

Waking Up Naptown - Hip Hop in Indianapolis

Written by Leslie Benson ID3338
Saturday, 17 February 2007 00:31 -

Waking Up Naptown-Hip Hop in Indianapolis by Leslie Benson

The Mudkids raise Indy hip-hop from the underground

Dreadlocks draped over his face, DJ Rusty Redenbacher stares intently at his Mac Powerbook screen, typing a response to a MySpace blog comment about the cyst he had removed from his cheek and the elation of his hip-hop band, the Mudkids, just having recorded a Colts tribute song. Moving from the coffee counter to his favorite table by the front window at the Northside News Café, where he works at the newsstand, this is the beginning of what will be a four-hour interview, during which the Indianapolis rapper will share with NUVO his joy, his rage and the journey he has endured.

Emerging from what he calls "the cruel years" — a three-year journey during which he survived the deaths of his parents, a shift to sobriety and the closing of his hometown bar, the Patio — Redenbacher and his musical family, the Mudkids, have loyally held each other up through heavy loss and liberation.

This past month has brought the band full circle — from its inception 10 years ago to the release of its fourth album, *Basementality*, and national recognition with its Colts" tribute anthem, "Rock N" Roll (Go Blue)."

"It took a Super Bowl, four CDs and countless shows and songs," Redenbacher says. "[Now] people that don't normally listen to us have found us."

It began the week of Jan. 22, 2007. On Monday, Colts superfan Zack Legend invited the Mudkids to write the team a tribute song after they won the AFC Championships.

"Colts.com — 100,000 hits a day was all I was thinking," Redenbacher says.

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On Tuesday, the Mudkids recorded "Go Blue" and attended a photo shoot with NUVO. They posted the song on their MySpace page and MusicalFamilyTree.com the following day. "Wednesday, the first day the song went online, I got a cyst cut off my face," Redenbacher says. Removing an unwanted physical growth — representing relationship pressures and his unwanted low self-esteem at the time — highlighted the good that was about to happen to the band and the sense of freedom that would ensue. "I made a decision that day, I don't want a nemesis," he says.

On Thursday, Jan. 25, Legend shot a music video with the Mudkids and a busload of Colts fans outside the RCA Dome in downtown Indianapolis. A revised video on YouTube.com and 10,000 hits later, the Mudkids performed their song the following week during a school rally on Jan. 31, sending off leukemia patient Tyler Genneken, 11, from West Grove Elementary School in Greenwood, to Super Bowl XLI, courtesy of tickets donated by Sam's Club to the Riley Hospital for Children.

"We wanted to make sure we were there for him," says Redenbacher, who, just a few months ago, faced his own battle — struggling with the loss of his parents.

"Christmas Day, I was about as depressed as I ever had been," he says. "I went to my mother's grave and stood between it and my grandparents' grave in the stinging rain." Placing copies of Basementality on their graves, he "asked for strength, answers and resolve." Four days later, he says, "good things started happening."

During his band's overwhelming success thus far in 2007, which includes consistently selling out copies of its new album at area Luna Music stores, Redenbacher decided to get a tattoo below his left elbow inscribed with the word "Loved" and pieces of his mother's artwork. "I was a loved child," he says.

Growing up in Gary, Ind., and moving to Indy at age 3, Redenbacher was the first grandchild in his family, with five aunts and uncles on both sides. "I was gregarious and fun, but not too mischievous," he says.

His mother began having seizures in her 20s, which grew aggressive when Redenbacher turned about 7 years old. "She went into a coma for three weeks," he says. "They sent me to

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Detroit to stay with my Great Auntie, my grandma's sister. A little while later, I came back to see my mom. They didn't tell me what had happened, but I knew. She had had seizures before, but this one took the cake."

Four years later, Redenbacher's mother had mostly recovered, upholding a job, taking care of his grandmother and making sure he graduated high school. "She was a soldier," he says. "I never heard her complain once."

His mother's personal drive taught him the importance of "Never Givin' Up," which he and the Mudkids sing about on *Basementality*. Besides his faithful bandmates keeping him motivated, Redenbacher also attributes his never-ending passion for music to his faith in God and his self-expression through writing and blogging.

