

MUSIC

The Shrinking Market Is Changing the Face of Hip-Hop



Peter DaSilva for The New York Times

Without a national radio hit or a video, the California rapper Turf Talk is taking a grass-roots approach to promoting his CD "West Coast Vaccine (The Cure)."

By KELEFA SANNEH
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UNTIL a few weeks ago it seemed like one of the few happy stories to emerge from an otherwise difficult year in hip-hop. UGK, the Port Arthur, Tex., duo that influenced a generation of Southern rappers, returned after a five-year hiatus. They came back bearing a sublime single, "Int'l Players Anthem (I Choose You)." And they came back bearing a great double album, "Underground Kingz" (Jive/Zomba), which made its debut atop Billboard's album chart.

Then, on Dec. 4, the news arrived: Pimp C — the duo's flamboyant half, a slick drawler and an even slicker producer — had been found dead in his hotel room. His bereaved musical partner, Bun B, gave a handful of eloquent interviews, trying to explain what he had lost, what fans had lost.

"I appreciate the concern," he told Vibe. "But I wouldn't ask anyone to stop their life, because Pimp would've wanted us all to keep grinding."

If you're looking for a two-word motto for hip-hop in 2007, you could do worse than that: "Keep grinding." This was the year when the gleaming hip-hop machine — the one that minted a long string of big-name stars, from Snoop Dogg to OutKast — finally broke down, leaving rappers no alternative but to work harder, and for fewer

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Project Pat once had success on a major label but now records for an independent.

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50 Cent, above, challenged Kanye West to a sales battle and lost: Mr. West's "Graduation" has outsold 50 Cent's "Curtis" by about half a million copies.

rewards. Newcomers arrived with big singles and bigger hopes, only to fall off the charts after selling a few hundred thousand copies, if that. Hip-pop hybrids dominated the radio, but rappers themselves seemed like underground figures, for the first time in nearly two decades.

Sales are down all over, but hip-hop has been hit particularly hard. Rap sales fell 21 percent from 2005 to 2006, and that trend seems to be continuing. It's the inevitable aftermath, perhaps, of the genre's vertiginous rise in the 1990s, during which a series of breakout stars — Dr. Dre, Snoop Dogg, [Tupac Shakur](#), the [Notorious B.I.G.](#) — figured out that they could sell millions without shaving off their rough edges. By 1997 the ubiquity of Puff Daddy helped cement hip-hop's new image: the rapper as tycoon. Like all pop-music trends, like all economic booms, this one couldn't last.

This was a bad year for hip-hop sales, but it wasn't necessarily a bad year for the genre. The scrappy New York independent Koch flourished, releasing a couple of great CDs by major-label refugees: "Return of the Mac," by Prodigy from Mobb Deep, and "Walkin' Bank Roll," by Project Pat. (Koch also released "We the Best," a sanctioned mixtape by DJ Khaled that produced a couple of hip-hop hits, and "The Brick: Bodega Chronicles," the well-received debut album from Joell Ortiz.)

And then there is Turf Talk, a loudmouthed upstart from Vallejo, Calif., who made arguably the year's most exciting hip-hop album, "West Coast Vaccine (The Cure)." It came out through Sick Wid' It Records, which is run by his cousin, the rapper E-40. (The album was released through a distribution deal with Navarre, which sold its music distribution business to Koch in May.) And despite Turf Talk's flamboyant rhymes, the album has pretty much remained a secret. Without a national radio hit or even a proper music video, Turf Talk has promoted the CD mainly through West Coast regional shows, from San Diego to Tacoma, Wash.

Reached by telephone at his home in Concord, Calif., Turf Talk tried to put the best spin on a mixed-up year. "The independent game is starting to shine again," he said. But when pressed, he said he would love to cross over to the mainstream, speaking in the third person: "Turf Talk wants to be known all across the world."

A few years ago that might have seemed like a reasonable goal, and an attainable one. During the boom the industry was flooded with scowling optimists: small-time hustlers with dreams of big-time success. And some dreams came true. In 1998 Juvenile went from a New Orleans secret to

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Prodigy, above, went independent this year with "Return of the Mac" after his duo, Mobb Deep, released an album on 50 Cent's G Unit label that flopped.

