

Rhymesayers Entertainment:
The Establishment of Minnesota Hip-Hop

by

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ABSTRACT

Alongside New York City, Los Angeles, and Atlanta, Minneapolis, Minnesota has become a cradle of hip-hop, breeding a distinct style that has grown swiftly from the 1980s to the present day. While Minneapolis is more commonly associated with the upbeat funk rhythms and prominent synthesizers of its favorite son, Prince (1958 – 2016), Minnesota hip-hop provides a strikingly contrasting listening experience characterized by dark, self-deprecating, and introspective traits. Minnesota and other regional hip-hop scenes have been overshadowed by academic studies that focus principally on New York City or Los Angeles. In this thesis, I advocate for a shift away from the Billboard charts and the East and West Coast, into the world of underground hip-hop of the Upper Midwest. This thesis explores and documents the development of hip-hop in Minnesota, specifically the Twin Cities and independent label Rhymesayers Entertainment, who have established Minneapolis as one of the largest hip-hop hubs in the country. A location that thrives on the “Minneapolis sound” of artists such as Prince and Morris Day (b. 1956), Minnesota hip-hop offered an alternative and more calloused genre for artistic expression. Following the arrival of hip-hop in Minnesota in the early 1980s, a group of like-minded youths gathered together to practice the art of hip-hop, which led to the creation of the Headshots Crew. Despite not having much of a local scene, the Headshots Crew created opportunities and performance spaces to showcase their talents, which eventually led to the creation of their own label, Rhymesayers Entertainment. Unlike many other independent labels Rhymesayers has found a way to sustain their success for over 25 years while maintaining their independence. Their most famous artist act is rap duo Atmosphere. By incorporating primarily biographical and historical methodologies

this study means to create a cohesive understanding and foundation of Minnesota hip-hop.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Today's rap industry is a mental wasteland of studio gangsterism, materialism, imitation, perpetrators, and bland predictable ignorance. An era in which DJ's compromise their integrity to the will of commercial radio while leading millions sheep in the monotonous materialistic circles of illusion. A time best described as a lack of artistry haphazardly wobbling out of sync. In the midst of all this corruption, one must ask; who will champion the cause of truth, originality and righteousness in the realm of hip-hop.¹
– I Self Devine

Minneapolis, Minnesota, a cradle of hip-hop, along with New York City, Los Angeles, and Atlanta, bred a distinct style of hip-hop that swiftly grew from the 1980s to the present day.² Alongside the upbeat funk rhythms and prominent synthesizers of its favorite son, Prince (1958 – 2016), Minnesota hip-hop provides a strikingly contrasting listening experience characterized by dark, self-deprecating, and introspective traits. Since the late 1980s, the Twin Cities have consistently bred independent artists who have perpetually helped mold the trajectory of hip-hop.³

Within Minnesota hip-hop, images of impoverished neighborhoods on the Southside supplant Prince's jubilant land of purple rain and more closely mirror the destitute, racially oppressed, and harsh living conditions of the New York City ghettos

¹ "Micranots," Rhymesayers Entertainment, accessed June 2019, <https://rhymesayers.com/artists/micranots>.

² This thesis is heavily influenced by Frank Driggs and Chuck Haddix's book *Kansas City Jazz: From Ragtime to Bebop – A History*. This opening paragraph, specifically the first sentence, mirrors their own in an attempt to show my appreciation, homage, and respect similar to musical quotation implemented by rappers and deejays. Chuck Haddix and Frank Driggs, *Kansas City Jazz: From Ragtime to Bebop* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

³ Other artists credited as contributing to the 'Minneapolis sound' are The Time, The Revolution, and Morris Day. A more recent example of this would be Bruno Mars' 2014 hit "Uptown Funk." Mary Angela Strasser, "Minnesota Nice," *Music Clubs Magazine* 85, no. 3 (Spring, 2006): 14–15, <http://login.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/docview/1278672?accountid=4485>. Rashad Shabazz, "How Prince Introduced Us to the 'Minneapolis Sound': From Polka to Punk-Funk, the Twin Cities Assimilated New Genres From Their Migrant Roots," edited by Eryn Brown and Reed Johnson, September 7, 2017, accessed February 2020. <https://www.whatitmeanstobeamerican.org/places/how-prince-introduced-us-to-the-minneapolis-sound/>.

that provided the spatial context and cultural conditions from which hip-hop would emerge. “The Message” (1982) by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five illustrates the harsh living conditions of New York City ghettos: “broken glass everywhere / people pissin’ on the stairs, you know they just don’t care,” “crazy lady, livin’ in a bag / eatin’ outta garbage pails, used to be a fag hag,” and “got a bum education, double-digit inflation / can’t take the train to the job, there’s a strike at the station.”⁴ Hip-hop not only gave a voice to South Bronx victims of corrupt political hardships, but also to those experiencing similar persecution in dense urban cities throughout the country. For example, Minnesotan rapper Brother Ali (b. 1977) offers an immersive perspective of his daily experience and the grim reality that undermines our surface level perception of Minnesota in “Room With a View.” Brother Ali compares himself to a modern urban Norman Rockwell as he paints a vivid picture of issues that overwhelm Minneapolis including drug use (“in a location where slanging crack rock is not a fuckin’ recreation but a vocation”), domestic violence (“shit we don’t have Bar Mitzvahs; we become men the first time our father hits us”), street violence (“that’s when the greatest hits of Donnie Hathaway; got interrupted by a drive-by shooting half a block away”), and prostitution (“sister Regina from across the street is beautiful; but for fifty bucks ain’t nothing she won’t do to you”), all visible through a window in his apartment on Minneapolis’ Southside, in front of the desk from which he writes his rhymes.⁵ Framing Minneapolis’ Southside as a hotbed for drugs and violence, Brother Ali stages a Minneapolis vastly disparate from Prince’s velvety purple paradise, yet remains no less important to the

⁴ “The Message” was initially released as a single on Sugar Hill Records on July 1, 1982 but was later included on their inaugural album, *The Message*, in October of the same year.

⁵ Brother Ali, “Room with a View,” *Shadows on the Sun*, Rhymesayers Entertainment RS0034-2, 2003.

Minnesota sound.⁶ Those unable to relate to Prince needed an alternative, less-sensitive genre for their artistic expression, which hip-hop offered.

Similar to preceding black musical genres, hip-hop began as an oral tradition, which could explain why it went largely unnoticed by those outside the Bronx, New York City until 1979. Although developed by DJ Kool Herc (b. 1955) and Afrika Bambaataa (b. 1957) in the 1970s, the first hip-hop recording released was by The Sugarhill Gang in 1979, a group assembled by Sugar Hill Records founder and producer, Sylvia Robinson. Once the young record label released “Rappers Delight” on September 16, 1979, hip-hop was no longer an artform exclusive to the Bronx and the other New York City boroughs.⁷ By putting the single on vinyl, hip-hop was now available for radio broadcast and mass national and international distribution. The single became an instant national phenomenon and hip-hop scenes began to grow out of urban cities throughout the country at an astonishing rate.⁸ By the end of the 1980s, scenes were established in Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Chicago, Houston, and Miami. During the 1990s, St. Louis, Atlanta, North Carolina, the Bay Area, and Detroit all fostered prosperous hip-hop scenes. Minneapolis and St. Paul were no exception; through hip-hop they developed their own expressions of dance, art, literature (lyrics), and music – which Samuel Floyd identifies as the four

⁶ The substantial increase in homicides during 1996 earned them the nickname “Murderapolis” and a spot in *The New York Times*.

⁷ I say ‘performing’ on purpose here because there is a lot of controversy surrounding Rapper’s Delight in regards to stealing lyrics from other rappers.

⁸ Jeff Chang, *Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2005), 129–34.

elements of black culture – yet, this scene has received little to no recognition in hip-hop scholarship.⁹

Minnesota and other regional hip-hop scenes have been overshadowed by academic studies that almost exclusively provide historical, biographical, and sociological perspectives within the context of New York City or Los Angeles, discounting the natural cultural dissimilarities that flourish beneath the 2,451 miles flyover space separating these two coastal metropolises. Scholars like Jeff Chang and Vladimir Bogdanov have successfully documented hip-hop as a movement in their books *Can't Stop, Won't Stop* and *All Music Guide to Hip-Hop*, respectively, but their work does not move past the early 1990s and outside of New York City and Los Angeles, suggesting hip-hop was sequestered to the East and West Coast.¹⁰ This glaring lacuna is due in part to the rise of 'new musicology' in the 1980s, in which scholars focused heavily on critical theory and socio-cultural methodologies in favor of the historically insipid Cartesian-thought-based scholarship that drove a lot of Musicology post World War II. Critical post-modern readings began with early music, responding and/or adding nuance to a base of decades old empirical studies on these topics. Hip-hop studies, however, seemingly bypassed building a similar foundation of robust empirical scholarship, in favor of applying critical theories characteristic of the new musicology.¹¹

The need for expansion outside of New York City and Los Angeles within hip-hop studies is has been initiated by scholars such as Ali Neff, Mark Katz, and Matt

⁹ Samuel A. Floyd, *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting its History From Africa to the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

¹⁰ Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop*. Vladimir Bogdanov, *All Music Guide to Hip-Hop: The Definitive Guide to Rap & Hip-Hop* (San Francisco: Backbeat Books, 2003).

¹¹ This applies not only to hip-hop studies, but post-1980s popular music studies in general.

Miller. Neff's *Let The World Listen Right: The Mississippi Delta Hip-Hop Story* uncovers a small yet thriving hip-hop scene hidden in Clarksdale, Mississippi.¹² Mark Katz's *Groove Music* broadens the narrative of deejay culture to include California's Bay Area, a focal point of turntablism in the 1990s, and Matt Miller investigates New Orleans and its energetic, hip-hop derived bounce music in his book *Bounce: Rap Music and Local Identity in New Orleans*.¹³ Despite their work expanding hip-hop studies beyond the centrality of New York City, Neff, Katz, and Miller maintain and acknowledge hip-hop's cultural roots in the Bronx while building off of the seminal framework of Tricia Rose's *Black Noise*.¹⁴ My work seeks to join the efforts of these authors by expanding the scope beyond Los Angeles and New York City. Outside of hip-hop studies, Frank Driggs and Chuck Haddix's *Kansas City Jazz: From Ragtime to Bebop – A History* provides an introspective look at the local jazz scene in Kansas City from the turn of century through the bebop era.¹⁵ Driggs and Haddix frame the city as a place of crime and debauchery and explore how it was able to foster its own subgenre of Jazz that differentiated itself from popular hubs like New York, New Orleans, and Chicago. In a narrative chronological approach, Driggs and Haddix successfully depict the relationship between the city and its music in a captivating and accessible way that it has inspired my framework and approach for this thesis.

¹² Ali Colleen Neff, *Let the World Listen Right* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011).

¹³ Mark Katz, *Groove Music: The Art and Culture of the Hip-Hop DJ* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). Matt Miller, *Bounce: Rap Music and Local Identity in New Orleans*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012).

¹⁴ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Lebanon: University Press of New England, 1994).

¹⁵ Haddix and Driggs, *Kansas City Jazz*.

In addition to over-emphasizing coastal cities, studies of hip-hop also tend to fixate upon commercial/popular hip-hop, meaning artists like Eminem, Puff Daddy, and Tupac, those who dominate or have dominated the radio and popular billboard charts during the 1990s, while neglecting thriving underground scenes run by independent labels.¹⁶ Other scholars, such as Crystal Belle, claim to be a voice for the underground, yet fixate on poor examples and out-of-date archetypes.¹⁷ In no way do I mean to diminish the contributions of scholars such as Eric Weisbard, who has written extensively about mainstream music, and top-40 popular music, specifically; rather, the juxtaposition of mainstream hip-hop against underground hip-hop is vital to understanding the history of hip-hop.¹⁸ Tara Morrissey even attacks the underground community, specifically the fans, in her discussion of *realness* with misinformed accusations of superiority over

¹⁶ Chang's *Can't Stop, Won't Stop* claims to cover hip-hop up until 2001, but largely only covers hip-hop during the 1980s; Some hip-hop artists have yet to be recorded. Reminiscent of John Lomax's journey south to discover blues, Neff's *Let The World Listen Right* provides a fascinating look at hip-hop in the Mississippi Delta, centered around the area's most popular (yet unrecorded) artist, Jerome "TopNotch the Villain" Williams.

¹⁷ Crystal Belle, "From Jay-Z to Dead Prez: Examining Representations of Black Masculinity in Mainstream Versus Underground Hip-Hop Music," *Journal of Black Studies* 45, no. 4 (2014): 287–300, <https://doi-org.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/10.1177/0021934714528953>. Belle only uses The Roots and Dead Prez as her models of underground masculinity; she should of used a larger variety of examples to strengthen her argument. She disregards the anachronistic nature of her examples, her argument would have been stronger had she acknowledged this. When this article was published, 2014, The Roots had not been considered underground for nearly a decade, serving as the house band for *Late Night with Jimmy Fallon*, and later *The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon*, since 2009. Dead Prez has also become an overplayed, oversaturated political novelty in scholarship. Although Dead Prez released an album in 2012 (*Information Age*), they peaked in popularity after their only other two albums, *Let's Get Free* (2000) and *Revolutionary But Gangsta* (2004) around 2005, thanks in part to Dave Chappelle using their song "It's Bigger Than Hip-Hop", from *Let's Get Free*, often as an introductory song for *The Chappelle Show*. Using examples such as Chance the Rapper to represent the underground and Drake to represent mainstream during this era would have been more apropos and indicative of her knowledge of the overall hip-hop scene. Chance the Rapper self-released his first and second mixtapes in 2012 (*10 Day*) and 2013 (*Acid Rap*) respectively, and Drake saw significant mainstream success following *Taken Care* in 2011 (over six million copies sold) and *Nothing Was the Same* in 2013 (over four million copies sold). These would have been better, more apt representations of blackness in hip-hop amongst the mainstream and underground communities during the time in which this article was most likely written.

¹⁸ Eric Weisbard, *Top 40 Democracy: The Rival Mainstreams of American Music* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014).

mainstream hip-hop, naïve to the notion of mainstream and underground productively coexisting within the hip-hop canon, a claim that disregards their productive co-existence: “The scorn with which aficionados of underground or conscious hip-hop interpret audiences of commercial hip-hop is similarly grounded in a logic of intellectual inferiority at best, and gullibility or naivety at worst.”¹⁹ What Morrissey does not realize is that the underground does not operate in hostile opposition to the mainstream, but rather offers an audience hip-hop with little commercial corruption.

If the 1990s (and late 80s) are truly the golden age of hip-hop, as claimed by Charise Cheney, then as academics we have a responsibility to widen the scope of hip-hop scholarship to expand beyond the East and West Coast as well as include underground artists and movements not represented on the popular billboard charts.²⁰ The underground offers a concurrent yet alternative perspective to their mainstream counterparts.²¹ For example, North Carolina underground group Little Brother demonstrates a more relaxed, calm, and even humorous aesthetic with deep introspective and heartfelt lyrics, a drastically different listening experience from the mainstream,

¹⁹ Tara Morrissey, “The New Real: Iggy Azalea and the Reality Performance,” *PORTAL: Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies* 11, no. 1 (August 1, 2014): 1–17, <https://doi-org.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/10.1017/S002187581300251X>.

²⁰ Charise Cheney, “In Search of the ‘Revolutionary Generation’: (En)gendering the Golden Age of Rap Nationalism,” *The Journal of African American History* 90, no. 3 (Summer 2005): 278–98, www.jstor.org/stable/20064001.

²¹ The underground hip-hop scene is largely undefined, but to me, in its most simple form, consists of artists who work with independent labels and are inattentive to their albums performance on the popular billboard charts and uninterested in maintaining a presence on MTV or similar platforms; they remain loyal to the fundamental pillars of hip-hop. The most telling aural signs of a mainstream hip-hop in the 1990s include lyrics that revolve around a braggadocio persona that includes overt hyper-sexual masculinity, drugs, violence, and misogynistic tendencies. Many of these artists are more interested in setting trends and making millions than contributing to the genre in a manner best for the genre. This is not to say that this includes all mainstream artists, for there are many cross-over artists such as Kanye West, Eminem, and the Wu-Tang Clan who began in the underground and slowly moved into the mainstream by sheer popularity. Additionally, many other artists begin in the underground because that is the only opportunity available to them, and transition to the mainstream as quickly as possible.

highly sexual, bass heavy, and club-like appeal of fellow North Carolina rapper Petey Pablo (b. 1973). Native of Detroit, Michigan and the surrounding area, Eminem (b. 1972) has an aggressive flow that coincides with his violent, angry, and hate-filled lyrics (yet contradicts his positive West-Coast instrumentals produced by Dr. Dre), while underground rapper One Be Lo (b. 1976) has a smooth, velvety flow that matches his retro, 1950s vinyl aesthetic characteristic of his instrumentals. A more recent and relevant example, Minnesota resident Lizzo (b. 1988) has recently received national recognition after a few of her singles have placed high on the Billboard Hot 100 list, however, her upbeat and youthful persona could not be more different than the topic of this paper, record label Rhymesayers Entertainment.

