

NY Erosion As Hip-Hop Mecca

Written by Westside ID183

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When hit rapper Nelly shopped around his first album in the late 1990s, New York's premier hip-hop labels, Def Jam Records and Bad Boy Records, passed on the unknown artist from St. Louis. He didn't have the gritty street cred of homegrown acts like Jay-Z and the late Notorious B.I.G.

Ultimately, Universal Records decided to take a chance on the rapper, with his melodic style and milder lyrics. Nelly's first album, *Country Grammar*, went on to sell more than 9 million units in the United States alone.

"The other labels thought his music wasn't hard-core, wasn't gangster, wasn't violent," says Monte Lipman, president of Universal Records, part of the Universal Music Group. "They thought it was wack."

Fast-forward five years, and rapper Nelly is no longer the exception but the rule. This year's hottest hip-hop artists are from the Midwest and the South, from Atlanta or St. Louis or Chicago--anywhere, it seems, but here.

Members of the new toned-down breed of musicians, like Nelly and Atlanta rapper Lil Jon, are starting independent labels and clothing lines in their hometowns. Though they emulate New York hip-hop greats Russell Simmons and Sean "P. Diddy" Combs, they're pushing New York out of the limelight.

"As the whole hip-hop sound became much, much more mainstream, it opened the door for talent to be found in places other than Queens, Harlem and Brooklyn," says Kenard Gibbs, president of Vibe, an urban music magazine.

During its heyday in the 1990s, hip-hop helped revitalize the moribund music business and returned New York to its glory as the spiritual center of the industry--a role that had been snatched by the West Coast several years before. And hip-hop was more than just a musical force. The entrepreneurial elan of its artists and producers added vigor and innovation to the mix, generating hundreds of millions of dollars and thousands of jobs.

Mr. Simmons launched Def Jam Records, currently a unit of Universal Music Group, more than 20 years ago. He branched out into clothing by launching Phat Farm in 1993. Now a full-fledged fashion empire offering sneakers, womenswear and men's suits, the brand generated \$615 million in revenues last year.

Mr. Combs is not far behind, thanks to Bad Boy Records and his \$400 million Sean John clothing line. Another young local hip-hop mogul, Damon Dash, set up Roc-A-Fella Records with partner Jay-Z. Their Rocawear fashion unit has grown into a \$300 million company.

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However, New York is no longer giving birth to the latest artists-cum-entrepreneurs.

Topping the charts

Nelly had the top two best-selling albums, *Suit and Sweat*, in the third week of September. Atlanta-based Usher has the biggest-selling album so far this year, with 5.7 million copies sold. OutKast, a duo from Atlanta, sold 3.1 million copies of its album last year and won a Grammy for album of the year. Other new platinum artists this year include Chingy from St. Louis, Lil Jon from Atlanta and Kanye West from Chicago.

Although the out-of-towners have been recording for several years, their popularity has exploded in the past year or so.

"What we're seeing is a four- to six-year gestation period giving birth right now," says Tom Silverman, founder of pioneering hip-hop label Tommy Boy Records.

The newcomers have quickly replaced fading New York hip-hop icons in the public imagination. Jay-Z has announced plans to retire. Even the very public blood feud between Ja Rule and 50 Cent, both from the mean streets of Queens, is yesterday's news. Meanwhile, Nelly and Lil Jon have started record labels and clothing lines, bringing jobs to their own locales and nurturing homegrown talent there.

"We're seeing the hip-hop lifestyle broaden and grow across the country," says Karen Kwak, senior vice president of artist and repertoire operations at Island Def Jam, a unit of Universal that now owns Def Jam Records as well as part of Roc-A-Fella.

The erosion of New York's hip-hop dominance may accelerate in coming months. Island Def Jam is now run by Antonio "L.A." Reid, a producer far more familiar with the pop and R&B genres. At his former label, Arista Records, he worked closely with acts like Avril Lavigne, Pink and Babyface.

New York may not be fostering new talent right now, but it still has a leading role in the business as it partners with the latest generation of artists and labels.

Mr. Lipman of Universal Records says his label's long-standing distribution agreement with New Orleans-based Cash Money Records has helped CMR's Southern artists, like Juvenile, sell millions of discs. Universal also just signed an agreement with Nelly's Derrty Records to distribute little-known artists such as St. Louis-based Avery Storm.

Furthermore, some music industry observers point out that public taste is fickle. New York could reclaim its position as ground zero for the hottest hip-hop artists. The city relinquished its bling-bling crown before--in the mid-1990s, when all the attention briefly shifted to Los Angeles thanks to the rise of Ice Cube and Dr. Dre.

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Hip-hop rebirth

"We could have a new artist break out of New York who could change the face of music once again," says Mr. Lipman of Universal Records.

For now, however, executives from New York labels admit that the music associated with the city had gotten stale.

"Everything started sounding the same," says Bryan Leach, vice president of urban artist and repertoire at Manhattan-based independent label TVT Records. His label, which has signed artists like Lil Jon and the Ying Yang Twins, helped popularize the "crunk" sound from Atlanta, featuring thumping beats that encourage slam dancing.

To reinvigorate their lineups, labels have expanded their quest for unique rhyming talent. The last five hip-hop artists signed by TVT, Roc-A-Fella and Universal have come from outside New York.

"It's a new time, a new territory and a new market," comments Darrin Chandler, vice president of Roc-A-Fella.

There's no doubt that all eyes are on the new rappers as they come out with fresh tunes and start their own clothing lines.

"These guys are on a roll," says Mr. Leach. "It's their time".

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