"[Spirituality] has always been there for me," he says. "It's always in sight, but there were a few years when I lost it. My self-esteem was beat up." Then he says he realized the one thing that can never be taken away from him is the ability to write and communicate with others.

"My blog is like my journal," says Redenbacher, who is considering turning some of his blogs into a book. "It's like an open underwear drawer. I have no shame."

Writing is the second form of counseling the musician has endured to make it through his cruel years. "My mother died in November 2005 and made me a new orphan," he says. When he hit what felt like rock bottom, Redenbacher says he decided he wouldn't give up. "Something in me said, "You've gotta survive, bro. You've got a gift,"" he says. "I just had to get it in my mind that I'm a pretty good rapper. We wrote *Basementality* in two or three years. Then it sat for a year, and it still sounds current. We make albums. If it's got 15 songs on it, it's gonna be 15 songs of merit. Everything we put out, I stand behind."

Unlike anything he's ever recorded before, Redenbacher is sidestepping from the citrus "everything's gonna be all right" hip-hop of the Mudkids to release his edgier side on an upcoming album, *Lazarus*, which he is recording with SP Star of Silence Productions. "[My blog] is bleeding into this music," he says. The man has two sides and isn't afraid to express them. "I don't mind sometimes saying, "I hurt too." I don't always have to smile for you," he says.

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Fortunately, Redenbacher has had a lot more to smile about these days. Each summer at Goodwill, he helps teach inner-city students the song craft of hip-hop with local promoter Bob McCutcheon and, year-round, he is backed by his best friends in the Mudkids.

Redenbacher says Ron "DJ Indiana Jones" Miner is the mover and shaker of the group, managing and producing their albums. The newest member of the Mudkids, DJ Helicon works as road DJ, driver and cook, while Tyler "DJ Elp-Mass" Knapp makes all the band's beats as the "genius architect of the band," according to Redenbacher. Lastly, he says, "Big Skitz is [his] right-hand man. I'd go to war with that guy," he says, calling him "the best freestyler" he's ever met.

"These guys have seen me at my lowest lows and highest highs," Redenbacher says. "They have been my counselors, my confidants — everything. We're stronger now family-wise than we've ever been."

Juggling five jobs, Redenbacher — who works at the Northside Newsstand, as a TV host at IMC, as a DJ at HOTT 96.3, as a hip-hop club DJ and as a Mudkid — thanks his friends for covering shifts for him while supporting his band's newfound success. "Thank God I've got good friends who understand how important this all is to me," he says. "These last cruel years took a lot from me as a man and an artist ... I wouldn't have been ready last year mentally, emotionally or songwriting-wise for this. [Now], these things have been put in place for us."

Having learned his ear for music from Indy music icon Paul Mahern, Redenbacher, who considers Mahern his hero, says he's grown tremendously as a musician since his days singing in the local rock band the Birdmen of Alcatraz. "I was 20-something and brash!" he says. "By the time we got into the studio, those were songs with a capital 's.'" We recorded "Flip Mode," and Paul had this look on his face like, "This is it!"

In the early 1990s, Redenbacher played in the Birdmen of Alcatraz and found his DJ legs by winging it at the Patio on Wednesday nights until the Vogue drew the same crowd for a similar event. "I learned to beat-mix on the job," says Redenbacher, who now uses a Mac and Serato Scratch LIVE software to DJ.

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When it came time for a band in Indy to have an East Coast aesthetic, he says it was all about the Mudkids, and they are still bringing a sense of community back to Naptown's hip-hop scene.

"That's why we do it — for the community," Redenbacher says. "That's what's happening in Broad Ripple again. Todd Johnson [the owner of Spin Nightclub] changed the sign, but he's bringing back the Patio's energy."

Unlike artists who started in Indy and left town to pursue the lights of other cities, the Mudkids have always stayed true to the blue of Naptown.

"This city has been supportive of us for 10 years," Redenbacher says. "The first thing we say when we're on stage is, "Hi, we're the Mudkids from Indianapolis.""