In this thesis, I advocate for a shift from the billboard charts and away from the East and West Coast, into the underground world of hip-hop. This thesis explores and documents the development of hip-hop in Minnesota, specifically the Twin Cities and independent label Rhymesayers Entertainment, who have established Minneapolis as one of the largest hip-hop hubs in the country.²² By incorporating primarily biographical and historical methodologies this study I intend to create a cohesive understanding and foundation of Minnesota hip-hop so that future scholars including myself, may build upon the collection of research and data presented here. Although there is much more to say on the subject in regards to culture and race, historical and biographical methodologies such as this one provide a necessary foundation upon which future critical work can build. Following a brief exploration into the migration of hip-hop to Minnesota,

²² For this thesis I will use terms like 'The Twin Cities', 'Minnesota', and 'Minneapolis' interchangeably to refer to hip-hop from Minneapolis and St. Paul. Soundset Festival has established themselves the largest hip-hop festival in the country and world.

Chapter Two observes the rise and fall of the Headshots Crew while exploring their journey to build a local hip-hop scene. The third chapter chronicles the transformation of the Headshots Crew into the independent label Rhymesayers Entertainment, specifically the group Atmosphere. Each of these chapters will use the four co-founders of Rhymesayers Entertainment – Brent Sayers, Sean Daley, Musab Saad, and Anthony Davis – as anchors through this chronological journey. Since resources regarding Minnesota are few and far between, and scholarship is limited and often inaccurate, it is imperative that I rely heavily upon oral histories as primary source texts, especially interviews from the four aforementioned co-founders. Fortunately, unlike other fields that depend on oral histories as a primary source, such as jazz studies and folklore, the hip-hop central repository is found online; rather than combing through archives in a university basement or Smithsonian-like institute, the information I require necessitates only a computer and internet access.²³

PROLOGUE: FROM THE BIG APP(le) TO MINNEAP(olis)

Hip-hop has been intertwined with Twin Cities culture since the early 1980s. In 1981, eighteen-year-old Travis “Travitron” Lee moved from Brooklyn to Minneapolis to attend the University of Minnesota. From New York City, Travitron brought with him “records ... the style of hip-hop, the gold ropes, record-scratching, and nearly

²³ The importance of YouTube towards my project is critical. The access I have to radio interviews and other materials uploaded by Rhymesayers Entertainment and others have provided key details necessary to tie together the entire picture of this paper. This is not necessarily a result of hip-hop as a genre, but a by-product of the technological age in which myself, Atmosphere, and Rhymesayers Entertainment live in. Technological innovations of the early 21st Century, specifically social media, has facilitated various platforms for artists to amass a larger audience around the world with instant transfer of information. This is not only a valuable source for myself but also for future musicologists interested in studying any and all musical genres of the late 20th and early 21st Century.

indecipherable show flyers with wildstyle lettering.”²⁴ Mirroring New York counterparts, Travitron’s lyrical flow is smooth and relaxed like late 1980s rappers Rakim (b. 1968) and Special Ed (b. 1972), but his instrumentals are more sharp and abrupt like early 1980s artists Run-DMC, Afrika Bambaataa, and Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five. For example, Travitron includes the same jarring sample of what might be a high-pitched xylophone, in his track “Make Moves” (1988) that Jam Master Jay (1965 – 2002) incorporates in Run-DMC’s “Rock Box” (1984). Additionally, Travitron’s “Can We” (1988) is eerily similar to LL Cool J’s 1987 hit “I Need Love” not only in sound, but its nearly identical subject matter.

Like their New York City counterparts, early Minnesota hip-hop artists struggled to find venues willing to host their art. Negative and violent stigma associated with hip-hop and exhorting by news media outlets drastically hindered nearly all performance opportunities.²⁵ Beginning in New York City, misinformed (read: racist) news media outlets pushed false narratives that framed hip-hop artists and their fans as violent and drugged up (read: black). This forced correlation between hip-hop and violence propagated throughout the country compelled venue owners (read: white) to deny the use of their space for hip-hop related activities. So, Minnesota artists seized every performance opportunity afforded to them; they performed at roller rinks, YMCAs,

²⁴ Justin Schell, “From St. Paul to Minneapolis, All the Hands Clap For This: Hip Hop in the Twin Cities.” In *Hip Hop in America: A Regional Guide*, edited by Mickey Hess, 363–91. Santa Barbara: Greenwood Press, 2010. Schell claims Travitron to be the ‘godfather’ of Twin Cities hip-hop, a moniker well deserved, but never officially awarded. As defined by UrbanDictionary.com, wildstyle lettering is “a type of graffiti style that is complex and hard to read ... Usually the letters will intertwine within itself and often other shapes and lines that have no relation to the letters will overlap or intertwine within each other, causing a very ‘busy’ look to the piece.”

²⁵ Schell, “From St. Paul to Minneapolis,” 364–5.

YWCA's, the University of Minnesota, parks, and community centers. Travitron recalls the relative absence of performance opportunities:

There were a lot of private parties because rap really wasn't accepted in the clubs. You couldn't get an established place. You'd have to rent out something, like the Electrician's Hall. Anywhere I could rent a place out, I'd put on a show. Sabathani, Lyndale Community Center, North Commons. I started giving parties at the Great Hall, at the U of M, and I was getting 700 kids there. I put myself through college doing that, from '81 to '86.²⁶

As hip-hop grew in popularity both locally and nationally, Travitron and other local deejays "began spinning records at Twin Cities clubs like Oz, the Fox Trap, Daddy's, and Duffy's."²⁷ Even radio deejays started to incorporate hip-hop into their regular programs. In 1984, Travitron received an opportunity to host Minnesota's first hip-hop radio show, a weekly hour-long segment dedicated solely to hip-hop called The Hip-Hop Show on KMOJ 89.9FM.²⁸ One popular local venue, 7th Street Entry, also initiated Club Wild Style, "a weekly, all ages hip-hop afternoon" that included opportunities to rap, deejay, and breakdance.²⁹

Although Travitron had sparked a burgeoning hip-hop scene in the Twin Cities during the 1980s, hip-hop was still a largely unknown genre and had not yet broken through to the mainstream. It is only fitting that the first hip-hop acts to gain national recognition were from New York City: Run-DMC, Beastie Boys, and Salt-n-Pepa each

²⁶ Peter Scholtes, "One Nation, Invisible: The Untold Story of Local Hip Hop," *City Pages*, August 18, 2004.

²⁷ Schell, "From St. Paul to Minneapolis," 364. Other deejays include Brother Jules, Delite, and Verb X to name a few.

²⁸ Twin Cities radio deejays such as Allen Freed, Pharaoh Black, Mike "Wax Attack" Mack, and MC "Kid Delight had already started incorporating hip-hop into their own shows, 'The Hip-Hop Shop' was the first dedicated to hip-hop.

²⁹ Schell, "From St. Paul to Minneapolis," 365. The name *Wild Style* alludes to the popular 1983 hip-hop movie of the same name.

released an album in 1986 integral to the evolution to of hip-hop, each selling over a million copies.³⁰ During the same year, Minneapolis based group the I.R.M. (Immortal Rap Masters) Crew became the first local act to sign a national distribution deal; K-Tel Records disbursed their self-titled EP, highlighted by the single “Uh, Baby” before disbanding a year later.³¹ By the end of the 1980s, the violent and controversial “gangsta rap” persona/movement on the West-Coast led by Too Short, Ice-T, and N.W.A. consumed the media’s attention through coarse language and vulgar content. Concurrent with the rise of gangsta rap, Minnesotan emcee Derrick “Delite” Stevens, of the group Soul Purpose, caught a glimpse of national recognition after being chosen by Paula Abdul to voice MC Skat Kat, a fictional animated character opposite Abdul in her 1989 single ‘Opposites Attract.’ His brief moment in the spotlight faded quickly as Delite failed to capitalize on anything more than a novelty spin-off album, *The Adventures of MC Skat Kat and the Stray Mob*, released in 1991.

Despite the Twin Cities’ status as an underground scene, a few artists who desired to, were able to break through, some by prominence and some by sheer luck. For example, local rapper Harold “DMG” Armstrong fortuitously bumped into Brad “Scarface” Jordan (b. 1970) of the Houston-based rap group the Geto Boys and Rap-A-

³⁰ Run-DMC: *Raising Hell*, Beastie Boys: *Licensed to Ill*, and Salt-n-Pepa: *Hot, Cool, & Vicious*. Other important hip-hop albums released that year include Stetsasonic: *On Fire*, Doug E. Fresh & The Get Fresh Crew: *Oh, My God!*, and 2 Live Crew: *The 2 Live Crew Is What We Are*.

³¹ The sound of the I.R.M. Crew matches the popular style at the time with heavy drum and bass, light sample layering, and pointillistic rhythmic flow. I find them a mixture of Run-DMC, The Skinny Boys, and LL Cool J. Their short-lived career can most likely be attributed to their lack of individuality and originality. I.R.M. Crew was produced by Cchill Productions. K-Tel Records also distributed records for Brooklyn group Gang Starr.

Lot records founder James Prince while out at club Grand Slam following a show.³² From there DMG handed Scarface a copy of his mixtape and was shortly thereafter signed to Houston-based Rap-A Lot records, joining artists like Bun B, Big Mello, and Devin the Dude. His debut album, *Rigormortiz*, was released in 1993, peaking at 40 on the R&B charts. Although DMG does not have prior releases to frame his artistic evolution, the flow and rhyming style of *Rigormortiz* mirrors that of Scarface and the Geto Boys, while his lyrical content matches the hardcore ‘gangsta’ persona of Rap-A-Lot records.

Around the same time DMG moved to Houston, a new group, the Micranots, started gaining traction in the Twin Cities. Comprised of Akiem “DJ Kool Akiem” Elisra and Chaka “Self 1” Mkali (b. 1972), previously of the Metro Unit, and William “TruthMaze” Harris, previously of the Mixed Breed, the Micranots performed and headlined their own shows throughout the Twin Cities during the early 1990s. Their growing notoriety became a launching pad for other local artists such as Urban Atmosphere, nurturing the Twin Cities hip-hop scene by allowing other aspiring hip-hop artists to be their opening act, syphoning off the Micranots’ success. Opening for the Micranots even became a part of the first-place prize for the Microphone Check Showdown Showcases discussed in Chapter Two. Unfortunately, the Micranots’ time in the Twin Cities was limited; soon after TruthMaze left the group they departed in 1994

³² DMG stands for DetriMental Ganxta. Still with Rap-A-Lot Records, DMG released one more solo album, *Black Roulette*, in 2003. Additionally, DMG released two separate albums with Facemob, a group comprised of labelmates 350, Devin the Dude, Chi-Ray, and Smit-D: *The Other Side of the Law* (1996) and *Silence* (2002). Harold Armstrong, “DMG Q&A,” interview by DPG, *Rap Music Is All I Know*, May 2014, posted October 14, 2014, blog.

for the burgeoning hip-hop scene in Atlanta, “citing a lack of adequate infrastructure within the Twin Cities hip-hop community that could support artists.”³³

After the Micranots abandoned Minnesota, a disturbing trend started to emerge in the hip-hop scene. Relocations of artists like DMG and the Micranots appeared to suggest that in order to succeed in hip-hop you needed to relocate to a city with more to offer in regards to hip-hop consumption, akin to New York City or Los Angeles. Like Kansas City was to jazz musicians during the 1940s and 1950s, the Twin Cities in the 1990s had become a revolving door for aspiring artists. But like Count Basie (1904–1984), there were artists in Minnesota content with their location and determined to make it work in their favor; loyal Minnesotans refused to let their hot bars freeze in the Minnesota cold.³⁴

³³ The Micranots did not end up releasing their debut album, *Return of the Travellahs*, until 1996 and was only available on cassette tape. DJ Kool Akiem was somehow able to get the tape in the hands of Bigg Jus of the Brooklyn rap group Company Flow. Bigg Jus liked the tape and signed the Micranots to his 321 Records. Unfortunately the label folded before the Micranots released an album, however, Bigg Jus was quick to start again by founding Sub Verse Music in 1998 and active until 2003. Through Sub Verse Music the Micranots released their second album, *Obelisk Movements*, in 2000 but were unable to maximize the album's potential after the label folded. Their labelmates included Blackalicious, KMD, and MF Doom. Unhappy with Sub Verse Music, the Micranots returned home to Minnesota where they signed with Rhymesayers Entertainment. Ironically, the Micranots syphoned off the success of Rhymesayers Entertainment artists who fed off them nearly a decade ago. Schell, “From St. Paul to Minneapolis,” 366.

³⁴ To many, gang violence and rap music are synonymous thanks to the media's unflattering and often misinformed portrayal of the genre and its fans. Just as the Crips rivaled the Bloods, the battle between East and West Coast resulted in the deaths of infamous rappers Tupac Shakur (1996) and The Notorious B.I.G. (1997) among others. Hot bars is a slang term for an emcee's lyrics.

CHAPTER 2

HEADSHOTS

I remember watching Headshots, it was just like on the record,
but you could see it.³⁵ – Eyedea

Travitron, I.R.M., and LST “were bigger than a local scene” to many young people in Minnesota; in their adolescent minds, these artists developed their own personal version of New York.³⁶ These artists’ growing national popularity and agency within a local scene had a strong influence on many of the Twin Cities adolescents. As local artists left for what seemed like greener pastures, there was a group of Minnesotans who resisted the appeal of the East and West Coasts and viewed their Upper Midwest location as an advantage rather than a hinderance, eventually coming together as the Headshots Crew. The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the Headshots Crew, what prompted their formation in the early 1990s, how they overcame infrequent performance opportunities, the marketing technique and strategy behind their six mixtapes, and their eventual dissolution. Core members Ant, Slug, Stress, and Beyond are utilized as a focal point for this chapter and the next, not only because they are the co-founders of Rhymesayers Entertainment, but because they each possessed a certain skill set that carried the label at one point or another and was vital towards the development of Minnesota hip-hop and success of Rhymesayers Entertainment.

³⁵ *Hip-Hop Below Zero*, directed by Austyn Steelman (2006; Minneapolis, MN: Overgreenland Productions, 2010), DVD.

³⁶ Sean Daley, Anthony Davis, Musab Saad, and Brent Sayers, “A Moment In Rhymesayers – Episode 1: The Beginning,” *Rhymesayers Entertainment*, posted January 21, 2015, YouTube video, 3:39, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UiPi1fNuT10>.

BEYOND, SLUG, ANT, STRESS

Brent ‘Stress’ Sayers grew up in Minneapolis idolizing local acts like Travitron, the Ecstasy Crew, and I.R.M and knew he was destined to be involved with hip-hop “whether it was breakin’, or deejay’n, or just being a fan.”³⁷ In fact, Stress quit his high-paying data entry job in favor of a staff position at a Best Buy music store, an approximate ten-dollar-per-hour pay cut.³⁸ Music salesman by day, Stress was running illegal warehouse parties through a couple of production companies by night.³⁹ “We would rent out a warehouse and have a couple kegs, and do our own security, setup, and DJ,” Stress recalled.⁴⁰ During one of his many warehouse parties, Stress ran into friend Derek “Spawn” Turner, and as they caught up Spawn mentioned that he had formed a rap group with friend Sean ‘Slug’ Daley (b. 1972) called Urban Atmosphere.⁴¹ Although Stress and Slug were acquaintances, they still did not know each other well, but Slug knew Stress was in charge of multiple hip-hop parties throughout the Twin Cities. After listening to a few sample tapes, Stress decided to book Urban Atmosphere for an upcoming show: 3rd Floor. Presented by Brigade and Nocturnal Productions, 3rd Floor was a one-night event on Sunday, July 11, 1993 that featured free giveaways, a freestyle competition, and of course live music. At 3rd Floor, Urban Atmosphere opened for local

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Best Buy was founded in 1983 by Richard Schulze in Richfield, Minnesota. In addition to their large stores, they also had smaller satellite stores that were dedicated solely to music, music production, and musical instruments.

³⁹ Chaz Kangas, “Rhymesayers at 20: How the Best Roster in Hip-Hop Was Built,” *City Pages*, December 2, 2015, <http://www.citypages.com/music/rhymesayers-at-20-how-the-best-roster-in-hip-hop-was-built-7870787>.

⁴⁰ Daley, Davis, Saad, and Sayers, interview, “Episode 1: The Beginning.”

⁴¹ At some point in 2001 Stress changed his name to Siddiq. Since this thesis is presented chronologically I will be adjusting his name accordingly.

celebrities the Micranots, marking the first time Stress would hear Urban Atmosphere perform live.⁴² Unfortunately, organizing illegal warehouse parties proved to be “a pain in the ass because of all the complications, and people coming in and starting drama. A constant headache.”⁴³ The illegal nature of these shows made difficult for anyone to call the authorities when violence occurs, out of fear of their own personal repercussions. Concerned by “the looming potential of something bad happening...and being held accountable for it,” Stress “knew [he] didn’t want to stay too involved in that,” and pivoted towards promoting nightclubs.⁴⁴

A longtime friend of Stress, Ralph X was a fellow showrunner who started an organization called The Universal Parliament of Hip-Hop, an extravagant display featuring “Minneapolis and St. Paul’s Phattest Street D.J.’s, M.C.’s, Breakers, and Graffiti Artists.”⁴⁵ After the two reconnected, they established the Microphone Check Showcase Showdowns (presented by The Universal Parliament of Hip-Hop); at the showcase showdowns, they would bring out one popular national act to headline the show. To open, there would be a “battle of the bands”-structured competition featuring Twin Cities hip-hop acts, with the finalists moving on to compete at the larger Universal Parliament of Hip-Hop exhibition. Showcase showdowns provided a much-needed platform and opportunity for local artists to work on their craft and meet fellow hip-hop enthusiasts. One emcee in particular, Musab “Beyond” Saad, caught the eye of Stress

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Shawn Setaro, “Rhymesayers At 20: An Oral History,” *Forbes Magazine*, November 30, 2015, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/shawnsetaro/2015/11/30/rhymesayers-20-an-oral-history/#5b86ba482cca>.

