's childhood pal Ali Vegas in the new year ("Jay-Z's comes out in November, so we'll stay away from that"), Odom and his partner Jamie Sangouthai will turn their attention to several film projects.

First in the hopper is "You're Nobody (Until Somebody Kills You)" -- executive produced by Spike Lee and written by Lee's longtime assistant director Michael Pinckney (and featuring Notorious B.I.G.'s title track) -- about two detectives who unravel a murder plot targeting rap artists. As with the T-shirt line, this is a project close to Odom's heart, and one with a purpose.

"It's timely, with all the tension in the hip-hop world," says Odom. "The NBA and hip-hop are brothers. They grew up with each other. It's something I'm very passionate about."

Walton can attest to that.

"Lamar knows his music, so when I put my music on in the weight room, he's all over me," Walton relays. "He's got an opinion about everything. I don't know what he's talking about when he's going back and forth with the guys about different rappers."

"He's got a great personality and so many aspirations," Walton continues. "It's good to see him so busy and happy."

Odom says he's very involved in the development of his films, reading scripts and, now, shopping them to distributors. Next week, he plans to take a meeting with Lions Gate -- considered to be a mini-major studio with aspirations of securing more urban content -- to pitch the \$2-million- to \$3-million-budgeted crime drama.

As Paula Abdul regales the crowd with tales from her days as a Laker Girl, Kobe Bryant -- who spends much of the hourlong ceremony nestled alongside his lanky sidekick -- is either nibbling on Odom's lobe or being quite the comedian, because Odom's laughing. This is a good sign, says Bryant, who believes Odom is making strides off the court.

"It's a daily struggle for Lamar," Bryant says. "The key is to not resist it, but to embrace it. The game can be your refuge, but when you have something so tragic happen to you, the game is so small. I keep telling him to not worry about basketball. If people don't understand, so be it. This is much bigger than that."

To that end, Bryant says he's happy to see Odom tackling his other ambitions.

"He's been working hard at the entertainment game and we're all pulling for him." Bryant says, before making a prediction. "At the rate Lamar's going with music and movies and fashion, he's getting the next star" on the Walk of Fame.

Odom is in awe of that notion.

"That would be awesome," he says, before hedging Bryant's bet. "Jerry Buss has been involved in L.A. culture for so long, he means so much to this city, and he's done great business off the court. So for me to get a star, I'd imagine it would take a few championships."

Championships would be great. The old, happier Lamar would be better.

Even if it does pave the way to an early retirement.

Merriman and Playboy's Kendra Wilkinson: Outtakes

Before he'd face down accusations of ingesting strange performance enhancing substances, Chargers linebacker Shawne Merriman made a playful midday visit to the Playboy Mansion in October to hook up with Playmate Kendra Wilkinson, co-star of E!'s behind-the-Bunny series "The Girls Next Door" and a diehard Chargers fan.

Being a professional of the highest standards, I selflessly chose to join them for their chat and a stroll of the grounds, where strange creatures hopped about, screeching in wild tones, and generally making me very nervous. Sounds like fun ... except these were not Playmates, but Hugh Hefner's collection of monkeys. There were few Playmates to be seen (on strike, perhaps) so we scouted the zoo, the Mansion proper, and the infamous grotto. "Best investment I ever made," confirms Hef, who made a cameo in his signature PJs.

**Shawne meets a Bunny.**

Afterward, Merriman, 22, and the Playmate, 21, sat at the tennis courts to discuss the legacy of Junior Seau, the Mansion pecking order, and the benefits of fake boobies.

Peep the video (right) and the article in the Nov. 6 issue of ESPN The Magazine.

New book on Pistol Pete

Nearly 20 years after the great Pete Maravich's passing, Wayne Federman and Marshall Terrill give us the authorized "Maravich" bio (in bookstores now). Maravich's widow, Jackie, says it was time to clear misconceptions like Pistol Pete's rudeness ("he was just shy") and obsession with aliens. "He didn't have a bull's-eye on our roof for ships to land," says Jackie. "But before he found Christianity, Pete was definitely searching for something."

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