The Mudkids already have eight songs written for their next album, *We Are Dynamic*, and *People Like Us*. Redenbacher plans on releasing his new solo record, *Lazarus*, this summer. Fans can also now download free copies of the Mudkids' early demos from 1998's *4trackmind* at MusicalFamilyTree.com. Copies of the Mudkids' current disc, *Basementality*, are available for purchase online and in local stores. In addition, the Mudkids are considering releasing *Decade*, a DVD documentary about their musical journey, later this year.

"I know we're at the top of our game, not the game," Redenbacher says. "The things we get done, we do in house, and that's a great sense of pride for me ... Everything I write about is something I've lived through ... For this to happen now is a sign of God's grace and mercy."

Blending rock, funk and hip-hop

The Franchise (Indy) www.thefranchizemusic.com

"Hip-hop influences more aspects of life than any other music [genre] now — books,

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commercials [and] clothing," says The Franchise's DJ Unorthodox. "It's a lifestyle."

Voted Best Local Hip-Hop Group by NUVO's readers in 2006 (making the list for the second year in a row), Unorthodox's band, The Franchise, also won 93.1 FM Radio Now's Battle of the Bands two years ago. Now the band's skills have paid off.

On the heels of their debut album, *Mergerz & Acquisitionz* (Artist Factory, 2005), Unorthodox and the group flew to Los Angeles, Calif., this week to record a new project with Black Eyed Peas founder/producer Will.i.Am.

"We auditioned for Artist Factory's Hiram Hicks [owner and former president of Island Black Music], and he gave us a call saying we needed to be in Atlanta," says lead vocalist and emcee Nate Davis. "We had 15 minutes to audition for Will.i.Am. and he liked our song, 'What's Going On.'"

The short performance brought The Franchise an offer from Will.i.Am. to record material with him. Not knowing what to expect until they arrived, the musicians were told they could be in L.A. possibly recording their second album. The Black Eyed Peas artist gave his nod of approval to original tracks "Traded It All," "Our Time" and "Hiphoprocksoulmusic." With enough new material to fill two more albums, Davis, Unorthodox and their bandmates, Ryan Russell (lead guitar), Ian Titus (bass), Mark Davis (drums) and George Mallers (guitar/keys), aren't afraid of the challenges and possibilities that lie ahead.

The boys' funkadelic beats and soul ballads boost rock guitar riffs and hip-hop vocals that have enabled them to ride the college circuit. Nate Davis' style stems from his days as rapper Doc Grip, when he released two solo hip-hop albums while attending the University of Wisconsin. Russell, a Cleveland, Ohio, native, met Nate Davis in 2002 at the college and soon grew to love hip-hop, a form of music the former Southern rock fan had not yet encountered. Becoming the bassist for Nate Davis' solo gigs, the duo soon joined forces with Titus.

Nate Davis, who grew up in Indy, persuaded Russell to move to the Circle City after graduating college to continue their music project. At Casba, a nightclub in Broad Ripple, Unorthodox met Nate Davis while DJing, and he soon joined the band, providing samples and record scratching to "keep the rhythm going" as an auxiliary percussionist. In The Franchise's early days, lineup

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changes occurred until the current band solidified in November 2005 with Mark Davis and Mellers.

"We're not trying to be overly artistic," Nate Davis says. "It [our sound] is new but familiar ... I don't like the idea of writing broad, cryptic lyrics. The empowering thing about hip-hop is saying exactly what you mean to a captive audience."

Keyboardist Mellers focuses on what artists say rather than how they say it. "I've noticed one way of separating yourself ... is the content of your lyrics," he says. "Our lyrics have more substance."

Nate Davis says his words are based on "wanting to get somewhere — chasing a dream — and everything that's involved in trying to accomplish a goal and how that affects relationships."

Performing originals and remixes of everything from ZZ Top to 2-Pac, the musicians are as diverse live as they are musically educated.

"I was classically trained as a pianist as a kid," Mellers says. "Then I started at Ball State [University] with a degree in music composition," which turned into a degree in telecommunications. Now the Fort Wayne native teaches music lessons to kids and writes commercials, hoping to one day work on a major motion picture soundtrack.