⁴⁴ Dan Rys, “How Rhymesayers Entertainment Survived 20 Years As An Indie Label,” *Billboard*, December 12, 2015, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/hip-hop/6785841/rhymesayers-entertainment-survived-20-years-indie-label>.

⁴⁵ Daley, Davis, Saad, and Sayers, interview, “Episode 1: The Beginning.”

while performing as a member of the group Labyrinth. Stress recalled Beyond had a special “presence and voice that stood out from everybody else.”⁴⁶

Rapping and writing rhymes since the third grade, Beyond received high praise and admiration from peers but never thought much of hip-hop as a career. Beyond’s roommate at the time, Unicus, played a big part in Beyond’s hip-hop career by introducing him to future friends/business partners, Slug and Ant. Unicus and Slug had been friends for some time, and one day after coming home, Beyond found them both hanging out in his living room. Slug remembers them instantly sharing a bond because “[Slug] smoked weed, and [Beyond] sold weed.”⁴⁷ According to Beyond “[selling marijuana] was like a hip-hop thing, a lot of homies bought trees from me, [Slug] just liked to rap more than most.”⁴⁸ Aside from sharing an affinity for marijuana, Slug and Beyond developed a relationship through their passion for hip-hop as a fan and a performer. From then on, Slug was constantly over at Beyond’s residence, the self-coined “hip-hop house.”⁴⁹

Slug’s interest in writing began in junior high school while he and a friend were under in-school suspension.⁵⁰ While in their solitude, Slug’s friend began writing his own lyrics to “Boogie in Your Butt,” a song by comedian Eddie Murphy (b. 1961) from his

⁴⁶ Kangas, “Rhymesayers at 20.”

⁴⁷ Sean Daley, Anthony Davis, Musab Saad, and Brent Sayers, “A Moment In Rhymesayers – Episode 2: Headshots Crew,” *Rhymesayers Entertainment*, posted February 4, 2015, YouTube video, 7:39, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZbeWp8VcSSA&t=75s>.

⁴⁸ Sean Daley, Anthony Davis, Musab Saad, and Brent Sayers, “A Moment In Rhymesayers – Episode 4: Headshots Tape 4 - History,” *Rhymesayers Entertainment*, posted April 1, 2015, YouTube video, 10:53, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vAQzwnLcQ78&t=313s>.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Sean Daley, interview, “Microphone Mathematics: Slug of Atmosphere Part 1 of 3,” *Microphone Mathematics*, FETV, posted September 7, 2010, YouTube video, 12:56, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4QnndXsxOuE&t=117s>.

1982 self-titled album, and told Slug to do the same. For the rest of junior high, Slug continued to write songs in this fashion, imitating, them improvising on grooves by rappers such as Run-DMC or Slick Rick (b. 1965) in what I refer to as a rhythmic/rhyme scheme quotation.⁵¹ This is audible in Slug's early Atmosphere tracks "Guns and Cigarettes," which adopts the rhythm and rhyme scheme of Run-DMC's "Sucker M.C.'s (Krush-Groove 1)" and "The Wind," which does the same with Slick Rick's "La Di Da Di." The beginning of "Sucker M.C.'s (Krush-Groove 1)" performed by emcee Run:

Two years ago, a friend of mine
Asked me to say some emcee rhymes
So I said this rhyme I'm about to say
The rhyme was def a-then it went this way

directly parallel's the opening line of the Slug's second verse of "Guns and Cigarettes":

A few years ago an ex-girl of mine
Asked me to keep her name out my rhymes
So I said this rhyme that I'm about to say
It came from the heart and it went this way.⁵²

Similarly, the line by Slick Rick in "La Di Da Di" at 1:20:

for all of ya'll keepin' ya'll in health
just to see ya smile and enjoy yourself

corresponds with Slug's line from "The Wind" at 3:04:

Well for all of ya'll keepin' ya'll hell
I'm only tryin' to help, peace out to 1-self.⁵³

⁵¹ In order to successfully execute this form of quotation, an emcee will begin by quoting another rapper's lyrics for approximately a line or two, the proceeding material is all original yet maintains a similar rhythmic flow and/or rhyme scheme.

⁵² Run-DMC, "Sucker M.C.'s (Krush Groove-1)," *Run-DMC*, Profile Records PCD-1202, 1984. Atmosphere, "Guns and Cigarettes," *Lucy Ford: The Atmosphere EP's*, Rhymesayers Entertainment RS-2200-2, 2001.

⁵³ MC Ricky D and Doug E. Fresh, "La Di Da Di," *The Show*, Reality D-242, 1985. Atmosphere, "The Wind," *Sad Clown Bad Dub II*, Rhymesayers Entertainment, 2000.

Slug had fun writing songs, rhyming, and rapping with his friends but did not take it too seriously: his eyes were “on the turntables, [he] wanted to be a deejay.”⁵⁴ However, in the mid-to late 1980s when emcees such as KRS-ONE, Rakim, and Big Daddy Kane innovated more complex rhyme-schemes, Slug was inspired to devote more of his attention to rapping. At first, Slug attempted to make it on his own as both deejay and emcee, but when he teamed up with Spawn in 1989 he focused on being a deejay/producer while Spawn wrote and performed vocals. Eventually, Slug emerged from behind the turntables, sharing the stage with Spawn as equals; this and the addition of Ant via the Headshots Crew solidified the end of Slug’s deejay career.

From an early age, Anthony “Ant” Davis (b. 1970) knew what he wanted “make music with rappers.”⁵⁵ He first began experimenting with turntables in 1983 by emulating his father, an army soldier and part-time deejay.⁵⁶ While in junior high Ant was very shy, and used hip-hop as a way to meet people and make friends after noticing his peers were into the b-boy aspect of hip-hop. The only one with access to deejay equipment, Ant began collaborating with friends and deejaying parties. Eventually people asked if they could plug in a mic and rap to his beats and began deejaying “for rappers in the ‘80s, cutting the beat back and forth like the Cold Crush Brothers.”⁵⁷ For this reason Ant sets himself apart from his current independent hip-hop contemporaries in that his “development more closely resembles the training of producers from hip-hop in its

⁵⁴ Daley, Davis, Saad, and Sayers, interview, “Episode 4: Headshots Tape 4 – History.”

⁵⁵ Daley, Davis, Saad, and Sayers, interview, “Episode 1: The Beginning.”

⁵⁶ Shawn Setaro, “Rhymesayers at 20.”

⁵⁷ DJ Ethx, “Atmosphere,” Gear, *EMusician*, December 1, 2005, last modified November 29, 2017, <https://www.emusician.com/gear/atmosphere>.

formative years.”⁵⁸ In the 1970s and early 1980s, deejay equipment consisted only of two turntables, a mixer, and of course, vinyl; the absence of computer technology and recording gear at the time forced deejays during this era to rely exclusively on their live performances and thus a more focused collaboration with the emcee.⁵⁹

As the hip-hop deejay became more of a behind the scenes studio producer role, Ant purchased equipment as technology developed, eventually adding to his collection 4-tracks, an Ensoniq ASR-10, effects processor, and a Flash Former.⁶⁰ After creating his own in-home studio, Ant advertised his production and recording services by distributing and posting fliers throughout town. Although his fliers demanded a small fee, he never intended on following through with collection, he was only “looking for people, like-minded individuals to make art with.”⁶¹ Eventually, one of Ant’s flyers posted at a local convenient store caught the eye of Unicus, who at the time was rapping in the group Kanser. After collaborating with Ant, at some point Unicus brought the flyer to the attention of both Slug and Beyond and invited them to Ant’s basement studio, nicknamed The Factory. Beyond was the first to accept his offer and, upon arrival at The Factory, was asked to kick a freestyle as Ant played one of his beats; an instant repour was made. In fact, a connection was built amongst all four as Slug, Ant, Stress, and Beyond shared an equal passion and fortitude to succeed in hip-hop.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ The advancement in deejay and recording equipment over the past thirty years has largely relinquished the deejay to the producers studio, leaving little to do during live performances; this could also be credited to the shifted focus from deejay to emcee in the late 1980s with the rising popularity of rappers such as Rakim, Chuck-D, and Eazy-E.

⁶⁰ An ASR-10 is a keyboard that allows producers to record their own melodies and experiment with timbre. An effects processor helps manipulate electronic effects such as distortion or reverb. A Flash Former is a transformer device that helps create turntable cuts and is easier to use than a standard mixer.

⁶¹ Daley, Davis, Saad, and Sayers, interview, “Episode 1: The Beginning.”

CREW'D UP

By 1994, the most popular hip-hop act in the Twin Cities was undoubtedly the Micranots, who were the first to gain traction and significant radio airplay.⁶² Building on their popularity, other local groups also started gaining notoriety by “playing shows with the Micranots, and ... playing shows with some of these other artists...people were getting used to seeing [them].”⁶³ Although great for exposure, Slug was more concerned with whether or not people were taking them seriously, fearing he was only viewed as an opening act and nothing more.⁶⁴ To make matters worse, venues stopped booking hip-hop shows due largely due to a few violent episodes and shootings.⁶⁵ “With 27.1 murders per 100,000 people [during 1995-1996], Minneapolis had a murder rate almost 70 percent higher than New York’s rate of 16 per 100,000.”⁶⁶ Thanks to those two catalysts, the hip-hop scene had dried up, or least it appeared to. If one looks closely, however, one would see a determined underground scene rising out of basements.

The biggest issue aspiring Twin Cities hip-hop artists faced in 1994 and 1995 was opportunity. Nationwide, hip-hop in the early 1990s was trending toward crews; one of the biggest events to happen in hip-hop was the debut of The Wu-Tang Clan and their first studio album: *Enter The Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)* on November 9, 1993. Crews like

⁶² DJ Kool Akeim is the deejay of choice for rapper MF Doom.

⁶³ Daley, Davis, Saad, and Sayers, interview, “Episode 2: Headshots Crew.”

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Violence at hip-hop shows as portrayed by the media should be taken with a grain of salt. In Rose’s book *Black Noise*, she discusses a time when she attended a hip-hop concert in which she witnessed a very small, unmemorable scuffle. However, news media outlets reported on the following day about a large and vicious brawl directly contradicting Rose’s eye-witness account. Alluded to in my thesis introduction, writers and reporters have inappropriately and irresponsibly made false claims and extreme exaggerations about hip-hop with racial implications.

⁶⁶ Dirk Johnson, “Nice City’s Nasty Distinction: Murders Soar in Minneapolis,” *The New York Times*, June 20, 1996, 1.

The Wu-Tang Clan, Boot Camp Click, Hieroglyphics, and Native Tongues were showing others, as Slug remembers, that “if you could crew up, there was a strength to that . . . the power was in numbers.”⁶⁷ This concept ignited the formation of the Headshots Crew, a collective of hip-hop practitioners who were regulars at the Microphone Check Showcase Showdown; original members included Urban Atmosphere, Beyond (and Ant), Abstract Pack (and Stress), and Black Hohl. The crew included not only emcees and deejays but also b-boys and graffiti artists as well who “were all in the local scene, doing their thing and kind of had similar interests and kind of approached things similarly.”⁶⁸ The two most important members of the crew during this time were undoubtedly Ant and Stress. After the crew was formed, Stress removed himself as producer for the Abstract Pack and focused exclusively on the business side of hip-hop. Stress observed there was never anyone from other crews willing to step back from the public eye and direct their efforts towards “moving the pendulum and taking things somewhere.”⁶⁹ Luckily, it turned out that Stress had a good acumen for business so he relinquished all of his recording gear to Ant. Ant, who had been working with Beyond, was already a prolific beat-maker before joining Headshots. When everyone realized he was “light-years ahead” of everyone else,

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid. In the same video, there is a clip of Headshots performing a show on March 13th in which Slug emphatically asserts that 1995 would be known as “the year of the Headshots.”

⁶⁹ Ibid. Examples of scholarship that center around these artists include: Brent Wood, “Understanding Rap as Rhetorical Folk-poetry,” *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 32, no. 4 (December 1999): 129–46. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44029853>. Bryan J. McCann, *The Mark of Criminality: Rhetoric, Race, and Gangsta Rap in the War-on-Crime Era*, (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2019). Franklin, Krohn and Frances Suazo, “Contemporary Urban Music: Controversial Messages in Hip-hop and Rap Lyrics,” *Et Cetera* 52, no. 2 (1995): 139, <https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=9507072979&site=ehost-live>. David Sigler, “Make It a Double: Two Renditions of ‘Gin and Juice’ Reconsidered,” *Literature Interpretation Theory* 18, no. 2 (2007): 95–113, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10436920701380687>.

he took over production for the entire crew, essentially becoming the Dr. Dre (b. 1965) of the Twin Cities.⁷⁰

Before leaving Death Row Records in 1996 and nurturing the careers of future hip-hop juggernauts Eminem and 50-Cent (b. 1975) with Aftermath Entertainment, Dr. Dre jump-started the careers of nearly all late-1980s and early-1990s rappers from the West-Coast. Beginning in 1986, Dr. Dre was the driving force behind the production, instrumentals, beats, and sound emanating from the greater Los Angeles area, starting with the pioneers of the gansta rap movement, N.W.A. In 1988 N.W.A. became a national phenomenon following the release of their debut album, *Straight Outta Compton* (over three million copies sold), which was quickly followed by the 1990 EP, *100 Miles and Runnin'* (over a million copies sold), and 1991's *Niggaz4Life* (over two million copies sold) before the crew officially disbanded.⁷¹ While with Eazy-E (1963 – 1995) and Jerry Heller's Ruthless Records, Dr. Dre also produced Eazy-E's debut album, *Eazy-Duz-It* (1988), which has sold over two-million copies, as well as The D.O.C.'s debut album, *No One Can Do It Better* (1989), which has sold over a million copies.⁷² After the demise of N.W.A. and conflicts with Heller and Eazy-E, Dr. Dre left Ruthless to create his own label, Death Row Records, with friend Suge Knight in 1992. Despite only working four years with Death Row before a violent and dangerous split between himself and Knight, Dr. Dre worked with and produced some of the most influential hip-hop albums

⁷⁰ Daley, Davis, Saad, and Sayers, interview, "Episode 2: Headshots Crew."

⁷¹ RIAA, accessed March 2020, https://www.riaa.com/gold-platinum/?tab_active=default-award&se=n.w.a#search_section.

⁷² Ibid, https://www.riaa.com/gold-platinum/?tab_active=default-award&ar=EAZY-E&ti=EAZY-DUZ-IT, and https://www.riaa.com/gold-platinum/?tab_active=default-award&se=no+one+can+do+it+better#search_section.

by some of the genre's most talented West-Coast artists such as Snoop Doggy Dogg (1993's *Doggystyle* has sold over four million copies), Tupac (*All Eyez On Me* has sold over ten million copies and *The Don Killuminati: The 7 Day Theory* has sold over four million copies, both released in 1996), and also himself (1992's *The Chronic* has sold over three million copies).⁷³ Legally and contractually Dr. Dre was unable to continue collaborating with his West-Coast protégé Snoop Dogg (b. 1971) until *The Last Meal* (2000), his first album since leaving Death Row, and unfortunately, 2Pac (1971 – 1996) passed away between the releases of *All Eyez On Me* and *The Don Killuminati: The 7 Day Theory*.⁷⁴

Just as N.W.A., Ruthless Records, and Death Row Records relied on Dr. Dre and his production talents in their early years, the Headshots Crew and Rhymesayers Entertainment depended Ant's production savvy during their juvenescence. In an interview with 24/7HH, Slug credits Ant with being the “reason why a lot of hip-hop happened [in Minneapolis], period.”⁷⁵ In many ways, Ant had a higher level of maturity about him than other Headshots members; he had intense work ethic and dedication towards crafting beats that allowed him, according to Slug, to “pump out twelve beats a

⁷³ Ibid, https://www.riaa.com/gold-platinum/?tab_active=default-award&se=doggystyle#search_section, https://www.riaa.com/gold-platinum/?tab_active=default-award&se=2+pac#search_section, and https://www.riaa.com/gold-platinum/?tab_active=default-award&se=the+chronic#search_section. Famous singles from these albums include “Nothin’ but a ‘G’ Thang,” “Fuck Wit Dre Day (and Everybody’s Celebratin’),” and “Let Me Ride” from *The Chronic*; “What’s My Name?,” “Gin and Juice,” and “Doggy Dogg World” from *Doggystyle*; “California Love” from *All Eyez On Me*.

⁷⁴ Although *The Don Killuminati: The 7 Day Theory* was released posthumously, it was ready and intended for release prior to 2Pac's assassination. All sequential posthumous 2Pac albums, which were released without his obvious consent/knowledge. Two months after his murder, Suge Knight decided to release the album in November 1996 instead of the following year. The album also should have been released under 2Pac's alternate identity, Makaveli.

⁷⁵ Sean Daley, “Atmosphere - Early Rap Career Days & How Ant Motivated Us (247HH Archives),” *247HH*, posted January 13, 2018, YouTube video, 5:00, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0tkTdDtnfxM>.

day.”⁷⁶ The assiduous nature with which Ant approached his music significantly influenced other Headshots emcees to apply themselves more vigorously in an attempt to match Ant’s output. Equipped with a plethora of talent on both the microphone and turntables, the only thing that could hinder the Headshots Crew was access to a performance space.

