Curly J learned how to do it himself. The self-proclaimed “King of Melodies” is Long Island’s most exciting star in years—effortless as a vibe-setting crooner or double-time rap assassin, over moody guitar-streaked bangers or bright electro-tinged trap. But while he may seem fully formed, his rise was predicated on a stubborn effort to become as well-rounded as any rapper doing it. Sure, his life changed forever in the summer of 2019 when his single “Bag Different” went viral on SoundCloud, but that success was a long time coming, and the result of Curly J betting on himself. After dabbling in rap growing up and studying stars like Drake and Speaker Knockerz, he found himself in Texas for college, living with his grandparents while his mother battled breast cancer. Music was a natural place to focus his energy and anxieties—he spent more time in his dorm watching videos and recording than he did in class. When he wrote “Bag Different,” though, he realized it was time to switch things up. Curly J took his paycheck from his on-campus job, paid to have the song mixed, and “risked it all.” He dropped out of school and moved back to New York, promising his mom that within a couple years he’d be a star. It only took a couple of months. Curly J followed up “Bag Different” with songs that ran the gamut from candy-coated nostalgia trips (“Kappa”) to acoustic-blessed flexes (“Taking Off”) to dreamy sex romps (“Addicted”), all brimming with energy to match his lively flow. He puts it all in the music, which is why so many fans of R&B’s intersection with rap have crowned him as rising royalty.