Readers' Comments

"Hip hop is not just music; it is a way of life."

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a pop radio staple, selling five million copies of "400 Degreez"; two years later, Nelly came from nowhere (actually St. Louis) to sell six million copies of "Country Grammar." Overall CD sales peaked in 2000, and by then even second-tier major-label rappers were routinely earning gold plaques for shipping half a million CDs.

Because hip-hop is so intensely self-aware, and self-reflexive, it came to be known as big-money music, a genre obsessed with its own success. If we are now entering an age of diminished commercial expectations, that will inevitably change how hip-hop sounds too.

How bad are the numbers? Well, no rapper was more diminished by 2007 than 50 Cent, who challenged [Kanye West](#) to a sales battle and lost. His solid but not thrilling recent album, "Curtis" (Shady/Aftermath/Interscope), has sold about 1.2 million copies, according to Nielsen SoundScan; considering that he's supposed to be the genre's biggest star, that's a disaster. (His 2005 album, "The Massacre," sold more than five million.) In fact "Curtis" has sold about the same as T. I.'s "T. I. vs. T. I. P." (Atlantic), the underwhelming and underperforming follow-up to his great 2006 album, "King," which sold

about 1.6 million.

This year veterans like [Jay-Z](#) and Wu-Tang Clan also returned, pleasing old fans but not, for the most part, making new ones. And Lil Wayne released another slew of great mixtapes — available for free download, not for sale. Meanwhile Mr. West's "Graduation" (Roc-A-Fella/Island Def Jam), which stands at 1.8 million sold and counting, is the only hip-hop album of the year that really seems like a hit, although he loves to portray himself as outside the hip-hop mainstream. Only one problem: After a year when the hitmaker Fabolous and the bohemian Common sold about equally, as did the BET favorite Yung Joc and the indie-rap alumnus Talib Kweli, it's not clear that there's still a hip-hop mainstream to be outside.

And eager newcomers discovered that the definition of success has changed. Rich Boy, Shop Boyz, Plies, Hurricane Chris and Soulja Boy Tell'em all released major-label debuts, buoyed by big, lovable hits: "Throw Some D's," "Party Like a Rockstar," "Shawty," "A Bay Bay" and "Crank That (Soulja Boy)." But of those only Soulja Boy has managed to sell half a million CDs. Hurricane Chris's disappointing CD, "51/50 Ratchet" (Polo Grounds/J Records), has sold only about 80,000 copies. To a major label that number is almost indistinguishable from zero. (Despite the hit the No. 1 chart debut and the half-decade of anticipation, UGK's triumphant double album hasn't reached the half-million mark either.)

Hip-hop has always had a complicated relationship with full-length albums. They're both too long (for impatient hit lovers) and too short (for ephemera-obsessed mixtape listeners). And even though the South has been hip-hop's most fertile region since the 1990s, the industry, based in New York and Los Angeles, harbors a lingering anti-Southern bias. Southern rappers are often viewed as one-hit wonders, and that can be a self-fulfilling prophecy. By the time Rich Boy, from Mobile, Ala., tried to drum up interest in his excellent fourth single, "Let's Get This Paper," it seemed everybody had already moved on.

At least independent-label rappers have no one to blame. Turf Talk knew from the start that he would have to fight for his album, which he released in June. "I had a lot of hopes for 'West Coast Vaccine,' that's why I'm still pushing it now," he said, adding that he was finalizing plans for a video. The song he chose was "Popo's," a sleek and infectious collaboration with E-40, who adds a memorable touch: a thunderous "Oooh!" In his mesmerizing verses, Turf Talk raps about selling drugs and avoiding the police. His breathless rhymes — "I'm tryna stack every dollar," he pants — evoke not a kingpin's confidence but a survivor's tenacity.

It's easy to romanticize Turf Talk's grass-roots approach: his do-it-yourself video shoot, his evident pride in how much he has accomplished on his own, his commitment to the family business. But for him the promise of exposure and the long shot at stardom are too tempting to reject.

"I love the independent money," he said. "I'm living good, I drive nice cars. But right now, if you asked me, I'd say, 'Turf Talk wants to go major.' Because you can always come back to independent."