As previously mentioned, it was nearly impossible to find a venue for hip-hop artists to perform in the Twin Cities during the early 1990s. As a result, the Headshots Crew began performing wherever they were allowed to set up speakers. Clubs were no longer booking hip-hop shows, but an abundance of cafés were willing to host performances by the Headshots Crew. Beyond emphatically asserts that “[Headshots] started that shit. I don’t care who disagrees or who says what, as far as I know, Headshots invented the café rap shows.”⁷⁷ Although cafés may not have been most ideal venue, it gave the crew an intimate setting in which their art could be heard.

Their first café show was hosted at Jitters coffee shop on October 21, 1995 in downtown Minneapolis, featuring performances by each member of the Headshots Crew. These shows gave all of the members an opportunity and a platform to hone their microphone skills and stage presence.⁷⁸ As word of mouth spread across the Twin Cities, the Headshots café shows became increasingly popular; there were “10 people then 20 people then 50 people,” and they created such a large buzz that the clubs started reaching

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Daley, Davis, Saad, and Sayers, interview, “Episode 2: Headshots Crew.”

⁷⁸ Through fliers posted throughout the Twin Cities in “wild-style” lettering, we can track the refinement of each of the groups. For example, a flier posted for a March 9, 1996 show informs us that Atmosphere had dropped the “urban” prefix and that Black Hohl had officially dismantled. By May 21 we see that members of Black Hohl had split into two groups, The Native Ones and Phull Surkle.

out to the crew.⁷⁹ Although café shows helped establish a local following for the crew, what really propelled them into local stardom was their series of mixtapes available for purchase at shows and local record stores. As Stress witnessed their growing popularity, he knew it would be to their benefit if they were able to monetize their performance in a way that put something into the audiences' hands, giving them something to take home. Thus began the Headshots tapes, an influential series of 4-track cassettes available for purchase at local independently owned music shops such as Slug's employer, Electric Fetus, as well as live shows.

THE TAPES

As the Headshots fan base grew, people began asking for a tape. Unfortunately, the crew did not have a lot of material recorded. Unsure of how they wanted to proceed with their first release, the crew decided to put out a mixtape of deejay cuts/mixes interspersed with freestyles recorded in Stress's basement. The resulting product was *Headshots Volume 1: The Wbboy Sessions*, which began circulation at shows and local record stores on August 1, 1995. Eklipz, deejay for the Abstract Pack, mixed Side A, and according to a reviewer at discogs.com, “[kept] it clean and simple with smooth blends and some flavorful cuts added here and there,” featuring freestyles from fellow Abstract Pack emcees: Knowledge MC and Glo.⁸⁰ Slug of Urban Atmosphere takes over for

⁷⁹ Daley, Davis, Saad, and Sayers, interview, “Episode 4: Headshots Tape 4 – History.”

⁸⁰ “Headshots - Vol 1. - The WBBOY Sessions,” Discogs, accessed July 2019, <https://www.discogs.com/Headshots-Vol-1-The-WBBOY-Sessions/release/2868466>.

The Abstract Pack logo on the tape insert further purports the notion of them as the crew's leaders.

Eklipz on Side B amidst freestyles from Beyond, Eklipz, and himself.⁸¹ Discogs again comments that Slug's

blends are on point, and his song selection and rather unlikely pairings are a great glimpse into his creative blend of styles that also transferred to his mic skills. You'll hear Biz Markie mixed into Aceyalone, or the Chubb Rock into The Artifacts...both made me pause and nod my head in appreciation.⁸²

The vocals of each rapper clearly projects an array of talent and skill, and as Discogs's reviewer alludes to, the blends and mixing between the vocals and instrumentals are done very well. However, the instrumentals overall are rudimentary at best, containing nothing more than a kick-snare and bass for the drum-line, a bass, and a single looped instrumental sample; this is most likely due to the lack of sufficient recording equipment in addition to the logistical restrictions of at-home recording devices such as a 4-track.⁸³ Two days after releasing Rhymesayers inaugural album, they began distributing *Headshots Vol. 2: Arrogance* on March 1, 1996. The cover of this tape not only includes the first Rhyme Sayers Entertainment logo on a Headshots tape, but also clearly delineates the members/groups of the crew: The Abstract Pack, Atmosphere (who dropped "urban" from their name), Beyond, The Native Ones (two members of Black Hole), and Phull Surkle. Unique to this album cover is the accessibility to fans. The cover encourages any emcee to challenge them to a rap battle and gives a phone number as well as address where they can be contacted. To this day, Rhymesayers continue to make themselves accessible to fans in this way.

⁸¹ This is the last DJ mix performed by Slug before concentrating solely on rapping.

⁸² Discogs, "Headshots - Vol 1."

⁸³ A 4-track is a type of cassette recording devices that allows one to easily layer four separate vocal or instrumental tracks and transfer them to a cassette tape. Although the machine only allows four separate tracks, there are ways to manipulate the device to include more. For example, one could perform two lines on the same track, or also connect it to another 4-track recorder, thus creating seven tracks.

When it was time to release a follow-up tape, the Headshots Crew still did not have a lot of recorded material. They were more concerned with getting their new label off the ground. For *Arrogance*, they again used old freestyles recorded in Stress's basement but also included two live performances from Saltwater, Minnesota at "some fuckin' rave" (i.e., an event for Electronic Dance Music) and First Avenue.⁸⁴ In an interview, Slug reiterates that the recordings from their live shows were never intended to be released to the public; they were made simply to own a recording of themselves. In order to appeal to a larger audience, Stress also decided to include an infamous West Coast battle between Casual of Hieroglyphics and Saafir of Hobo Junction.⁸⁵ Including the rap battle on the tape was a smart marketing ploy. A consumer could purchase the tape with the single intention of listening to the rap battle, but as bonus they have the *option* to explore the other side of the tape and listen to the Headshots Crew, an experience artists in their area are contributing to hip-hop.

A month after releasing *Arrogance*, the Headshots Crew released their third tape, *Headshots Vol. 3: Compensation* on April 1st. Continuing to not have recorded material, Stress decided that the third tape would again feature live performances and for the first time include 4-track recordings created in Ant's basement. This tape not only included live recordings of the Headshots Crew, but also bootleg recordings of a recent show featuring bands from elsewhere: The Fugees, The Roots, and Goodie Mob. Interspersing live Headshots recordings with each of the three nationally recognized groups not only

⁸⁴ Sean Daley, Anthony Davis, Musab Saad, and Brent Sayers, "A Moment In Rhymesayers – Episode 3: Headshots Tapes 1-3," *Rhymesayers Entertainment*, posted March 11, 2015, YouTube video, 8:06, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qc-GAHZCLhw&t=17s>.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

enticed consumers, but also seemingly elevated the Headshot Crew's status within the rap community. A less informed listener might assume that the Headshots Crew were performing the same show as these popular artists. It was not only the content that intrigued consumers but also the album's artwork. Drawn by Abuse of the Abstract Pack, the tape's cover featured a person with a fist holding a microphone exploding out the top of his head. According to Slug:

The artwork to it [*Compensation*] was so beyond what rap artwork was doing at the moment. It was the same idea that underground rap was going through, "we'll blow your mind" ... that was what all underground rap felt like, but this was the first time that somebody that I had seen somebody actually create a visual that was technically beyond the music ... This was a case of the art selling the tape, at least in my opinion.⁸⁶

After *Compensation*, the Headshots Crew started growing further apart. By this time Stress, Slug, Ant, and Beyond had put a lot of work into developing their own label, and some of the other members were no longer satisfied with the crew's artistic direction (more on this in the next chapter). Unfortunately, tragedy struck when Abstract Pack emcee Herbie "The Bomb Funk One Sessamilla" Foster IV (Sess for short) was killed in a car accident on October 10, 1996. His untimely death was a huge blow to the Twin Cities hip-hop community; highly revered by his peers, Sess was considered one of Minnesota's most talented emcees.⁸⁷ Ant remembers Sess as

one of the better ones at the time. That's no bullshit. Just 'cause he passed I'm not just saying that shit, he was pretty dope. But he didn't really care either. He was just one of those guys that just had it. He didn't give a shit. He didn't even take

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Emcee Eyedea was very young at the time of Sess' death and took it very hard. He secluded himself for a month, and by the time he came out he apparently rapped and sounded like Sess. It was as if he was channeling Stress through himself.

recordings of the stuff he did. He just came over and recorded, everybody else was worried about getting his stuff.⁸⁸

Despite these terrible circumstances, the Headshots crew regrouped and decided to dedicate their fourth tape to the memory of Sess. Interspersed with dedications and interludes showcasing Sess's lyrical prowess, *Headshots Vol. 4: History* was released on December 1, 1996. Although important in a sentimental way, *History* was also a significant display of the maturation and development of the crew, an intersection of the Headshots Crew and Rhymesayers Entertainment. Instead of relying on live performances and freestyle compilations like a crutch, *History* was the first tape to substantially feature the 4-track recordings from Ant's basement. According to another anonymous Discogs reviewer, "you can clearly tell the crew is getting a better grasp on song-writing, arrangement, concepts, and things of that nature. The raw b-boy essence is still in effect, but they've injected more musical savvy into the mix."⁸⁹ Ironically, Ant was not thrilled about including 4-track recordings on the tapes. He felt that the 4-tracks were never intended to be heard by anyone because they weren't perfected. To him, they were "demo ideas for going to the studio to make the best possible songs."⁹⁰

During Ant's creative process he uses demo tapes, which are essentially sketches or initial rough drafts, as an opportunity to communicate with the emcee and collaborate to see what works and what needs to be changed. To demonstrate this process, during an interview with *Making Music* in 2006 Ant played three separate demo versions of Atmosphere's "Get Fly," a song initially intended to be on their 2003 album *Seven's*

⁸⁸ Daley, Davis, Saad, and Sayers, interview, "Episode 4: Headshots Tape 4 – History."

⁸⁹ "Headshots - Vol 4. - History," Discogs, July 2019, <https://www.discogs.com/Headshots-Vol-4-History/release/2868447>.

⁹⁰ Daley, Davis, Saad, and Sayers, interview, "Episode 3: Headshots Tapes 1-3."

Travels.⁹¹ To complement Slug's anti-government and anti-establishment lyrics, Ant first chose a sample that included dark minor chords performed on the low register of a piano. Slug's reaction was that the product was too clichéd, meaning the drab aesthetic of the instrumentals paralleled Slug's bleak lyrics too well. The second time they attempted to set the "Get Fly" lyrics to instrumentals, Ant used a sample that sounds as though he blended a Theremin with music from a broken carousel, projecting an ominous and frightening aesthetic. The horror-circus-like beat did not elicit their desired reaction.

Nearly a year later, Ant decided to show Slug an instrumental track he had worked on for Brother Ali, but for whatever reason did not work out. The instrumentals contained powerful gospel-like cadences, melodies, and rhythms, so Ant was unsure of how Slug would react. They set the "Get Fly" lyrics to Ant's new beats and oddly enough, instrumentals provided a paradoxical, yet apropos complement to the anti-authoritarian lyrics. The tune ended up on their 2005 album *You Can't Imagine How Much Fun We're Having*. Releasing copies of these demos prematurely to the public cemented these rough drafts in a way that Ant was not comfortable with. In-fact, Ant discouraged members from putting their best material on the tapes, encouraging them "not to take these tapes so seriously...because if only fifty people heard this shit what's the point...then let's take these really good songs and make an album out of it."⁹² For example, "Brief Description" by Atmosphere appears on both *History* and their then upcoming album, *Overcast!*, yet each version offers a drastically different listening

⁹¹ Anthony Davis, "Anthony Davis Plays Demo Versions of 'Get Fly,'" interview by JG Everest, *Making Music*, Whole Music Club, University of Minnesota, November 30, 2006, posted June 11, 2008, YouTube video, 6:56, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IqB9dJ0ePhk&t=2s>.

⁹² The Headshots Crew originally intended to release an official album, but unfortunately it never came to fruition. Some groups, including Atmosphere, had already recorded a song and filmed a music video for "Ear Blister," one of their songs on the album before it fell through.

experience in both sound and recording quality. The most significant issue with the *History* rendition of “Brief Description” is their struggle to maintain balance between the voice and instrumentals, an unfortunate limitation of the 4-track recording device. These concerns are addressed and resolved in the final version on *Overcast!*, recorded in a professional recording studio, but one of the most glaring changes is heard in the song’s chorus/hook. The original chorus, “I shut my eyes like this / the mic is clutched in my fist and then / all the shit around me doesn’t really exist / I put my chin to my chest / let the wind take my stress and / all the shit around me doesn’t really exist,” is performed twice separately.⁹³ The final version of the chorus is also performed two separate times, but the second iteration contains alternate wording:

within the movement / fact checking, trying to completely avoid all channels of backstepping / from the lines of painted concrete / that reside on Lake Street / to the way we close our eyes to sleep / and drift through deep-space-nine type shit / to find this / I’ve been around for as long as sound / I’ve been to that not-so-fresh phase / and to that not-quite-that-serious state / but I’ve evolved, metamorph and manifestate

and

within the movement / fact checking, trying to completely avoid all channels of backstepping / from the lines of painted concrete / that reside on Franklin Ave / to the dead bird on the elevator / to that short in your crossfader / I never got lost later / for efforts to pester / just throw your hands up in the air like a leper / I’ve been to that not-so-fresh phase / and to that not-quite-that-serious state / metamorph and manifestate.⁹⁴

The alterations Slug made to the chorus demonstrates his growing maturity as an artist; each iteration of the chorus in the final version offer more intellectual in depth than its more shallow predecessor. Additionally, the adjustments Slug makes to the chorus in the

⁹³ Atmosphere, “Brief Description,” *Headshots Vol. 4: History*, Rhymesayers Entertainment, RSUC0002, 1996.

⁹⁴ Ibid. Atmosphere, “Brief Description,” *Overcast!*, Rhymesayers Entertainment RS0008-2, 1997.

second half of its final repetition exhibits a sophisticated approach to lyrical writing in that he maintains the same essential chorus framework from its first repetition, but places the listener in a different setting by means of alternate lyrics. Recording an outline or *rough draft* of a song on a shoddy 4-track recorder allowed Headshots members an opportunity to save both time and money in the studio. Clearly Slug was unhappy with his original chorus in “Brief Description” and rather than revisiting an overpriced studio, he was able to make the desired changes for the final product.

Another example of the changes made between their demos and their final version is audible in *History*’s ninth track, “Appearing Live,” performed by The Dynospectrum, officially released on their 1998 debut, self-titled album. Similar to “Brief Description” the lyrics change slightly at the end of the second verse as Sept Sev Sev Two changes his final line from:

takes up too much of me, I know this / now don’t you think I noticed, blink and focus / cuz it’s not as hopeless as it appears to be on the surface / first disguised as worthless yet clearly your sincerity to provide a higher purpose

to

the fraudulent fall to dismemberment in September / clever sentiments, camouflage, hidden agenda / uncloud the vision and unclog the hearing / the poster says it perfect, Dynospectrum now appearing.⁹⁵

The new lyrics and syllabic formations create a new rhythmic pattern that better complements the instrumentals, and also to facilitates a smoother transition into the chorus. Outside of lyrics, “Appearing Live” additionally exemplifies the limitations of the 4-track recording. The final version contains a significantly higher amount of over-

⁹⁵ The Dynospectrum, “Appearing Live,” *Headshots Vol. 4: History*, Rhymesayers Entertainment, RSUC0002, 1996. The Dynospectrum, “Appearing Live,” *The Dynospectrum*, Rhymesayers Entertainment RS0010-2, 1998

dubs (vocal or instrumental overlays), especially during the intro, outro and various repetitions of the chorus. The chorus includes turntable scratching, a feature impossible to accomplish with only a 4-track recorder. Fortunately, the unrefined sound of the Headshots Crew would not remain this way for long; they approached the recording process for mixtapes five and six much more seriously.

Seven months after releasing *History*, Headshots released their fifth tape in the series, *Headshots Vol. 5: Effort*, on June 1, 1997. Unlike the other tapes in the series, *Effort* focuses solely on 4-track recordings and introduces new/honorary members of the Headshots Crew: Extreme, Self-1, and Mr. Gene Poole.⁹⁶ The Rhymesayers website offers two definitions of ‘effort’. The first is a standard *Webster’s Dictionary* definition, however, for their purposes, ‘effort’ was defined as: “another classic underground tape dedicated to all those kids who don’t put in the work doing shit before they start running around talking shit about all the shit they really ain’t doing.”⁹⁷ Notably missing from this tape, however, are original members of The Abstract Pack. They decided that they no longer wanted to continue with Headshots and the rising Rhymesayers Entertainment label. “By the sixth release (*Industrial Warfare*) there were no more headshots. Those that were still down were in the process of making Rhymesayers what it has become,” wrote Slug.⁹⁸ The crew’s final tape, released on September 1, 1997, *Headshots Vol. 6: Industrial Warfare* continued to make use of their 4-track recordings. This tape marks the

⁹⁶ Gene Poole and 1-Self actually made their Headshots tape debut as a part of The Dynospectrum in Volume 4.

⁹⁷ “Vol. 5 - Effort,” Headshots, Rhymesayers Entertainment, accessed June 2019, <https://rhymesayers.com/releases/vol-5-effort>.

⁹⁸ Atmosphere, liner notes, *Headshots: Se7en*, recorded 1997-1999, Rhymesayers Entertainment, RS0053-2, 2005.

first appearance by Sixth Sense as a part of Headshots and sees the return of original crew members The Native Ones, rebranded as Los Nativos. “Over the course of four years and six Headshots cassette releases, some Headshots members left the family, some lost the path, and one went to heaven.”⁹⁹ It was time for Rhymesayers Entertainment to be the new “crew.”