Guitarist Russell works as a chef at the Hawthorne Country Club in Fishers, Titus sells home insurance, Nate Davis is a mortgage broker, Mark Davis owns a real estate business and Unorthodox works on houses as an engineer. Video games and exercise round out the rest of the boys' days, but their music takes precedence. Drawing from those who came before — Mozart, Miles Davis, Danny Elfman, Jimi Hendrix, 2-Pac, Nas, Outkast and even AFI — thoughtful and aggressive tunes drive their creative output.

As the first band to perform at Seven, The Franchise believes more Indy bars should take chances on letting local talent perform. "I've never been anywhere else where there are so many bands trying to "make" it — giving it 110 percent," Russell says. He knows firsthand the

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struggles of trying to succeed at performing music. Not only are money, talent and popularity factors, he and Nate Davis say society's ills also sometimes come into play.

According to Nate Davis, "The hardest thing about being a white rapper are the stereotypes." Although hip-hop is a competitive business across the nation and some racial issues ensue at bars due to violence sporadically caused by thugs, Nate Davis says, "The people are open."

For Titus, performing in a hip-hop band as a Caucasian male has never posed controversy. For him, it's truly about the quality of the music, not the folks behind the instruments.

Although Titus and his bandmates agree that hip-hop is changing, they assert that "it'll never die."

Mallers says, "Nothing ever dies [in music], it just gets reinvented. A lot of artists [who] say "hip-hop is dead," like Nas on his new album, are lighting a fire under people's asses."

"Hip-hop is doing now what rock did in the '70s," Mallers adds. "More than ever, it's important to blend rock and the hip-hop genres. That's how we're gonna reinvent it."

Other than recording a second CD, The Franchise has a film proposal on the horizon courtesy of emcee Nate Davis. "We want to write a movie, Shelf Life, about a band that was popular in their city, went to record a big album that got shelved and returned to their city to face their failure." Russell referred to the idea as "Spinal Tap meets Grandma's Boy."

The Franchise's future may look brighter than that of the band in their script. "I've been doing this long enough," Unorthodox says, "and I know something big will come out of this."

Representing Indy's hip-hop network

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Crush Entertainment (Indy) www.crushentertainment.com

When show promoters examine the Midwest, they find a triangular networking path between Indianapolis, Bloomington, Ind., and Dayton, Ohio. Sometimes the angles spread to cities like Columbus, Ohio, — staple towns for indie rock shows, a blueprint for what local promoter Ron "DJ Indiana Jones" Miner wants to do for hip-hop and reggaeton in Indy.

"If we can form that same kind of union, then we're onto something," Miner says. To him, that type of networking is "more fruitful than a one-time record deal," and that's exactly what he's doing as executive producer of the Mudkids, whose new album, *Basementality*, has been a top-selling item at local Luna Music stores.

"On the last album, they were reaching up," Miner says. "[On *Basementality*], they're reaching inward. The focus is on keeping it underground."

Miner got his start DJing in 1983 at his family's Melody Skateland. He was 13 years old.

Fronting the rap group D-KOR in 1985 while attending Ben Davis High School, he grew up with many of Indy's prominent music personalities, including Paul Mahern, who produced his first CD. He formed Homegrown Productions in 1992 with future Mudkids" frontman Rusty Redenbacher and would-be bandmate Tyler "Elp-Mass" Knapp. He and Mark Seidman (DJ Noah) began the first weekly hip-hop night at Kilimanjaro, now the Jazz Kitchen. Two years later, Miner took off to New York for a chance at the big time, landing a job for the independent Pendulum Records (Lords of the Underground, Lisa Lisa) and, later, EMI Music, where he worked for D"Angelo as national director of crossover promotion.

"When I went to New York, I got a rude awakening," Miner says. "DJs there were playing dance hall reggae and disco. I learned that hip-hop isn't necessarily a [type of] music; it's the way you do music. You can put two jazz records together and cut it up, and that's hip-hop."

In the late '90s, Miner returned to his hometown, forming Crush Entertainment with Seidman out of the Surf Studios on the Westside of Indy. "We put out the Mudkids" 12-inches and

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[albums] and got college radio play," he says.