That's what Prodigy discovered. Last year his duo, Mobb Deep, flopped with "Blood Money," a misconceived CD on 50 Cent's label, G Unit, an Interscope imprint. This year he went independent for "Return of the Mac," a hallucinogenic, willfully obscure solo album that evokes the grimy old New York, and the grimy old Prodigy too. (It sold about 130,000 copies.) He has a new album scheduled for next year, though he pleaded guilty in October to gun possession and was sentenced to three and a half years. His new single, "ABC's," begins with a halfway defensive boast: "It don't matter who poppin' for the moment/P is forever." If you're not making hits, why not claim to be making history?

Like Prodigy, Project Pat is a major-label refugee. He emerged from Memphis in the late '90s and swiftly took advantage of the hip-hop boom. "Chickenhead," his memorable but medium-sized hit (it peaked at No. 24 on Billboard's Hot R&B/Hip-Hop chart), helped his 2001 major-label album, "Mista Don't Play: Everythings Workin'," sell nearly 1.1 million copies. (Five years ago, in other words, Project Pat sold about as well as 50 Cent sells today.)

After a prison sentence and an underperforming major-label comeback, Project Pat made his Koch debut with "Walkin' Bank Roll." The boast in the title track is a defiant (and typically absurd) response to his diminished commercial success: "I'm a walkin' bank roll/You can rubber-band me," he keeps shouting, and his glee is infectious. It's a weird, funny little album; though it has sold only about 40,000 copies, it feels triumphant.

Is it possible to hear a shrug over the phone? Project Pat, when asked about his newfound independence, seemed profoundly unimpressed. "It's the same old, same old," he shouted, over the roar of a Mortal Kombat game, though he conceded, "People say they liked it better." He said he was planning his next album and gearing up for more live dates, which are crucial for independent acts. "Alaska — yessirrr, Anchorage," he said, sounding a bit like the eccentric rapper from the CDs. "They asked for me personally."

Under-the-radar releases, weird tour schedules, modest sales figures: none of this is new. The success of Southern hip-hop in the last decade was built on a foundation of independent and independent-minded rappers, many of whom worked with the scrappy regional distributor Southwest Wholesale, which is now closed, like many of the little shops it used to serve. In an earlier era these regional scenes were farm teams for the industry, grooming the top players and then sending them up to the big leagues. But what if there are no big leagues anymore? What if there's no major label willing or able

to help Turf Talk get his platinum plaque? Would his next album sound as brash? Will his musical descendants be as motivated? The mainstream hip-hop industry relies on a thriving underground, but isn't the reverse also true?

Eventually, a (new?) group of executives will find a business model that doesn't depend on shiny plastic discs, or digital tracks bundled together to approximate them. But for now the major league is starting to look a lot like the minor one. And in ways good and bad and utterly unpredictable, rappers may have to reconsider their place in the universe, and their audience. Some will redouble their commitment to nonsense, like Project Pat. Some will wallow in their misery, like Prodigy. Some will merely revel in their own loudmouthiness, like Turf Talk, hoping someone will pay attention. But if sales keep falling, more and more rappers will have to face the fact that they aren't addressing a crowd, just a sliver of one.

On Oct. 14, less than two months before Pimp C's death, there was another death in the Houston hip-hop family. His name was Big Moe, and he died of a heart attack. He was a much more local figure than Pimp C: a crooner turned rapper and an associate of DJ Screw, who popularized the art of remixing records by slowing them down. (DJ Screw died in 2000.) Big Moe's best tracks are sublime and disorienting. His was a huge, wobbly sing-rapping voice, often paired with slowed-down drums and lyrics extolling the pleasures of cough syrup.

Big Moe eventually got himself a deal, but his odd and entertaining 2002 major-label debut, "Purple World" (Priority/Capitol), quickly disappeared, and soon he was back to independent releases. It's no slight to his legacy to say that when news of his death arrived in October, even most hip-hop fans didn't know who he was. That's all right. Music that seems lost — there's a head-spinning selection on "Big Moe Classics Volume One" (Wreckshop) — will be found, over and over again. And after this dispiriting year, it's not hard to admire Big Moe's little career. He made secrets, not hits, but so what? He kept grinding.

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