RI’s Underground Rap Scene

I have always said that Rhode Island’s rich underground rap culture is often overlooked, mainly because local artists have few opportunities to have their music heard. I want to help change that.

When people talk about rap music, two things never come to mind: community and RI. But the community plays a huge role in rap music, especially when you’re talking about local artists. To local artists community is everything! Rap is a lot more than just rhyming words to a beat and cupping your balls. It’s a lifestyle — the artist’s lifestyle — who they are, where they came from, what they’ve been through, whether they tell stories through music or if it’s a little more autobiographical. One thing they have in common is community. And taking pride and representing where you came from is a must!

Rap is much like sports in that it takes a lot of training and hard work to master your craft, and all the while you have people hating on you. But hate is good. If you’re killing that beat and executing unbelievable wordplay, you’re doing something that the haters can’t. You’re developing a style. You’re finding your sound.

Rappers who see you as a threat will come at you lyrically, like a verbal game of king of the hill. You might be on top today, but someone is always coming to take that crown. Regardless of your style, you need punchlines that you can dump on any competitor trying to test the waters. When you’re in the ‘hood and people see you’re rapping, word travels fast and when you go to parties or hang out with a group of people they will test you. “You rap?” “Spit something,” they challenge. Doing this will actually help build your base (if you are entertaining enough) and get more people willing to pay to see you perform at local venues because the community talks.

Rhode Island has one of the most underrated local rap scenes I have ever seen, and I’ve lived in eight states and on the other side of the world in Korea while serving our country. RI is so rich in underground rap and barely shows any real interest in showcasing these talents. Radio stations turn down mixtapes and local artists’ albums to play the same mainstream songs in rotation for hours at a time.
Most people have never heard of Buck, Splif, Remedy or Playboy Nyse and it’s not because of a lack of talent. It’s due to a lack of exposure. It is so much harder to be an underground rapper than it is to be on a label, and there are a few reasons why.

**Recording Time:** Local artists have to pay for their recording time out of pocket — usually between $50 and $80 an hour. There is no time for mistakes and re-recording the same verse just so some sound engineer can take the best parts and piece them together. The artists pay for the time that it takes to record, mix and master each song. If an artist is lucky, he will leave a short session with three to four finished songs. An artist that belongs to a label, however, has the label they are signed to give them a large sum of money. The artist usually doesn’t know it, but that money is just a loan to be paid back through record sales. Any money from record sales will always go to the label first. The artist will not see a dime of this money until the loan is paid back in full, which is how a lot of artists who don’t have a lawyer to read their contracts end up going broke or in debt if the album isn’t that great.

**Distribution:** Every CD needs an album cover, so after you’ve taken the picture and put your name on it in the paint program on your computer, it’s time to print and cut out each picture for every CD you spent the last three hours burning. A record label usually has their own department for pressing albums and creating cover art, which is also covered in that loan your sales are supposed to pay back.

**Sales:** I have sold albums out of my trunk, in front of stores while I was working. The only person who is going to push hard for your album to be sold is you! Nobody knows you, so why should they care? Why would they spend their hard-earned money on your album rather than the new Drake? Set up a sample for people to hear and prepare a good pitch.

**Radio Play:** If you’re lucky, you live in a place that plays local music. However, if you live somewhere that will only play mainstream music then you need to resort to other ways to get your songs heard. Parties are always a good way to get it going. Give the person throwing the party a copy of your album and ask them to throw it on for a few. If it’s good, people will ask if you have more copies and there you are promoting, partying and making some cash in the process. Another way to get a song heard, especially if you have a party song, is the clubs. Bring a copy of some club songs to the DJ. He may not have time to listen to it that night, but he may throw it on to test it out the following week. Always keep copies of your album in your car. Let it be known that it is your song playing and always try to make that quick sale.

In future columns, I’m hoping to bring more appreciation to the craft and the work that artists put in as well as give our RI rappers some love and exposure by interviewing them, letting you know when and where the hottest shows are and how to purchase their albums.

*Mathew Gilbert, also known as Ocyris, has been rapping locally for about 17 years. He has put out one full-length solo album, been on many features and worked with his rap group Unorthadox. He left the local rap scene in 2010 to serve in the United States Army then returned home in 2014 to get an education.*