Crush events have spanned from the Patio to the new Spin Nightclub, Seven and the Vogue. Representing the Mudkids, Kayo, Monster Maker and C-Rayz Walz (a Bronx, N.Y., artist who now lives in Terre Haute, Ind.), Miner hopes to bring the national spotlight back to the Indy hip-hop scene.

"I keep it revolutionary and on a party level," Miner says. "National media doesn't even know Indiana even exists. We had our day for a minute, but really, as artists, we have to take it on ourselves to release products."

For Miner, releasing albums from new talent has been optimal. He even once managed Rhymefest, now a Chicago resident. "Attending the Grammys with Rhymefest was pretty big," Miner says.

In 2002, NUVO named Miner the best DJ in Indy. He remains a building block in the local hip-hop scene.

"What drew me to hip-hop was the attitude," Miner says. "You've gotta think about what music was like in 1983. By default, the other music out there was so bad ... Back then, I was listening to Run-D.M.C., the Beastie Boys [and] Public Enemy. These people influenced my thoughts growing up."

Whether it's the competitive nature of hip-hop (B-boy battles, graffiti art or emcee/DJ battles) that draws fans to the music, or the lifestyle incorporated with hip-hop, Indianapolis is one city that refuses to sleep. Miner says it's time to support the hip-hop artists who were virtually underground for so long. Naptown is awake, alive and well.

"Hip-hop has put me in the craziest and best places [in life]," Miner says. "From the Grammys to the gutter, I've always felt safe and loved by the people."

Embracing the Midwest

Darkside U.C.O.N.N. Entertainment (Indy and Chicago) www.myspace.com/darksideuconn

A cultural wave for the past 30 years, hip-hop has washed over inner cities all the way to the rural countryside, impacting people throughout the world not only in the music they listen to, but also in aspects of fashion, dance, nightlife, media and consumer use. Hip-hop is a lifestyle, and the Midwest embraces it.

That is the view of Darkside U.C.O.N.N. Entertainment (United Clicks of Notorious Nations). Uniting Midwest gangs with music, Darkside, based in Chicago, Ill., with ties to Indianapolis, bridges rappers and hip-hop artists of various flavors with a positive goal — to make things happen.

"I don't care what click you're in," says Chu, CEO of Darkside. "We come together to turn negative into positive from the streets."

Nominated by the Chicago Music Awards as one of the best record labels of 2006, Darkside's prime artist, Nalon, who called Indy home for three years, was also nominated for the best hip-hop/rap album of the year (for L.O.C. Muzik Mixtape), competing against Grammy Award-winning Rhymefest (also originally from Indy) with Blue Collar. Forming in "somebody's momma's house," according to Chu, Darkside got its start in 1997, setting up a studio on 16th and Concord streets in Indy for a little over a year. Eventually, Darkside and Nalon moved to Chi-Town, like many other hip-hop artists, but Chu assures the move wasn't personal.

On Jan. 12, Nalon returned to Indy for an all-ages gig at the new teen club, Xtremes. "We got a lot of positive feedback on MySpace from those kids," Giovanni of Darkside says.

"The music makes you want to live," Chu adds, "like back in the day, when breakdancing made you want to dance."

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For a record label that supports Midwest talent, Darkside stays true to its mission without favoring Chicago's scene over Indy's. "I'm calling out the whole Midwest to come together," Chu says. "We truly have talent [here]."

With real-life testimonies driving the lyrics of Darkside's artists, Chu believes "the world will blow before hip-hop dies."

Breaking through

Hip-hop artists stay true to the blue

NUVO recommends ...

