

Hip Hop Artists: To Bling Or Not To Bling

Contributed by Greg Simms

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We're proud to announce the launch of our newest column, URBAN BEAT--How To Break Into the Urban Music Industry, with hip-hop correspondent Greg Simms Jr. Each month, you'll get honest opinions and analyses of the latest Urban music trends from Greg, insights as to where the Urban music industry is heading, tips on how to get in the game, and thought-provoking discussions about the issues that affect Urban music makers here.

What it is?

Welcome to Urban Beat, a new column at Getsigned.com that will address the needs of an ever-growing global army of Urban music makers and trend-setters. My name is Greg Simms Jr. and I am a writer for a large daily newspaper in the United States. I'm also a Hip Hop fan who was blessed with his own Hip Hop column in that very same paper, and now his very own forum here at Getsigned.com, the largest and most respected music & biz advice source on the Internet. I am thrilled to be here!

Although I've never been invited to one of P.Diddy's A-list parties or hung out with Snoop and Dre in South Central, I do know a little bit about Urban Music from my many years of enjoying it, observing it, and covering it for the dailies. In my new Getsigned.com column, I, along with my friends here Getsigned.com, will help all of you aspiring MCs, producers, beat makers, songwriters, future label moguls and R&B divas out there understand this crazy business we love so much and show you how you, too, can get your foot in the door. You'll get honest opinions and analyses of the latest trends, insights as to where the Urban music industry is heading, tips on how to get in the game, and thought-provoking discussions about the issues that affect Urban music makers and Urban music lovers today.

To make this forum more interesting and dynamic, I'll need your help. I encourage you to email me with your comments about the columns, your ideas for future columns, and your questions on how you can not only break into the Urban Music business, but sustain your independent Urban Music career.

And now, "To Bling Or Not To Bling"…

"Damn, I'm only worth a hundred million!" That's what Jay-Z said in the song "Superugly". And, by all accounts, it's true. Jay-Z IS worth "somewhere north of \$50 million", according to his boss, Def Jam label head Lyor Cohen. And let's not even start on the bank accounts of P. Diddy and Master P.

The reason for all this talk of money? Because the game's changed, son--probably forever. Hip hop is officially off the street corners, out of the ciphers and into the hearts of the suburban young. Hip Hop is BIG business now. There's a reason these "Hip Pop" MCs do what they do…they make millions. Their albums sell 3 to 4 million every time out. They get lucrative side deals, movie roles, their own record labels, and mega tours that sell out in every city. These guys get PAID! But the real victors are the labels. These guys get the bulk of the money earned from album sales, so you'd better believe they're happy. Plus, the machinery that's in place to create the money is almost foolproof. Get a young black kid, put him in a "wife-beater" T-shirt and a bandanna, and watch him sell about 4 million copies of his debut album. No, really.

The point of this article is to let all you upcoming MCs out there know what kind of game you're getting into. The days of just being a "dope MC" are long gone—at least if you want to make any money at this. There was once an A&R rep who, a few years ago, made a classic quote when dealing with a potential signee. The rep said, "I sign two kinds of guys, the kind of guys women want to fuck, and the kind of guys other guys wanna be like." That's the bottom line these days. Labels are looking for the next Busta Rhymes or Ja Rule, not the next Rakim. Sad, but true.

These words are NOT to discourage any of you out there to stop doing what you love and trying to get signed. Maybe you could be that artist that does a "Nirvana"--changes the course of the industry with powerful, new work—regardless of your packaging. Just know what you are getting into. When you spit for that A&R, he's checking your skills AND he's also looking at your body--determining how much weight you need to lose and sizing you up to see if your face would look good enough on the cover of Vibe. It's a fact.

So you want to be a Hip Pop star? Great! The rewards, if you make it, are awesome. But you have to know a few certain things, though, in this ever-changing musical climate. You have to:

* Be able to make SONGS. Labels are looking for songwriters, arrangers, and hit makers. Battle rhymes don't sell units. Ask Canibus.

* Be "pop savvy". Make material that people would want to buy in droves. You almost can't lose with party anthems and odes to sex, but be mindful not to offend TOO many people. Remember, pop sells, but that doesn't have to be a bad thing.

* Workout. Seriously. If you are tryin' to be a sex symbol rapper, it wouldn't hurt to hit the gym. Eye candy seems to work these days--even though at over 300 pounds Biggie Smalls was one of Hip Hop's biggest sex symbols. Go figure.

* Develop a sound. Make a sound that's unmistakably yours. An identifiable sound makes you stand out from everyone else out there. People will remember your name. Record buyers will remember your name. Get it?

Now, also know that Hip Pop stars are VERY expendable. They come and go faster than any boy/girl group out there. For every P.Diddy, there is a Peter Gunz. Make no mistake about it. Kids, who WILL be your main audience, will dump a Hip Pop rapper as soon as they lose interest. It can be ugly. Also, you can't get too "deep"; if you're a Hip Pop star. Don't think for a second that your label is going to let you do a song protesting the destruction of the rainforest. Your job will be To SELL ALBUMS. Plain and simple.

To all the MCs out there that call yourselves "real MCs", it's gonna be hard. Truth is, the industry only "allows" a certain number of serious MCs to shine. The number of Ja Rules outnumber the commons by a large margin. Now, I'm not suggesting that you give up or completely sell out. Never that. Just know that the market for this kind of MC is small. Very small, indeed. It will be really hard to get A&Rs to listen to you, especially the reps at major labels or even larger independent labels. The best bet for you guys is to check for small indie labels--even though these are hard to come by these days. "Serious" Hip Hop labels, like Rawkus Records, are now owned by major labels.

If you are a "classic MC", the best way to get noticed is the tried and true stratagem for underground MCs: the mixtape.

Mixtapes are the best way to get your music out if you aren't signed. Freestyles are a Godsend to DJs. An MC goes to the studio, drops a verse or two, and the rest is Platinum history; if you're lucky. Mixtapes are very popular with traditional Urban music buyers and a hot freestyle can change your life overnight. MCs that can freestyle usually make more memorable turns than Pop rappers do on mixtapes. Some of the best mixtape verses have come from underground MCs like Canibus, pre-Dr. Dre Eminem, and legions of others. If you should get the opportunity to get on a mixtape, drop your hottest shit. This is your opportunity to shine. Don't forget that.

Another way to possibly get on is to go the "Ludacris" route. Do radio promos that get people's attention. Even commercials. That's right. The product could suck, but your verse doesn't have to. Get your name out there.

The Wu Tang Clan were eerily prophetic in saying "Cash rules everything around me." The Rap game has changed forever. Rappers, CEOs, and producers are rolling in more crossover dough than ever before. Is that such a bad thing? Yes and no. "Yes," because as some would argue, the quality of Urban music has suffered for it in recent years--it has sold out to meet the musical tastes of the mainstream. "No," because of the widespread acceptance of Urban culture from the mainstream and the serious money that minorities can make from Hip Pop. Could it all change? Maybe. But, for right now, we live in a Hip Pop world. Get used to it.

Adapt. Evolve. Prosper.

In my next column: "How To Make A Hit Urban Song";