By no means do I imply that Rhymesayers and the Headshots Crew were the only ones to implement the mixtape platform, for the mixtape has been an essential aspect of hip-hop culture and an important means of bootleg information distribution, especially during the 1980s and early 1990s. Before the internet facilitated instant information sharing, cassette mixtapes were the fastest way to share music across the country outside of a legal purchase (“holdin’ my finger on the pause button like ‘now go’ / I guess that was the original download”).¹⁰⁰ Mixtapes broadly united fans of the same music, which Stress perpetuated when he included the battle between West-Coast groups Hieroglyphics and Hobo Junction on *Headshots Vol. 3: Compensation*. Mixtapes were not only disseminated hand-to-hand either, in an interview with 24/7HH, Slug remembers having a few friends who would trade tapes over the mail with friends they had in New York or Oregon.¹⁰¹ In-fact, the first time Slug heard New York-based rapper and future friend/collaborator Aesop Rock (b. 1976) was from a bootleg copy of Eminem’s *Slim Shady EP*. An unknown tape-trader placed a copy of Aesop Rock’s debut album, *Music for Earthworms*, on Side B of the *Slim Shady EP* bootleg. Unlike other mixtapes,

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Atmosphere, “Don’t Forget,” *Sad Clown Bad Summer*, Rhymesayers Entertainment RSE0089, 2007.

¹⁰¹ Sean Daley, “Atmosphere - Internet Helped Me, Tape Trading, Discovering Aesop Rock Thru Eminem (247HH Archives),” *247HH*, posted January 18, 2018, YouTube video, 4:58, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zyU5-MFe1r4>.

however, Headshots created a *series* of tapes that both expanded their fan base while also creating a demand. For example, if someone was able to obtain a copy of *Headshots Vol. 4: History* and enjoyed it, they would be more likely to investigate the previous three tapes. This marketing tactic was not only important to the development of the Headshots Crew, but also Rhymesayers Entertainment, specifically Atmosphere. The second chapter argues that Atmosphere replicates this similar ploy in his *Sad Clown Bad Dub* series for similar purposes.

THE BREAK-UP

Following the release of the first Headshots tape and their successful venture into café rap shows, some members began to toy with the idea of creating their own label. As the business leader of the crew, Stress believed it to be a natural transition from the Headshots Crew, but others were hesitant. Eventually Slug, Ant, and Beyond joined Stress in creating a label, founding Rhyme Sayers Entertainment in 1995, releasing their first album on February 27, 1996, two days before the release of *Effort*. The only member armed with enough material to record a full-length album, Beyond was chosen to record and release the label's inaugural album, *Comparison*. Unfortunately, this created tension amongst the crew; some (mainly The Abstract Pack) did not think it was fair that Beyond, the last member to join Headshots, would be the first to release an album.¹⁰² "The Abstract Pack were the leaders, everyone knew that, nobody had a problem with that"

¹⁰² The Abstract Pack culminated in a single album, *Bousta Set It (For the Record)* released in 1998. Little is known about what happened to the group, but members are individually still active in the Minnesota hip-hop scene.

recalls Beyond, but their petty resentment was unfounded.¹⁰³ Beyond was the only member of Headshots with enough material to make a full album; nobody else was close to his abundance of high-quality material. The lack of recorded songs from other members also contributed to why *Headshots Vol. 2: Arrogance* and *Headshots Vol. 3: Compensation* were comprised mainly of freestyles. The growing resentment arising from jealousy was the first step towards the Headshots Crew's disbanding. The crew released five more tapes before officially dissolving. To make matters worse, Atmosphere decided to release their own tape, *Headshots Vol 7: Se7en*, on May 1, 1999, nearly two years after *Headshots Vol. 6: Industrial Warfare*.¹⁰⁴ Bothered that Atmosphere was receiving his own Headshots tape, previous crew members the Abstract Pack, Los Nativos, and Phull Surkle felt as though Atmosphere was hijacking the momentum the Headshots' name had accumulated over the past two to three years.¹⁰⁵ Unfazed by the negative feedback, Slug, Ant, Stress, and Beyond continued looking towards the future, focused on their new record label.

¹⁰³ Daley, Davis, Saad, and Sayers, interview, "Episode 4: Headshots Tape 4 – History."

¹⁰⁴ It is interesting that this was released the same day as Beyond's sophomore album, *Be Sides*. Perhaps this was to downplay and protect the feelings of the upset Headshots members, despite featuring cameos from members Eyedea, Musab, and Mr. Gene Poole.

¹⁰⁵ Atmosphere, liner notes, *Headshots: Se7en*.

CHAPTER 3

RHYMESAYERS ENTERTAINMENT

...at a time when so many are out for a check rather than out to gain respect, the Rhyme Sayers [sic] connect through factory beats and lyrical content. So if one person across this land finds this in their hand, catches a head nod, gives respect, understands and tells his man... The Rhyme Sayers stay underground and underrated because we've been compensated!¹⁰⁶ - Stress

Despite the rich musical history of Minnesota, the Headshots Crew eventually confronted the same issue that forced the Micranots to move to Atlanta: an inadequate music industry. "It's not like we were in New York or Cali where we could go to a label or where there's label reps out and about in the city every night at shows and shit seeing artists play," recalled Stress.¹⁰⁷ Since the crew refused to leave Minnesota, there was no other choice but to start their own record label. After their combined experience with production, performance, and promotion before and with the Headshots Crews, Slug, Musab, Stress, and Ant smoothly transitioned into becoming record label owners, co-founding Rhyme Sayers Entertainment in 1995 between *Headshots Volume 1: The Wbboy Sessions* and *Headshots Vol. 2: Arrogance*.¹⁰⁸ "At some point you just had to say, 'well if I'm not gonna move to where the investors live, I'm just gonna have to figure out how to do this myself,'" recalled Slug.¹⁰⁹ In an interview with *Billboard* in 2015 Stress remembered that "it just started out of being involved in hip-hop in general and just doing it out of the love and then it kind of evolved from there into being more active, actually

¹⁰⁶ Headshots Crew, liner notes, *Headshots Vol. 3: Compensation*, Rhymesayers Entertainment, 1996, <https://www.discogs.com/Headshots-Vol-3-Compensation/release/2868454>.

¹⁰⁷ Rys, "How Rhymesayers Entertainment Survived."

¹⁰⁸ The name of the company was created as a pun off of Stress' last name, Sayers. At some point, although it is not known when, Rhyme Sayers changed from two words to one.

¹⁰⁹ Rys, "How Rhymesayers Entertainment Survived."

doing more things.”¹¹⁰ For them, there was never any intention or grand scheme to start their own label, Slug and the others only saw Rhyme Sayers as “taking baby steps towards something that [they] knew wasn’t destructive,” meaning the transition to becoming record label owners was an organic process and a hobby to keep themselves busy and out of trouble.¹¹¹

THE BUSINESS

Slug and Siddiq had been preparing indirectly for the business side of the music industry for years prior to their label’s inception. As mentioned in the first chapter, Siddiq quit a well-paying data entry job in favor of a job at a Best Buy music store. He worked quickly his way up the corporate ladder to store supervisor, in charge of purchasing his store’s music inventory. Siddiq spoke on this during an interview with *Forbes*:

It was good experience for later on...I gained a lot of experience just in the sense of what happens to records once they’re made and put on the shelf. I sat and watched a lot of recorders collect dust. I learned right away that building a demand is something that’s important. Just the fact that you’ve got a record isn’t going to matter...All these things have been stepping stones of a learning process of what evolved into Rhymesayers.¹¹²

Slug gained similar experience working at a popular record store on Minneapolis’s Southside: The Electric Fetus. Recalling his experience, Slug equated his record store position to an internship within the larger music/recording industry.¹¹³ This fortuitous

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Killian Young, “Once Upon a Time in Minneapolis: 20 Years of Rhymesayers,” *Consequence of Sound*, March 12, 2015, <https://consequenceofsound.net/2015/03/once-upon-a-time-in-minneapolis-20-years-of-rhymesayers/>.

¹¹² Shawn Setaro, “Rhymesayers At 20.”

¹¹³ Ibid. Daley: “At the end of the day, I think most people who start record labels, they do have looks behind curtains They did some time working for Best Buy, or they did some time working for some label in

opportunity to intimately learn the backstage politics involved with labels and distribution was an invaluable experience. Able to “look behind the curtain,” Slug “pay[ed] attention to what worked in what markets,” which provided a substantial advantage over others wanting to start their own label.¹¹⁴ Unlike Stress’s corporate job, Slug’s independently owned record store allowed him to promote and solicit Rhymesayers music, giving the job promotional value.

We were selling straight to the cats that were dishing dope. So I put up a wall between my art and what I was doing in retail. When a cat would find out that I rapped, I would tell him, “You could go listen to my shit on the listening machine over there.” He’d come back like, “Yo, I don’t really fuck with your raps, but I like you as a person.” Working at that store helped me get known. Cats that were coming in to buy rap shit, even if they didn’t fuck with my kind of rap, they all started to recognize who I was, and that I was Sluggo from a group called Atmosphere. There was a face value to it that was priceless. As far as me pushing Rhymesayers music through Electric Fetus, that was also a plus. I’ve got this audience who are right here in the store trying to buy tapes, and I could be like, “You’re buying this Black-Star tape? You should check out my man Beyond.” Or, “You’re buying that? You should check out my guys Los Nativos.” I was able to push Rhymesayers music onto people who I thought were already fucking with that box. And in that regard, I would say working at that store mostly was good for promotional purposes, on a local level.¹¹⁵

For the first few years of Rhymesayers Entertainment, Stress and Ant remained in Minnesota working on growing the business and managing production, respectively, while Slug embarked on tour after tour as half of Atmosphere.¹¹⁶ In an interview with *Forbes*, Slug remembers being “willing to play anywhere, for peanuts,” and as long as he

New York. It seems like everyone was an intern somewhere before they got involved.” (read as possible jealousy over those that actually had internships?)

¹¹⁴ Obviously Slug was only able to see the markets as they were in Minnesota. This was because they had a one-stop that serviced the whole state.

¹¹⁵ Shawn Setaro, “Rhymesayers At 20.”

¹¹⁶ After the early departure of Spawn, discussed later in this chapter, Atmosphere became only Slug and Ant. However, Ant’s crippling anxiety prevented him from performing on tour during Rhymesayers’ early years, forcing Slug to use Mr. Dibbs or DJ Abilities as a temporary place holder. Eventually Ant joined Slug on tour in 2005.

had a couch to sleep on he was prepared to travel and perform.¹¹⁷ Their first opportunity to perform outside of Minnesota came when a promoter from Dallas called asking to book them. After the initial shock wore off they agreed and drove over “900 miles to Texas for a small, 50-person gig” with a van full of merchandise.¹¹⁸

While this method of touring was neither practical nor financially rewarding, around 1999 Slug connected with booking agent Christian Bernhardt, founder of Kork Agency. Bernhardt’s introduction to Atmosphere and Rhymesayers Entertainment came through either of the two independent underground hip-hop labels he had been working with at the time: Oakland based Anticon or New York City based Definitive Jux (Def Jux).¹¹⁹ He was surprised Atmosphere and Rhymesayers did not have an agent at the time and thought it “was crazy because the band already had a really cool following, small but solid.”¹²⁰ One of the first things Bernhardt did with Rhymesayers to expand their following was to connect them with rock promoters. Bernhardt elected to book Atmosphere and other Rhymesayers acts in rock clubs because he saw a lot of parallels between independent hip-hop and the independent punk-rock scenes.¹²¹ As Atmosphere began performing at these rock clubs, they saw other rappers begin to follow suit, inadvertently carving out a new tour circuit for underground hip-hop. Because the

¹¹⁷ Shawn Setaro, “Rhymesayers At 20.”

¹¹⁸ Andres Tardio, “Rhymesayers: An Oral History Of The Indie Rap Empire,” MTV News, December 4, 2015, <http://www.mtv.com/news/2616582/rhymesayers-20th-anniversary-oral-history-atmosphere/>.

¹¹⁹ Anticon released one of Slug’s side projects, Deep Puddle Dynamics. Def Jux includes artists such as Aesop Rock, Del the Funky Homosapien, and Murs.

¹²⁰ Shawn Setaro, “Rhymesayers At 20.”

¹²¹ This dynamic between underground and mainstream hip-hop reproduces that of popular rock and punk rock in the late 1970s. Underground hip-hop and punk rock share a similar ethos comprised of non-conformity and anti-corporate beliefs, united in a resistance of their affluent-associated counterpart. Some of these punk rock bands include the Ramones, The Clash, Sex Pistols, and Misfits.

internet was fairly new and social media was nonexistent, touring played a significant role in the early success of Atmosphere and Rhymesayers Entertainment. Only through touring were they able to connect with fans, garner a new audience, and according to Stress: “start building that allegiance with people that were into what [they] were doing.”¹²²

During the Rhymesayers’ inaugural years, both Slug and Siddiq showed tremendous financial dedication to and investment in their company. In an interview with Mr. Peter Parker on Minnesota’s 96.3 Go Radio, Brother Ali talks about the financial dedication of Slug, remembering a time when Atmosphere opened for Run-DMC for five thousand dollars. After the show, Slug immediately signed the check over to his company then proceeded to write himself a check for rent. Apparently, he had “just sold records out of [his] personal record collection so that [he] could buy some food and new shoes cause [they] don’t pay [them]selves for clothes.”¹²³ For years, they continued to invest earnings in the company. Siddiq corroborated this in an interview with Hip-Hop DX, claiming that “if [they] made \$100 on a show, [they] took that \$100 and threw it into the pot so [they] would have funds to record the next project.”¹²⁴ Remarkably, despite growing success and numerous critically acclaimed albums, Rhymesayers remained an independent label, resisting the allure of major labels.

¹²² Justin Hunte, “Rhymesayers’ CEO Siddiq Explains Branding Without Distribution, Chart Skepticism & Atmosphere’s Success,” HipHopDX, February 20, 2012, <https://hiphopdx.com/interviews/id.1858/title.rhymesayers-ceo-siddiq-explains-branding-without-distribution-chart-skepticism-atmospheres-success>.

¹²³ Ali Newman, “Brother Ali Talks About the Secret of Rhymesayers’ Success,” interview by Mr. Peter Parker, *Go Radio MN 95.3*, posted November 16, 2017, YouTube video, 27:41, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=24omOjYs4Cc&t=1142s>.

¹²⁴ Justin Hunte, “Siddiq Explains Branding Without Distribution.”

MAINTAINING INDEPENDENCE

In *Black Noise*, Tricia Rose argues that hip-hop, like other black-associated genres, “was pioneered by independent entrepreneurs and independent labels.”¹²⁵ Historically speaking, as soon as any popular black musical genres displayed the slightest bit of economic value, they were typically run out of business or absorbed by one of the major record companies. Regarding hip-hop, Rose states that “by 1990, virtually all major record chain store distribution [was] controlled by six major record companies: CBS, Polygram, Warner, BMG, Capitol-EMI, and MCA.”¹²⁶ However, Rose also mentions that when hip-hop was growing in popularity during the 1980s, major labels attempted to dominate the market but were unsuccessful. Major labels were unable to grasp the “cultural logic of hip-hop and rap music, a logic that permeated decisions ranging from signing acts to promotional methods,” and the six major labels were thus unable to produce sales comparable to independent labels such as Tommy Boy, Profile, or Def Jam.¹²⁷ Instead, major labels purchased their independent counterparts, allowing them to run nearly autonomously while also providing access to major retail distribution and production resources, establishing a mutually beneficial relationship.

Just as artists from the 1980s were skeptical of major labels, so was Rhymesayers Entertainment, especially following the success of Atmosphere’s *God Loves Ugly*,

¹²⁵ Rose, *Black Noise*, 6.

¹²⁶ Russell Sanjek and David Sanjek, *American Popular Music Business in the 20th Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

¹²⁷ Rose, *Black Noise*, 7.

released June 11, 2002.¹²⁸ After *God Loves Ugly* garnered interest from major labels, Siddiq and Slug accepted meetings with everyone who was willing. However, Siddiq recalled in an interview with *Forbes* that “nothing felt right at the time. It just didn’t seem like anybody really got what we were doing. Some of them didn’t seem like they had even heard of Atmosphere.”¹²⁹ Going into these meetings, Rhymesayers had more leverage than most independent labels; they had already built a successful career for themselves, so in attending these meetings they only wanted to see if a major label had the possibility to improve on something they already had or contribute something new. Of all the labels they met with, they favored Epitaph Records the most, and felt as though they “had a very similar spirit in the sense of [Rhymesayers’] independent approach.”¹³⁰ However, since Epitaph was a label and not a distributor, Rhymesayers only signed with them for a short-term licensing deal for Atmosphere’s *Seven’s Travels* in 2003 and Eyedea & Abilities’ *E&A* in 2004. Through Epitaph they were able to receive a lot of radio and video airplay for “Trying to Find a Balance” from *Seven’s Travels*, drastically expanding the fan base.

Finally, in 2004 Rhymesayers Entertainment decided to sign their first distribution deal with Navarre Entertainment Media, a distribution and publishing company based in New Hope, Minnesota.¹³¹ What made Navarre appealing was their location; if they experienced any contractual issues, it was much easier to take a fifteen-

¹²⁸ The single “Modern Man’s Hustle” peaked at #18 on the Billboard Hot Rap Tracks chart, and the album was included among Hip-Hop DX’s list of 30 Best Underground Hip-Hop Albums Since 2000, released in 2015.

