

Fad to furor

Rap music graduates to world of big business

By Alan Phelps

Super DJ Clark Kent, a rap producer and New York City DJ, scratched his way into the rap world.

"I'm true to hip-hop," he said from his Brooklyn apartment.

Kent, 26, who has worked with such artists as Large Professor, UPMD and Diamond D, played in clubs nearly every day for two years before several record companies approached him to be a rap producer.

Kent's dedication, his love of the music and his flavor exemplify what artists need to break into rap. It isn't easy, but with rap sales booming and more and more rappers becoming household names, the devotion can prove worthwhile in a new world full of rap superstars.

"I'm very, very well-paid," Kent said. "A whole bunch of labels came at me at the same time. I'm telling you, I'm one of the top DJs in the world."

Merlin Bobbe, senior vice president for Atlantic East-West Records, said rap music, once looked down on as a fleeting inner-city fad, has indeed become big business.

"It's as competitive as any other form of music," he said. "At one time, it was known that rap artists wouldn't get the same type of budgets or production fees as R&B, pop or any other form. That has changed."

"They can get as much or sometimes even more than mainstream music," Bobbe said.

Even in medium-sized Midwestern towns such as Lincoln, far from rap's birthplace, rap has caught on and commands a large following.

"In only two years, I've seen sales in rap increase dramatically," Janet Froschheiser, manager of Twisters Music and Gifts, 1401 O St., said. "People who used to hate it are buying it on a weekly basis."

That's not the way it used to be, Kent said. During rap's infancy, record companies were reluctant to invest in the street-

based art form.

Because rap was centered in the inner cities, it was looked upon as a very limited, cultural phenomenon that lacked widespread appeal. It simply wasn't considered serious music.

But rap fans became more numerous, and the music kept pounding louder through the nation's cities. A 15-year-old phenomenon, Kent said, ceases to be a fad.

Bobbe said the breakthrough was in the large amount of rap music sales despite limited radio airplay. "It was amazing to many record companies and music lovers to see music with virtually no airplay gain such sales and reach an audience the way it did through streets and DJs and parties," Bobbe said.

Nowadays, Kent said, rap has taken its rightful place beside other forms of music.

"It's a very big business — very competitive, extremely competitive — like all music is."

But while rap becomes more and more competitive, Bobbe said he thought it now was easier than ever to break into the scene.

"Every record company is looking for some type of rap music to represent their commitment to young people, and to music they have really brought to the limelight of this industry."

But Kent said would-be rappers still needed an edge. It used to be easy for artists to sign deals, he said, because all of the large record labels were scrounging for rap.

Now, he said, an act has to be different to make it. "I find out what's special," Kent said. "If I have anything to do with an act, I want it to be right."

Kent said he looked for rappers with a style all their own, with a "hook" that sounded different from any other rapper's. A unique flavor can be difficult to find, he said.

"That's why you don't sign on the first thing," he said. "You look around, weigh the differences, ask, 'Why is this special?'"

"There's reasons for somebody to be a hit or not a hit."

Bobbe uses the same reasoning.

"It's just like a good vocalist or good musician — not something you come across every day."

Bobbe's company, East-West Atlantic, thought Da Youngsta's, a group of three teen-agers out of west Philadelphia, were special. Members of the group readily agreed.

"I think that my style, my flow, our look, is good," Qur'an said.

His cousin and fellow group member, Tarik, agreed.

"I think most (record companies) look for new acts that have their own flavor," he said. "We have a lot of flavor."

Along with a special flavor, successful rappers must know where they're coming from. Da Youngsta's got their start on the streets, listening to their friends rapping on sidewalks.

"It was just something I grew up around," Taj said. "I wrote some verses down on paper, just started rhyming, rapping."

"A lot of people like doing it," Tarik said. "It's a way you can express your feelings. A whole lot of people want to do it, from being around it so much. You be like, man, I got flavor, let me try and do mine."

Kent, too, was raised by rap. When he was a teenager, he used to hang out with his uncle, who was a New

York City DJ.

"I just went right along with it, just listened to what was happening in the streets, at a very young age."

It's that type of background and devotion that Kent believes is important for any act he considers working with.

"What I look for is something I can really believe, a rapper who's rapping about streets and how hard life is. I want somebody who's through and through."

"When I get someone like that, I can't really make a mistake," he said. "It's easy if you have a record that no one can deny."

The lack of a real background can be a hindrance for white rappers trying to make it, Kent said. There are some white artists who are true, he said, but those are few and far between.

When rap began to take off in the mid-1980s, record companies recruited white rappers to help "mainstream" the music, Kent said. But now that the form has established itself, white rappers have a more difficult time.

"Now, people really understand that rap is true shit," he said, "and there aren't many white rappers who really, truly know this shit."

Bobbe said whites weren't necessarily at a disadvantage in the industry, but many rap fans tended to see them as imitators rather than true artists.

"They're not looked upon as sincere and real," he said. "But if you have artists, for instance, like House of Pain, who pretty much have their own style of rapping, and their lyrics pertain to their Irish background, they're more accepted and get more respect for doing something unique in itself, instead of imitating what is already out."

But the realness of rap — the very aspect that makes the music popular with so many fans — can turn off some listeners. The violent lyrics some artists use came under fire as rap entered the mainstream, and led in part to the parental advisory stickers sported by many tapes and CDs.

Kent defended the lyrics as true to life.

"If you think about it, the city of New York is a violent place. It was violent before rap music started," he said. "The street kids are going to be violent whether rap music is playing or not."

"How can you blame anything on what music is? This is New York, man, it's a criminal place, and rap music started here."

Kent said that while he didn't mind the record companies' warning labels on graphic rap albums, he was very much against censorship.

"How can you take a curse out of what somebody is saying, because it's true. How can you disrespect a record like that?"

Bobbe said warning labels were a cure for potential censorship.

"They should be used. It's up to that consumer to decide whether or not this is for them," he said. "They can pick and choose what they want. All rap music doesn't contain profanities."

Kent said lyrics and whether a song was profane weren't always as important as they are today. The emphasis of rap used to be on the music spun by the DJ, he said, not the lyrics rappers have become so famous for. Kent said he wanted to see rap move back to how it once was.

"In essence, what else can rapping be but about the rapper now? You can see that's happening. The DJ is fading. Some are true and some aren't true to the whole rap form."

"Before, it was if a mike was on, everyone got on it, and the DJ was the DJ."

Kent said rap might be starting to revert to its hip-hop roots. Bobbe said that wherever rap was headed, it would be young people who took it there.

"Rap represents, in many ways, our youth," he said. "Rap music is music about youth. Young people have put it on the map. Its popularity will continue to grow as young people find new and different ways to appreciate and produce it."



Action: something going good, bad or otherwise

Ain't half steppin': going all the way and doing the best job possible

Ain't no joke: a good appraisal or being serious

Ain't no thang: not a big deal

A.K.: AK-47 automatic rifle

Ave: avenue

B-Boy: break boy, a totally devoted male fan and participant in hip-hop music and culture

Back in the days: the past

Bad: excellent, good, stylish, cool

Base head: cocaine addict

Basin': taking free-base drugs

Beat down: a serious physical beating by one or more persons

Benzo: a Mercedes Benz

Believe dat: telling someone that something is the absolute truth

Bet: an emphatic way of saying yes

Biting: to copy someone



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