Hip-hop musicians and DJs:

Atarilogic and Alaksa Westwind (Lafayette): www.tonedefsystems.com

Big Phil (Indy): www.rhymelifemusic.com

Brittany Street (Indy): www.myspace.com/itsbrittanystreet

Cleptoz (Indy): www.myspace.com/cleptoz

DaFilled (Indy): www.dafilled.com

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DJ Cappin Kirk (Indy): www.myspace.com/cappinkirk

DJ Danger (Indy): www.myspace.com/fromjamrock

DJ Indiana Jones (Indy): www.myspace.com/ndjones

DJ Optimo (Indy): www.myspace.com/djoptimo1

DJ Paren (Indy): www.myspace.com/paren

DJ Paul Bunyon (Indy): www.myspace.com/djpaulbunyon

DJ TopSpeed (Indy): www.myspace.com/djtopspeed

D Mac (Indy): www.werunitrecords.com

Dre Young (Indy): www.myspace.com/simpleliferecords

The Franchize (Indy): www.thefranchizemusic.com

Gueroloco (Indy and Chicago, Ill.): www.myspace.com/gueroloco

Kel Spencer (Indy and Brooklyn, N.Y.): www.myspace.com/kelspencer

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LegAcey (Indy): www.myspace.com/legaceymusic

Mikado (Indy): www.myspace.com/mikado04

Mic Sol: www.myspace.com/micsol

Mudkids (Indy): www.myspace.com/mudkids

Nalon (Indy and Chicago): www.myspace.com/loc26

The Parker Brothaz (Indy): www.myspace.com/theparkerbrothaz

The Philosophy (Indy): www.myspace.com/the1philosophy

Sub-Surface (Fort Wayne): www.myspace.com/boomboxhiphop

Trilogy (Indy): www.myspace.com/trilogy

Twilight Sentinels (Indy): www.myspace.com/twilightsentinels

Young True & Rokstar (Indy): www.myspace.com/nappyville625Clubs/bars

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Casba

6319 Guilford Ave., Broad Ripple Village, Indianapolis, 317-254-1147

Thursdays: B-boy battles

Sundays: Reggae and hip-hop beats by DJ Indiana Jones and DJ Danger.

Coaches Tavern

28 S. Pennsylvania St., Indianapolis, 317-917-1191

www.coachestavern.com

Tuesdays: DJ Driver spins hip-hop.

CT Peppers

6283 N. College Ave., Broad Ripple Village, Indianapolis, 317-257-6277

www.pepperslive.com

College-friendly home pub for the Franchise.

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Ice Lounge

235 S. Meridian St., Indianapolis, 317-951-2174

www.iceultralounge.com

Swank three-floor club with multiple bars and cushy VIP areas. Select hip-hop parties take place here.

Seven

6235 N. Guilford Ave., Broad Ripple Village, Indianapolis, 317-257-0707

www.7indy.com

Fridays: DJ Paul Bunyon spins hip-hop.

Spin Nightclub

6308 N. Guilford Ave., Broad Ripple Village, Indianapolis, 317-257-0000

www.myspace.com/spinindy

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Alternating live hip-hop shows, emcee battles by Bassment Funk Productions and DJs.

Therapy Nightclub and Lounge

605 E. Market St., Indianapolis, 317-632-0325

www.myspace.com/therapynightclub

Wednesdays: Reggae and Afro-beats. Underground hip-hop DJs make appearances on varying dates.

Vogue Nightclub

6259 N College Ave., Indianapolis, 317-259-7029

www.thevogue.ws

Occasional live hip-hop concerts.

Labels/Promoters/Events:

3 Duff Entertainment Group (Indy): www.myspace.com/3duff2006

Bassment Funk Productions & Promotions (Indy): www.myspace.com/bassfunk1

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Crush Entertainment (Indy): www.crushentertainment.com

Darkside U.C.O.N.N. Entertainment (Indy and Chicago): www.myspace.com/darksideuconn

Hip Hop Congress (Fort Wayne chapter): <http://hiphopcongress.com>

Multiform (weekly hip-hop/funk event at Casba run by DJs Paren and Scott Matelic; Indy): www.myspace.com/multiformal

Naptivity Entertainment (Indy): www.myspace.com/spstar317

Old Soul Entertainment (hosts Soul Sessions; Indy): www.myspace.com/oldsoulent

Silence Productions (Indy): www.myspace.com/spstar317

Simple Life Records (Indy): www.myspace.com/simpleliferecords

Tone Def Systems (Indy): www.tonedefsystems.com

We Run it Records (Indy): www.werunitrecords.com

***Leslie Benson: <http://www.nuvo.net/profiles/lbenson>