¹²⁹ Shawn Setaro, “Rhymesayers At 20.”

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Many of the artists that have worked with Navarre Corporation are largely unknown, but also include artists such as Sonny Rollins and 9th Wonder.

minute drive rather than to charter a flight to the East or West Coast.¹³² After a few years, Rhymesayers was forced to locate a new distributor after Navarre shut down their distribution division. In March of 2007, Rhymesayers Entertainment signed a deal with Warner Music Group's (WMG) subsidiary Independent Label Group (ILG), which allowed them to utilize their independent distributor Alternative Distribution Alliance (ADA).¹³³ Commenting on the deal, Siddiq states: "More than our desire to be independent, Rhymesayers first and foremost has always wanted to be in a position to help our artists reach their individual goals and aspirations. ILG understood that and has provided us with an extremely unique opportunity to do this."¹³⁴ What this deal means is that Rhymesayers Entertainment is able to retain their independent status while also utilizing any and all ADA services as needed. The flexibility granted by ADA and ILG to remain independent is the reason for Rhymesayers' success, and why they continue to employ their services over ten years later.

FIFTH ELEMENT and SOUNDSET

With the exception of large companies such as Virgin Records, Rhymesayers Entertainment is the only label to open their own music and retail store. In August of 1999 Rhymesayers opened their own record store, Fifth Element, in uptown Minneapolis off Hennepin Avenue. The store provided not only a home base for the label to operate

¹³² Siddiq had a prior relationship with a Navarre employee, dating back to his time with Best Buy. That sense of trust already built made Navarre more appealing.

¹³³ Other independent labels that work with ADA include Macklemore LLC and Comedy Central Records.

¹³⁴ Brian Zisook, "WGM Independent Label Group Signs Minneapolis-Based Rhymesayers Entertainment," *DJBooth*, March 12, 2007, <https://djbooth.net/features/wmg-independent-label-group-signs>.

out of, but more importantly generated a “stream of income that had nothing to do with [them] pushing [their] art.”¹³⁵ After the store was up and running, Slug was finally able to quit his job at the Electric Fetus, and focus his energy on growing the label. At first it was only Siddiq and Slug working at the store. According to Siddiq, “the store staff was basically me and Sean. I would have artists working in the retail store, and we officed [sic] the label out of the back of the store.”¹³⁶ In-fact, to this day “you’re still likely to see Slug, Ant, Siddiq, and other Rhymesayers artists floating around.”¹³⁷

Opening a store in uptown Minneapolis, Fifth Element provides “fans with all of the music and assorted clothing and other products for all of the groups on the Rhymesayers roster,” but also maintains a strong, intimate connection between themselves and their fans, unparalleled by any record label past or present.¹³⁸ An epicenter for local hip-hop, Fifth Element hosts a variety of events including album release parties, open mics, special promotions, rap battles, production showcases, turntable clinics, “intimate in-store performances, record signings, and meet-and greets with hip-hop groups from across the local and national scene.”¹³⁹ For these events, fans can be found waiting outside the store as early as 6:00AM with a seemingly never ending line wrapped for blocks on end.¹⁴⁰ In 2005 Fifth Element launched their own website that

¹³⁵ Shawn Setaro, “Rhymesayers At 20.” The RSE headquarters were eventually moved to larger offices in downtown Minneapolis.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Schell, “From St. Paul to Minneapolis,” 367.

¹³⁸ City Pages, “Fifth Element,” Venues, May 12, 2016, accessed October 2019, <http://www.citypages.com/location/fifth-element-6664918>.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Record Store Day, “Fifth Element,” Participating Stores, n.d., accessed December 2019, <https://recordstoreday.com/Store/7223>.

over the years has expanded to include music “by local and national hip-hop groups.”¹⁴¹ Over the years, Fifth Element has established themselves as “one of the primary foundations for all your hip-hop needs: CDs, Digital Sales, Vinyl, Art Supplies, Clothing, Specialty Items, and more.”¹⁴² The storefront not only became a hotbed for independent hip-hop fans, but also served as “a driving force behind the annual Soundset Music Festival.”¹⁴³



Image 1: Siddiq outside Fifth Element.¹⁴⁴

In Rhymesayers’ early years, Atmosphere and other label mates frequently performed at raves and warehouse parties. These were the standard performance venues for house and techno music, two pioneering genres of electronic music that rose in popularity in the 1990s, especially in the Midwest.¹⁴⁵ Siddiq recalled in an interview, “we were like, ‘shit, why don’t we have a hip-hop rave?’ we were already doing sets at random raves, so we decided to do an all hip-hop one.”¹⁴⁶ So, on March 1, 1997

¹⁴¹ City Pages, “Fifth Element.”

¹⁴² “About,” Fifth Element Online, accessed November 2019, <https://shop.rhymesayers.com/pages/about>.

¹⁴³ City Pages, “Fifth Element.”

¹⁴⁴ Tardio, “Rhymesayers: An Oral History.”

¹⁴⁵ Large mid-west cities, Chicago and Detroit, each birthed house and techno, respectively.

¹⁴⁶ Reed Fischer, “How Rhymesayers Set up the Soundset Festival,” *City Pages*, May 23, 2012, <http://www.citypages.com/music/how-rhymesayers-set-up-the-soundset-festival-6757365>.

Rhymesayers hosted their own rave-like show in a warehouse off East Lake Street in Minneapolis. Similar to a rave, the Soundset featured dozens of artists that performed all night, from 8:00pm – 8:00am. In an interview with *Star Tribune*, Slug remembers that despite inviting every performer they knew in the Twin Cities area, he was still “afraid that nobody would show up and/or the music wouldn’t be well received.”¹⁴⁷ However, the event turned out to be such a tremendous success, and Rhymesayers decided to expand the concept to a weekly showcase, Soundset Wednesdays at First Avenue, similar to the Microphone Showcase Showdowns held in 1995. According an article on JamBase.com, their opening night drew “a crowd of over 1700 people ... [and] maintain[ed] sellout capacity for its entire run.”¹⁴⁸ Although current documentation makes it difficult to know exactly when the Soundset showcases stopped, Rhymesayers reinvented the rave-style format in 2008, creating an all-day festival of the same name.

Starting on May 25, 2008 and every subsequent Sunday of Memorial Day weekend, Rhymesayers expanded their Soundset format to an all-day festival. Soundset has become a large-scale event that attracts fans from across the country and around the world.¹⁴⁹ A “one-day celebration that represents hip-hop culture in Minnesota,” Soundset Festival features multiple stages and “a diverse lineup of national and local Twin Cities artists” that include “elements of rapping, deejaying, breaking, graffiti, live production,

¹⁴⁷ Chris Riemenschneider, “Soundset: Old Name, New Fest,” *Star Tribune*, May 22, 2008, <https://m.startribune.com/soundset-old-name-new-fest/19185594/>.

¹⁴⁸ JamBase, “Soundset Festival,” Articles, April 13, 2008, <https://www.jambase.com/article/soundset-festival>.

¹⁴⁹ I personally participated in 2013. While living in Michigan, my roommate and I drove to Minneapolis in time to pick up my friend from Colorado at the airport. The festival was unlike anything I have seen before, with a vibe that was surprisingly friendly, projecting a thorough example of the true Minnesota nice narrative.

skateboarding, and car culture.”¹⁵⁰ However, what is most impressive about Soundset is the number of high-profile and quality hip-hop artists, both underground and mainstream, who perform.¹⁵¹

The inaugural Soundset Festival in 2008 was hosted in a parking lot in front of the Metrodome (football stadium of the Minnesota Vikings), and according to Slug, drew approximately twelve thousand fans.¹⁵² To accommodate this growing capacity, Rhymesayers moved the event to Canterbury Park Festival Field the following year. Due to logistical reasons, they moved the festival once again in 2016 to the Minnesota State Fairgrounds which “allowed for bigger attendance (more than 30,000) and much easier transit options.”¹⁵³ The significant increase in popularity has earned Soundset a place among “one of the largest hip-hop fests in the country,” and “the single biggest one-day hip-hop festival in the country.”¹⁵⁴ Rhymesayers took a hiatus during 2020; an official

¹⁵⁰ “Soundset,” Rhymesayers Entertainment, accessed February 2020, <https://rhymesayers.com/soundset>. Soundset 2013 featured graffiti artists EWOK, RIME, ZES, VIZIE, ALOY, Eklips and TRAV.

¹⁵¹ Some of these artists include: Snoop Dogg, Mac Miller, Tech N9ne, Busta Rhymes, Juicy J, Little Brother, The Pharcyde, Immortal Technique, Prince Paul, Method Man, Redman, Del the Funky Homosapien, Souls of Mischief, Big Boi, De La Soul, Lupe Fiasco, Ghostface Killah, Raekwon the Chef, Kendrick Lamar, Macklemore, Wiz Khalifa, Nas, Cypress Hill, Ice Cube, Big Sean, Ludacris, A\$AP Rocky, The Roots, Common, Lizzo, Machine Gun Kelly, Travis Scott, Lauryn Hill, Talib Kweli, Migos, Erykah Badu, Tyler the Creator, Wu-Tang Clan, Ice-T, Hieroglyphics, DJ Jazzy Jeff, Lil Wayne, DMX, Black Star, and DJ Spinderella.

¹⁵² Andrea Swensson, “The Current Rewind: Soundset, Rhymesayers, and the Power of Going for It,” *The Current*, May 22, 2019, <https://www.thecurrent.org/feature/2019/05/21/the-current-rewind-soundset-rhymesayers-transcript>.

¹⁵³ Chris Riemenschneider, “Twin Cities' Largest Music Festival, Soundset, Announces 2017 Lineup with Travis Scott, Lauryn Hill, T.I.,” *Star Tribune*, March 1, 2017, <https://www.startribune.com/soundset-2017-to-feature-travis-scott-lauryn-hill-t-i-gucci-mane/415100204/>.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid. Chris Riemenschneider, “Twin Cities Largest Music Festival, Soundset, Is Called off for This Summer,” *Star Tribune*, January 25, 2020, <https://www.startribune.com/soundset-hip-hop-fest-called-off-in-2020-to-assess-what-it-will-become/567265672/>.

statement released by the label reveals that they will instead focus their attention on the Rhymesayers 25th anniversary celebrations and promotions later this year.¹⁵⁵

NEW BLOOD

Early success with Atmosphere and Beyond showed that Rhymesayers had promise in the hip-hop industry, but it was unrealistic to believe only two artists could financially carry an entire record label. Instead of searching artists they thought had the most talent or monetary value, according to Slug they “only work with artists [they] believe in as people, as opposed to artists [they] think are talented. Talent is secondary to humanity.”¹⁵⁶ Unlike other record labels, Rhymesayers strive to sign artists with a different sound and aesthetic than their current roster; Siddiq was concerned that if they only signed those with a similar style to their own, they would go out of business similar to other talented independent hip-hop labels such as Definitive Jux.¹⁵⁷ In an interview with *The Guardian*, Siddiq remembers Def Jux as an

amazing label, with amazing creators doing amazing work, but I’d say that they all had a similar sound. That came from El-P helming the ship and driving the production. It made it a crew thing, and they had a similar sound. With us, I always wanted to be more like a Def Jam...I wanted the label to have that diversity.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁵ Ibid. Soundset was not canceled due to COVID-19 as the dates might suggest. In fact, it was never canceled at all because it was never planned to begin with. Rhymesayers were fortunate in that their hiatus coincided with the COVID-19 scare of 2020.

¹⁵⁶ *Hip-Hop Below Zero*, 2006.

¹⁵⁷ All of the Rhymesayers/Headshots artists sounded very similar in tone during their first four to five years.

¹⁵⁸ Rob Boffard, “Rhymesayers – The Finest Independent Hip-Hop Label in the World?” *The Guardian*, February 4, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2014/feb/04/rhymesayers-finest-independent-hip-hop-label-world>.

Rhymesayers nurtured a safe space for artists by providing the spatial context to experiment and find their own voice and stylistic approach no matter how similar or distant it was from the ideal sound of hip-hop. In an interview Los Nativos member Felipe states that “Rhymesayers sound comes from the artists, and whatever sound they decide to take it in. There’s no formula to what we do, and that’s the beauty of the label ... do what you do is what we’re told. Do what you do, and do it well.”¹⁵⁹ The most drastic example of this within Rhymesayers Entertainment is without question rapper Michael “Eyedea” Larson (1981 – 2010), known primarily as the emcee/front-man for rap duo Eyedea & Abilities. In the documentary *Hip-Hop Below Zero*, Eyedea gives a powerful statement on his stance on hip-hop music:

I see the more in touch, or out of touch, I get with this kind of plight to be a musician that I just care less and less about what it’s called. To me, yeah, I’m always making hip-hop. I’m a hip-hop person. If I’m rapping over dogs barking, it’s hip-hop. If I’m screaming over dogs dying, it’s good hip-hop. Technically, it’s a music, like I said, started with drum machines and sampling, but are you sampling? They weren’t sampling hip-hop, you know, they were sampling anything. They are doing anything, so that’s what’s kind of neat about it.¹⁶⁰

Eyedea’s most experimental project was an exclusively live and improvisational band, Face Candy, comprised of himself, fellow emcee Kristoff Krane, bassist Casey O’Brien, and drummer J.T. Bates. During 2006 Face Candy embarked on a national tour, performing and recording new, improvised shows every night. At the end of their tour they compiled their best products from each performance for their debut album, *This Is Where We Were*, which included performances in North Dakota, South Dakota, Kansas, Iowa, Michigan, and Wisconsin. Although not conventional hip-hop, Eyedea expands its

¹⁵⁹ *Hip-Hop Below Zero*, 2006.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

boundaries by synthesizing freestyle rap and free jazz focusing entirely on live improvisation. One of the many songs that demonstrate this experimentalism is the song “The Art of Faking Orgasm.” Beginning with O’Brien oscillating between half-steps, after about fifteen seconds Krane enters with the line “man save the kids from the ignorance” as the drums slowly follow his lead. However, Krane is quickly interrupted by Eyedea who builds off of Krane’s lyrics: “we save them from the ignorance / we save them from the indolence / and from the innocence / and from the penetrating benefits.” Eyedea’s verse ends “only then will you be able to eat / will you be able to feel your fucking teeth / when the flavorless meat’s ripped” but is interrupted before he can finish by Krane who continues Eyedea’s subject and rhyme scheme from “will you be able to feel your fucking teeth” with “I can’t feel my feet / I can’t feel my balance / I can’t fill my void / I can’t build this palace / my teeth are so weak / they grind to each other / my peoples are blind / my brothers and mothers,” followed by an extended drum solo before Eyedea and Krane recite another verse each.¹⁶¹ No matter how experimental, their artists “had to find their own voice and put their perspectives and personalities into the music. When that started to happen, people really started to respond to that,” recalled Siddiq.¹⁶² I will now discuss three additions to the Rhymesayers label that exemplify the unique and eclectic group of hip-hop artists and have contributed to their overall success: Brother Ali, MF Doom, and The Uncluded.¹⁶³

¹⁶¹ This extent of improvisation and reliance on live-performance is reminiscent of early hip-hop performances, discussed in the first chapter. The group created only one other album, *Waste Age Teen Land* (2011), released after the sudden death of Eyedea October 26, 2010.

¹⁶² Tardio, “Rhymesayers: An Oral History.”

¹⁶³ Although not a member of the Headshots Crew, Eyedea has been around Rhymesayers since the beginning. He first joined the Twin Cities hip-hop scene as a member of the breakdancing group, The Battle Cats Crew. He was close friends with Sess before his death, and made his Rhymesayers debut on

One of the first and most important additions to the Rhymesayers family was Ali Douglas Newman, otherwise known as Brother Ali. On the surface it might not seem as though a blind Muslim person with albinism would have much of a career in hip-hop, but he has become one of the most successful and prolific members of Rhymesayers Entertainment, second only to Atmosphere. His music reflects the many societal and financial challenges he has faced, yet maintains a positive outlook on the future and takes pride in his religion.¹⁶⁴ Brother Ali was signed to Rhymesayers in late 1999/early 2000 and released his first album *Rites of Passage* on April 1, 2000. After Brother Ali's sophomore album *Shadows on the Sun*, he drew a larger audience, especially to his hit single "Forrest Whitaker," a commentary of his everyday life and issues he faces in society due to his unique complexion/condition while maintaining a positivist attitude: "I got red eyes and one of them's lazy / And they both squint when the sun shines so I look crazy / I'm albino man I know I'm pink and pale / And I'm hairy as hell everywhere but fingernails" and "You might think I'm depressed as can be / But when I look in the mirror I see sexy-ass me / and if that's something that you can't respect then that's peace / my life is better without you anyways." This song, as well as his others, rely heavily on gospel and gospel-like samples that evoke a powerful, dramatic, and passionate delivery by Brother Ali. Over the past two decades Brother Ali has continued his success releasing another five full albums and four EP's. Recently, on February 1 2020, Brother Ali released his seventh official album, *Secrets & Escapes*.

Headshots Vol. 6: Industrial Warfare with the duo Sixth Sense before changing their name to Eyedea & Abilities.

¹⁶⁴ Brother Ali converted to Islam at age fifteen, and credits his conversion to fellow rapper KRS-One, whom he saw give a lecture at a local university when he was thirteen.

The most important addition to Rhymesayers Entertainment was British-American rapper MF Doom (b. 1971). Unlike other acquisitions, MF Doom had already established a cult following, garnered a reputation as one of the most skilled lyricists in the genre, and is considered a living underground hip-hop legend. Prior to Rhymesayers, MF Doom had worked with various independent labels such as Fondle 'Em Records, Big Dada, Sound-Ink, and Insomniac Incorporated to name a few, never remaining with a label for more than one project. In 2004 he signed with Rhymesayers Entertainment for the recording and production of his fifth solo studio album, *Mm..Food*, a conceptual album focused on various foods; some of the track names include “Beef Rapp,” “Hoe Cakes,” “One Beer,” “Gumbo,” “Guinnesses,” “Kon Queso,” and “Kookies,” among others.¹⁶⁵ *Mm..Food* continues MF Doom’s signature sound of incorporating samples from various 1960s, 70s, and 80s cartoons, specifically those of comic book superheroes, on top of thin instrumentals (a single plucked guitar) and heavy drum beats. Upon its release on November 16, 2004, *Mm..Food* immediately received universal acclaim upon its release, peaking at seventeen on Billboard’s Independent Albums chart.¹⁶⁶ Following *Mm..Food*, MF Doom stayed true to his nomad-like mentality and moved onto his next project. Although the time he spent with Rhymesayers was brief, the impact left by MF Doom was vital for the label moving forward. He was able to contribute an artistic juxtaposition, difference, and originality only he could while also strengthening Rhymesayers reputation and credibility in underground hip-hop.

¹⁶⁵ *Mm..Food* is an anagram for M.F. Doom.

¹⁶⁶ Kiah Fields, “Today in Hip Hop History: MF DOOM Releases ‘MM ... FOOD’ 12 Years Ago,” *The Source*, November 16, 2016, <https://thesource.com/2016/11/16/today-in-hip-hop-history-mf-doom-releases-mm-food-12-years-ago/>.

The final artist I would like to discuss is, The Uncluded, a duo featuring rapper Aesop Rock and anti-folk singer/guitarist Kimya Dawson (b. 1972) who together drastically transgress the boundaries of hip-hop music.¹⁶⁷ The unlikely pair first connected in 2007 when Aesop Rock wrote Dawson a fan email. They eventually collaborated on each's respective solo works, Dawson's *Thunder Thighs* (2011) and *Skelethon* (2012).¹⁶⁸ During their collaborations, "both found more worth pursuing within the group dynamic" and decided to work together on an entire project. However, the group has since released only one album, *Hokey Fright* (2013), before having a falling out for an unknown reason few years later.¹⁶⁹ *Hokey Fright* is a strange, yet deep, introspective look into life and specifically mortality. For example, "TV on 10" reflects on Swissair Flight 111, which crashed and killed 229 people on September 2, 1998; "Organs" discusses what to do with your organs after you pass away: "it's important to give away your pieces / in the detail surrounding your death / there will always be a need for the pieces you are made of / you may one day need a few pieces yourself;" and "Earthquake" is about a three-year old whose mother recently passed away:

the earthquake got me out of bed / see the little bird fly 'round his head / as the little boy sits on the ground / and makes the toy cars drive around / it's a loss that I can't comprehend ... cause his mother died the other day / he's only three years old / her body's gone but her soul is here to stay / see the little birdy watch him grow.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁷ The groups name refers to the book *Imaginationaly* by Michael Bernard Loggins.

¹⁶⁸ Dawson had gained notoriety for her work on the soundtrack for *Juno* (2007). In *Skelethon*, Dawson appeared on "Crows 1" and "Racing Stripes." In *Thunder Thighs*, Aesop Rock appeared on "Miami Advice," "Zero or a Zillion," "The Library," "Walk Like Thunder," and "Captain Lou."

¹⁶⁹ "The Uncluded," Rhymesayers Entertainment, accessed March 2020, <https://rhymesayers.com/artists/theuncluded>.

¹⁷⁰ The Uncluded, "Organs" and "Earthquakes," *Hokey Fright*, Rhymesayers Entertainment RSE01612, 2013.

Although “much of the album maintains a serious tone, Dawson and [Aesop] Rock’s oddball humor plays an integral part in humanizing the obstacles that can initially seem too massive to process.”¹⁷¹ The album’s most popular track, “Delicate Cycle,” uses a laundromat and washer setting as a conduit for projecting and expressing societal and economic differences among various individuals. There are also more overtly humorous tracks such as “Superheroes” which is simply them listing off their favorite sandwiches. Regardless of the bizarre subject-matter, what makes *Hokey Fright* so unique is the juxtaposition of Aesop Rock’s hard and gritty rap style against Kimya Dawson’s acoustical guitar and delicate voice. Together they create a one-of-a-kind aesthetic that blends folk-style guitar similar to Bob Dylan with rap-style vocals. For this audible reason, *The Uncluded* transcends hip-hop and folk-music into a genre unique unto themselves. In many ways, signing unique artists with an alternative artistic endeavours “became part of the label’s identity.”¹⁷² However, it was Slug of Atmosphere who was the first to employ this tactic, experimenting with different methods of story-telling, lyrics, rhyme schemes, and clever word-play.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Rys, “How Rhymesayers Entertainment Survived.”

CHAPTER 4

ATMOSPHERE

“I didn’t know what I wanted to be, I just wanted to be a part of it.”¹⁷³ – Slug

Between the fifth and sixth Headshots tapes, when the Headshots Crew had already dissipated, Rhymesayers released their second and Atmosphere’s first album *Overcast!* on August 5, 1997.¹⁷⁴ Their freshman album earned positive reviews and started turning heads from outside Minnesota towards their burgeoning stable hip-hop scene. The album’s lead single “Scapegoat” received significant airplay from college radio stations, nationally expanding Atmosphere’s (and to a lesser extent Rhymesayers’) audience.¹⁷⁵ Despite the successful and lucrative future *Overcast!* foreshadowed, Spawn gradually removed himself from the group and the Rhymesayers family shortly after its release.

In an interview with 24/7HH, Slug spoke about the departure of Spawn, and he claimed that Spawn chose to leave the group citing personal issues that prevented him from being as productive or prolific as possible.¹⁷⁶ Apparently, this did not bother Slug

¹⁷³ Daley, Davis, Saad, and Sayers, interview, “Episode 1: The Beginning.”

¹⁷⁴ When Slug and Spawn initially got together in 1989 they called themselves ARC, an acronym for A Rhythmic Culture, but soon after realized the name was too corny, or “corn-ball,” as Slug describes it, for the serious direction hip-hop was heading. They wanted a title that reflected this growing change, and decided on Urban Atmosphere, a phrase deriving from an early lyrical verse by Spawn. Unaware at the time, the word *urban* had become “played-out” and over-used by various media platforms often as a supplemental word for *inner-city*; additionally, a new band called Urban Brutality was starting to gain traction in the Twin Cities, provoking Slug and Spawn to drop *urban* sometime between their first café rap show at jitters (10/21/1995) and the release of *Headshots Vol. 2: Arrogance* (03/01/1996).

¹⁷⁵ “Scapegoat” is about someone who never takes responsibility for their actions: “it’s sleep, life, and death / it’s speed, coke, and meth / it’s hay fever, pain relievers, oral sex, and smoker’s breath / it stretches for as far as the eye can see / it’s reality, fuck it, it’s everything but me.”

¹⁷⁶ Daley, Sean, “Atmosphere - How We Got Our Name & Spawn Leaving The Group (247HH Archives).” 247HH. Posted February 10, 2018. YouTube video, 4:21. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cKBa1lhHIAQ&t=1s>. Spawn had a difficult time taking care of his ailing mother and dealing with her subsequent death while also enduring a failed marriage and its ensuing

too much, but “Spawn made the decisions to not show up at a couple of shows that were kind of big, and he made decisions to not get together to make music.”¹⁷⁷ As the two grew further apart so did the group, and Spawn slowly exited the Rhymesayers family. However, Spawn refutes Slug, commenting on the same interview that he was never “told about nor made aware of those shows,” firmly asserting that he “would never abandon [his] crew and just not show up.”¹⁷⁸ Slug appears to brush off Spawn’s departure as largely irrelevant, but Spawn paints a very different picture: “I felt like my friends including Slug (Sean) and those in our circle weren’t there for me at the time. In the midst of all that was going on in my life and me feeling the way I did, I left the group.”¹⁷⁹

As unfortunate as it was to lose Spawn’s creative input, Slug was unfazed by his departure; by this time, Slug had become a lyrical juggernaut, participating in side projects like The Dynospectrum and Deep Puddle Dynamics.¹⁸⁰ “Riding the high from taking part in The Dynospectrum,” Slug could not have been more “amped to start the next Atmosphere album with Spawn.”¹⁸¹ However, according to Slug’s *Headshots: Se7en* liner notes, he was “writing and recording five to ten songs a week with Ant,” nurturing their relationship while unintentionally neglecting his relationship with Spawn. With a

divorce. Derek Turner, approximately December 2019/January 2020 (no date, but it was two months ago as of 2/20/2020), comment on: Daley, “Atmosphere - How We Got Our Name.”

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ The Dynospectrum was a side project that featured emcees Slug, Beyond, I Self Devine (formerly Self 1), and Swift (of Phull Surkle) with productions by Ant. Each member of this Minnesota hip-hop super created an alias for themselves: Sep Sev Sev Two, General Woundwart, Pat Juba, Mr. Gene Poole and Solomon Grundy, respectively. The group only released one self-titled album on October 13, 1998. It is possible that The Dynospectrum was inspired by D12, Eminem’s super group in Detroit founded in 1996, whose members also took on an alternate identity for the project.

¹⁸¹ Atmosphere, liner notes, *Headshots: Se7en*.

glimmer of regret and the gift of hindsight, Slug agrees that he “could’ve been more supportive of [Spawn] and his contributions, but at the time [he] was hungry and felt like [Spawn’s] pace was slowing [him] down.” Recording about fifty songs without Spawn’s voice, Slug felt as though it “was [Spawn’s] way of saying he wasn’t down with the direction I was going.”¹⁸² Spawn felt as though it was Slug’s “way of saying that [he] didn’t need him.”¹⁸³ The songs recorded by Slug and Ant during this time (1997-1999) culminated in “a four-track album intended to be some type of twisted manifesto for where [Slug] felt like [he] was at the time.”¹⁸⁴ On May 1, 1999 Atmosphere and Rhymesayers Entertainment decided to release the album as the next Headshots tape, *Headshots: Se7en*, “named for [Slug’s] relationship with [him]self.”¹⁸⁵ Despite the petty jealousy felt by previous Headshots members, Slug “had to grow regardless of who appreciated it.”¹⁸⁶ According to Slug’s liner notes for the 2005 re-release, “this album is probably [his] most important work if only for its role in [his] growth, as well as the growth it enabled for the few rappers it inspired.”¹⁸⁷

Without question, Atmosphere is the most critically and financially lucrative act to emerge from the Rhymesayers family, charting five top-forty albums and two top-ten albums on the Billboard 200 chart, selling out venues across the country, and touring

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Atmosphere’s *Headshots: Se7en* and Beyond’s sophomore album, *Be-Sides*, were released on the same day, May 1, 1999, possibly in an attempt to curb the criticism from past headshots members unhappy with Atmosphere using the Headshots name for himself.

¹⁸⁶ Atmosphere, liner notes, *Headshots: Se7en*.

¹⁸⁷ *Headshots: Se7en* was re-released in 2005, available for the first time on CD and vinyl. Previous versions were only available on cassette tape.

internationally in Canada, Europe, Middle East, Asia, and Australia.¹⁸⁸ Despite their constant touring, the greatest contributor to their success is the amount of high-quality product released over their thirty years together. Since 1997 Atmosphere has released thirteen albums, twelve EPs, five mixtapes, two DVDs, a maxi-single, and various other singles and side-projects. Very few hip-hop artists have been able to maintain success for over four decades, keeping old fans engaged while consistently amassing new and younger followers; unlike most hip-hop careers, Atmosphere has spanned multiple generations.¹⁸⁹ Besides their significant output, two significant catalysts for Atmosphere's long-standing success can be identified: their ability to evolve and explore new avenues for sound and their manipulation of the EP format.

Over the course of Atmosphere's career their artistic development can generally be categorized into four separate phases. Their first musical phase was initiated at their inception in the early 1990s and lasted until 2002 with the release of *God Loves Ugly*. This phase saw the group produce one DVD (*Sad Clown Bad Dub 4*), two mixtapes (*Sad Clown Bad Dub 1* and *3*), two singles (*Sad Clown Bad Dub 5* and *6*), four EPs (*Overcast! EP*, *Ford One*, *Ford Two*, and *The Lucy EP*), and five albums, (*Overcast!*, *Headshots: Se7en*, *Lucy Ford: The Atmosphere EP's*, *God Loves Ugly*, and *Sad Clown Bad Dub 2*) – all sharing a unified grim and hopeless aesthetic of introspection and self-deprecation audible through lyrics and instrumentals.¹⁹⁰ During this phase, Atmosphere was

¹⁸⁸ Set List, accessed April 9, 2020, <https://www.setlist.fm>. Atmosphere toured Canada in 2003, 2004, 2006, 2009, 2011, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2018, and 2020; Europe in 2000, 2001, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2009, 2011 twice, 2014, 2015, 2016, and 2019; the Middle East in 2012, 2015, 2016, and 2019; Asia in 2006; Australia in 2005, 2009, 2012, and 2017.

¹⁸⁹ The only other hip-hop artists to have such long lasting careers that come to mind are De La Soul, The Roots, and Beastie Boys.

¹⁹⁰ *Sad Clown Bad Dub 5* and *6* was not released until 2005, but they were actually recorded in 1998.

influenced by an assortment of different artists. Their drab and dreary instrumentals, featuring atonality, distortion, and obscure percussion timbres, clearly reflect the impact of their mid-1990s New York City colleagues such as Nas (*Illmatic*, 1994), structures all these like that of De La Soul's *Stakes is High* (1996), or Lost Boyz's *Legal Drug Money* (1996), to name a few.¹⁹¹ Slug's smooth rhythmic flow also mirrors late-1980s rappers from New York City in the vein of Rakim, Q-Tip, and Big Daddy Kane; however, Slug also blends his rhythmic flow with a more melodic flow characteristic of West-Coast rappers such as Snoop Dogg, Del the Funky Homosapien, or Tone-Loc. As DJ Abilities states in *Hip-Hop Below Zero*, "when you live in cold climates it's more on the grind ... you have to worry about being warm more, it's more tunnel vision."¹⁹²

One of the most apt examples of Atmosphere's sound during this time is "Aspiring Sociopath" from *Lucy Ford: The Atmosphere EPs* in which Ant cleverly extracts a sample from the third (Adagio) movement of Béla Bartók's *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta* (1937). From Bartók (1881 – 1945), Ant utilizes two samples: a melodic line from the violins and a rhythmic line from a hard-malleted xylophone. As can be seen in Image 2, the violins perform a jarringly high-pitched melody filled with accidentals that elicit an ominous and unsettling feeling reminiscent of *The Exorcist*

¹⁹¹ Although Atmosphere clearly shows an influence from artists on the East and West Coast, I would be remised if I failed to mention the close parallels between their production during this phase of their career with that of fellow upper mid-west artist and Detroit, Michigan native, Eminem. (His lyrics are also very dark and self-deprecating, but unlike Atmosphere, Eminem is extremely more violent and misogynistic). Before Dr. Dre took over production and signed Eminem to his label, Aftermath Entertainment, Eminem's *Infinite* (1996) and *Slim Shady EP* (1997) more closely resemble the sound of the Headshots Crew and early Atmosphere than any other artist in the country. If Eminem had not left for the West Coast, he would have made a larger contribution to the Upper Mid-West sound, which later included artists such as One Be Lo and Binary Star.

¹⁹² *Hip-Hop Below Zero*, 2006.

(December 1973) theme, *Tubular Bells* (May 1973) by Mike Oldfield (born May 15, 1953), apropos to Slug's lyrics about an aspiring sociopath.¹⁹³

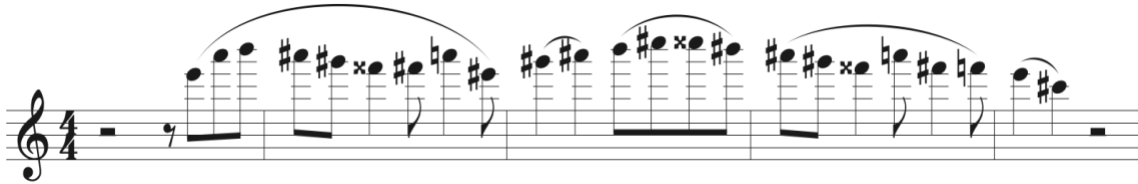


Image 2: Béla Bartók, *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta*, Movement III – Adagio, m. 23–27.

Slowly, Slug walks us through the day in the life of a man who superficially appears to live a normal yet boring life:

up and out the door by nine o'clock / the sun is shining up and down the block / There's children in the corner waiting for a bus / that will take them to school and exploit their trust / he starts the car, sparks with one crank / it's those good old fashioned American mechanics / and even though he'd rather own a new import / it's dependable and more important it's all he can afford.¹⁹⁴

As the protagonist nears the end of his day, Slug adds: "he's a loner dottie, he's a rebel / he's gonna drive the escort to the middle of that meadow."¹⁹⁵ Seemingly out of nowhere this man's life becomes significantly less boring, but Slug pivots immediately after the vaguely implied murder to the man contemplating what he should do for the rest of the evening: "maybe he should just go get a picture at the CC / and find a stool at the bar where he can stare at the TV / either way tomorrow will be just like today," reflecting the

¹⁹³ Mike Oldfield, *Tubular Bells*, Virgin V2001, 1973. William Friedkin, dir. *The Exorcist*, 1973; Vancouver, Canada: Hoya Productions and Warner Bros. Pictures, 2003, DVD.

¹⁹⁴ Atmosphere, "Aspiring Sociopath," *Lucy Ford: The Atmosphere EP's*, Rhymesayers Entertainment RS-2200-2, 2001.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid. This lyric also alludes to the 1985 film *Pee-wee's Big Adventure*.

emotional detachment characteristic of a sociopath.¹⁹⁶ The lyrics combined with the Bartók sample create a disturbing amalgam of ominous fear.

Discographically speaking, the next phase of Atmosphere spanned from the release of *Seven's Travels* (2003) through *Leak at Will* (2009) and includes one DVD (*Sad Clown Bad Dub 13*), one double LP (*Sad Clown Bad Dub 7 / Random Vol. 3*), four albums (*Seven's Travels*, *You Can't Imagine How Much Fun We're Having*, *Strictly Leakage*, and *When Life Gives You Lemons, You Paint That Shit Gold*), and six EPs (*Happy Clown Bad Dub 8*, *Sad Clown Bad Summer*, *Sad Clown Bad Fall*, *Sad Clown Bad Winter*, *Sad Clown Bad Spring*, and *Leak at Will*). Compared to preceding albums, this phase has a more up-beat and fun aesthetic which seems to have inspired more freedom and more artistic expression.

The first thing notable about Atmosphere's second phase is the significant increase in sound quality. Access to Rhymesayers Entertainment's production equipment is audible in the first album of this phase, *Seven's Travels*, most likely due in large part to the success of *God Loves Ugly*. For example, the instrumentals for "Cats Van Bags" is a mosh of distorted sound, reminiscent of Public Enemy, that necessitates a clear-cut projection to accomplish the appearance of unpredictability. As one can hear from *Overcast!*, songs such as "Multiples (Reprise)," "Clay," or "1597" the samples are less distinctive and blend together assisted by the constant crackling of an old vinyl record, again reminiscent of Public Enemy, specifically the technique "leakage" used by The Bomb Squad¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ For these reasons Rhymesayers Entertainment decided to re-release both *Headshots: Se7en* in 2005 and *God Loves Ugly* (which included a copy of *Sad Clown Bad Dub 4*) in 2009. Leakage is a sound

The second phase also saw Slug's significant growth as an artist, becoming one of the most profound storytellers since Slick Rick.¹⁹⁸ One of their most notable and passionate, yet heart-breaking stories from this time is "That Night" from *You Can't Imagine How Much Fun We're Having*. The song is based on true events following an Atmosphere concert in Albuquerque, New Mexico on July 16, 2003, during which sixteen-year-old Marissa Marguerite Mathy-Zvaifle was raped and killed. The song is a self-reflection of regret ("wish I could protect the kids / I guess safety is just hit or miss"), anger (and when I think about her mother / I become another number that wants you to suffer"), and sadness ("That night, the sun went dark / now watch everyone on the tour bus fall apart / that night, lord have mercy / the music died that night in Albuquerque").¹⁹⁹ To emphasize the serious tone, the instrumentals are very thin, consisting of only drums underneath the lyrics to keep the beat and a soothing choir to separate the verses. Atmosphere's ability to paint such a vivid picture, as dark and grim as it may be, allowed them to gravitate towards conceptualized albums.²⁰⁰ Instead of painting individual pictures, they painted and bound entire picture books.

The best-known concept albums by Atmosphere are called *The Seasons* or *Sad Clown Bad Dub Year*, is comprised of four EPs, *Sad Clown Bad Summer*, *Sad Clown Bad*

manipulation technique utilized by The Bomb Squad which involves bringing the bass drum sound to the forefront and commonly associated with the TR-808 drum machine. According to Tricia Rose, "Leakage is a managed part of a process of achieving desired sounds, rather than a problem of losing control of fixed pitches." Rose, 76.

¹⁹⁸ In hip-hop Slick Rick is regarded as one of, if not the, greatest story tellers of all time. His two most famous song stories are "La Di Da Di" and "Children's Story." MC Ricky D and Doug E. Fresh, "La Di Da Di," 1985. Slick Rick, "Children's Story," *The Great Adventures of Slick Rick*, Def Jam CK 40513, 1988.

¹⁹⁹ Atmosphere, "Get Fly," *You Can't Imagine How Much Fun We're Having*, Rhymesayers Entertainment RSE0069-2, 2005.

²⁰⁰ Slug briefly mentions his view on concept albums in *Headshots: Se7en* liner notes: "I feel like everyone's albums are concept albums, it's just too bad that most of ya'll are working with stupid concepts." Atmosphere, liner notes, *Headshots: Se7en*.

Fall, Sad Clown Bad Winter, and Sad Clown Bad Spring, numbers nine through twelve of the *Sad Clown Bad Dub* series. Reminiscent of Antonio Vivaldi's concept in his *Seasons*, Atmosphere's conceptual/programmatic approach ventures to capture the aural aesthetic of each season in five songs on four separate EPs. For example, *Sad Clown Bad Summer* is happy and upbeat with light piano samples and stories of teenage summer love and harmless delinquent activities, while *Sad Clown Bad Winter* focuses instead on stories of alcoholism and pointillistic samples, the latter as though they are moving with a rigidity attempting stay warm. After *Sad Clown Bad Year*, Atmosphere applied this conceptual approach towards his next LP, *When Life Gives You Lemons, You Paint That Shit Gold*, which acts as a metaphorical bridge from phase two to phase three due in large part to the altered orchestration.

Beginning around late 2006 and early 2007 Atmosphere began touring and performing with a live band featuring longtime Rhymesayers collaborators Nate Collis (guitar) and Erik Anderson (keyboard).²⁰¹ When asked about this shift around the release of *Lemons*, Slug answered that it was because he sought a new challenge for himself and craved the performance nerves from his early years.²⁰² Atmosphere not only incorporated Collis and Anderson in live performances, but also included them as the primary instrumentalists for each product from phase that featured two albums (*Lemons* and *The Family Sign*) and one double EP (*To All My Friends, Blood Makes the Blade Holy: The*

²⁰¹ In "You Played Yourself" from *Strictly Leakage*, Slug talks about his initial experience performing with a live band ("New York, at the Bowery getting down / with Grayskul, P.O.S. and Fillmore Brown / my first time touring with a live band / tryna hide all the fear behind the mic stand") and the subsequent criticism ("talking about, you ain't The Roots, you ain't The Roots, why you got a band man?").

²⁰² Sean Daley and Anthony Davis, "Atmosphere's Paint it Gold- Episode 1," Rhymesayers Entertainment, posted February 13, 2008. YouTube video, 10:31, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V35BNwfeDos>. Lyrics from "You Played Yourself" from *Strictly Leakage*.

Atmosphere EPs), Ant's role as producer in both recording and performance was thus downplayed.

Not only did the instrumentals change during Atmosphere's phase three, the lyrical content saw a significant shift into what they have termed "Dad Rap." *The Family Sign*, especially demonstrates Slug's change in narrative to a more family-oriented reflection of the past ("we used to sit on the park bench and hold hands / staying out past dark to feel the romance") that simultaneously acknowledges the present ("she's up in my head but never oversteps / she let me know when it's time for us to go to bed / she's my lady case closed / she want a baby so I gave her one of those") while recognizing a promising future ("believe it don't get sweeter / she gonna make me sweat like a fever / she wanna eat so we went to Domingis / she want a ring, got me measuring her fingers").²⁰³

The final phase of Atmosphere's career began in 2014 and has continued to the present. To date, it has served as a sort of renaissance and accumulation of their song-making skills garnered over the past three decades. Atmosphere now reverts to a more standard hip-hop instrumental aesthetic in regards to their instrumentals by increasing Ant's presence on production and removing Collis and Anderson as prominently featured artists.²⁰⁴ Since this phase is currently ongoing, it is subject to change in future analysis, but as of 2020, the latest phase includes one EP (*Frida Kahlo vs Ezra Pound*), one maxi-single (*Lake Nokomis*), and four albums (*Southsiders*, *Fishing Blues*, *Mi Vida Local*, and

²⁰³ Atmosphere, "The Number None," *To All My Friends, Blood Makes the Blade Holy: The Atmosphere EPs*, Rhymesayers Entertainment RSE0123-2, 2010. Atmosphere "She's Enough," *The Family Sign*, Rhymesayers Entertainment RSE0130-2, 2011.

²⁰⁴ For example, "When The Lights Go Out" from *Fishing Blues* revisits the scary dark aesthetic reminiscent of the first phase of Atmosphere's career.

Whenever). Slug's subject matter is an amalgam of all his song writing methods including braggadocio ("Windows" from *Frida Kahlo vs Ezra Pound*), conceptual (*Lake Nokomis Maxi-Single*), story-telling ("Postal Lady" from *Whenever*), and sensitive subject matter ("Flicker" from *Southsiders*). Unlike any other phase however, Atmosphere features a plethora of guest vocalists and fellow Rhymesayers artists, specifically on their last four releases: *Fishing Blues*, *Frida Kahlo vs Ezra Pound*, *Mi Vida Local*, and *Whenever*.²⁰⁵ This shift is significant because Atmosphere rarely features any voice other than Slug; when asked why this was, Slug answered that it was because he is "a control freak. [His] vision rarely involves someone else's voice."²⁰⁶ This not to say that he does not enjoy working and collaborating with other artists. Typically, Slug reserves his collaborations for side projects such as Felt, The Dynospectrum, or Deep Puddle Dynamics.

SAD CLOWN BAD DUB

Following the success of the six Headshots tapes and the demise of the crew, Atmosphere began to release their own series, *Sad Clown Bad Dubs*. Over the course of ten years Atmosphere released thirteen editions in this collection including tapes, CDs, and DVDs, the first of which was released in 1999, only two years removed from the final Headshots tape.²⁰⁷ Like the Headshots tapes, Sad Clown Bad Dubs were not meant to be taken seriously; this concept is reiterated by Slug in "Hungry Fuck" from *Sad*

²⁰⁵ These artists include deM atlaS, Prof, Blueprint, Aesop Rock, Grieves, Eric Mayson, Musab, Muja Messiah, Gifted Gab, Murs, Haphduzn, Nikki Jean, Cashinova, The Lioness, DOOM, Kool Keith, The Grouch, Kim Manning, and The Dynospectrum.

²⁰⁶ Sean Daley and Anthony Davis, "Atmosphere's Paint it Gold- Episode 4," Rhymesayers Entertainment, posted March 17, 2008, YouTube video, 12:22, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JgZLyVLbU3E&t=28s>.

²⁰⁷ The exact date is unknown.

Clown Bad Dub II: “the words bad dub are right in the title / so fuck your criticism of the sound quality / this is not an album / the sole intention is to eat better while on the road.”

The first and third *Sad Clown Bad Dub* more closely reflect the same concept as the *Headshots* tapes than any of the other dubs, featuring unrefined 4-track recordings/productions, freestyles, and portions of live shows; the fifth and sixth edition contain two previously unreleased singles each. *Sad Clown Bad Dub II*, however, more closely resembles a full-length album more than any other edition in the series with original 4-track recordings, but Slug again emphasizes in the liner notes that

this is not an album. It is a collection of four track pieces that Ant and I have recorded over the last year. We sat down and compiled on Thursday, September 21st – the first day of fall. We should’ve named it “Food and Fuel” but instead we decided to call it *Sad Clown Bad Dub II*, so you can save any and all criticism about the sound quality. Nonetheless, I hope you enjoy it.²⁰⁸

Editions four and thirteen are the only DVDs in the *Sad Clown Bad Dub* Series.

The fourth features the *God Loves Ugly* release parties as told through a cameraman following Atmosphere and Rhymesayers Entertainment for a few months on tour; it was originally released single DVD available at live shows and Fifth Element, but was later included in the *God Loves Ugly* re-release in 2009. *Sad Clown Bad Dub 13*, paired exclusively on the deluxe version of *When Life Gives You Lemons, You Paint That Shit Gold* in 2008, features a live performance at from Minneapolis at the First Avenue nightclub, concluding their *Everybody Loves a Clown* tour in 2007.

Beginning with *Sad Clown Bad Dub 7*, there is an audibly unmistakable increase in sound and production quality and this was a characteristic of Atmosphere’s second

²⁰⁸ Atmosphere, liner notes, *Sad Clown Bad Dub II*, Rhymesayers Entertainment, 204 of 500, 2000, <https://www.discogs.com/Atmosphere-Sad-Clown-Bad-Dub-II/release/2055729>.

artistic phase previously discussed. Unlike any of the other editions, the seventh is a dual compilation album shared with the third volume in labelmate Mr. Dibbs Random series; the official title of the album is *Sad Clown Bad Dub 7 / Random Vol. 3*. For the eighth *Sad Clown Bad Dub*, Atmosphere flips the script, so to speak, naming it *Happy Clown Bad Dub 8*, featuring new up-beat material as well as singles from then upcoming album *You Can't Imagine How Much Fun We're Having*. *Sad Clown Bad Dub 9-12*, discussed earlier in this chapter, substantially deviates from previous editions as Slug attempts to create a conceptual masterpiece of each of the four seasons, retroactively termed *Sad Clown Bad Year*. Different from all other *Sad Clown Bad Dubs*, *The Seasons* are EPs, a format for Atmosphere they have become very familiar with throughout their career and has significantly contributed to their success.

THE ATMOSPHERE EPs

Shorter in audio duration than their Long-Play (LP) counterpart, Extended-Plays (EPs) at their inception were intended for the purpose of singles, LP samples, single compilations, and mini-LPs (also known as jukebox EPs) prior to the antiquity of vinyl records.²⁰⁹ During the late 1970s the EP format was briefly revitalized by the punk rock scene, “and was popular with labels that had new bands who perhaps might not have enough material for an album ... by the late 1990s, however, the concept of the EP had been superseded by the ‘maxi-CD single’ format.”²¹⁰ Another unwitting correlation to the

²⁰⁹ Richard Osborne, *Vinyl: A History of the Analogue Record* (London: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2016).

²¹⁰ David Buckley, “EP,” *Grove Music Online*, 2001, <https://doi-org.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.47209>.

punk scene, Atmosphere, over the course of their career, rejuvenated, revitalized, and repurposed the EP format in various ways to their advantage. Not only have they conceptualized the EP, as seen in the *Sad Clown Bad Year* collection, but also experimented with the EP as an album sampler, compilation LP, singles compilation, double EP, and a truly “extended play” EP.

Atmosphere’s initial experience with the EP format coincides with their first official release; prior to *Overcast!*, Atmosphere released an EP of the same name. Evocative of the album sampler EP popular in Europe during the 1950s, ‘60s, and ‘70s the *Overcast! EP* incorporates eight tracks total, six of which are featured on the LP.²¹¹ By releasing the EP before the ensuing LP, Atmosphere was able to spark an initial interest coinciding with a broadening fan base. Following the release of the full-length album, the *Overcast! EP* was subsequently removed from the Rhymesayers Entertainment catalogue having accomplished its mission. Eminem used a similar tactic in regards for his *Slim Shady EP* (1997) and *The Slim Shady LP* (1999). Before signing with Aftermath Entertainment, Eminem released *Slim Shady EP* with Detroit-based record label Web Entertainment, the same production company he worked with for his debut album, *Infinite* (1996). Despite positive reviews, the EP was a financial failure having sold approximately just 250 copies, but succeeded in capturing the attention of Dr. Dre; Eminem was signed to Aftermath in 1998. With his new record label, Eminem re-

²¹¹ The other two tracks include an edit-for-radio version of “Scapegoat” and “God’s Bathroom Floor (Stress’ 4-track Fiasco),” a popular conclusion to Atmosphere’s live performances. Gradually recovering from the devastations of World War II, European consumers found the inexpensive nature of the EP to be very attractive. Catering to a public who on average could not afford an LP, European record companies provided a cheaper alternative by dividing full-length albums into two or three distinct EPs. Sold separately or in bundles, these album samplers were extremely popular throughout Europe until vinyl technology was surpassed.

released his work as an LP with eleven additional songs; unlike the *Overcast! EP*, where all but one song transferred to the LP, *The Slim Shady LP* only contains three of the six songs from its respective EP.²¹² Although Eminem's situation is unique situation in that each release was through a different label, the lack of congruity between the LP and EP, I feel, does not allow for the album to be considered an album sampler as was the *Overcast! EP*.

From 2000 to 2001 Atmosphere released three EPs: *Ford One*, *Ford Two*, and *The Lucy EP* available exclusively at live performances, but later in 2001 re-released all of them again as compilation album, *Lucy Ford: The Atmosphere EPs*, including four additional, new tracks. In this way Atmosphere made the EPs more accessible to a broader audience. Atmosphere mirrored this tactic fifteen years later for the release of *Frida Kahlo vs Ezra Pound*, a compilation of singles recorded during their sessions for *Fishing Blues*, released four months prior in August of 2016. In an interview with 95.3 Minnesota Go Radio, Slug explains that the reason for excluding the seven tracks of *Frida Kahlo vs Ezra Pound* from *Fishing Blues* was because he felt as though those particular songs were outliers and did not fit with the overall aesthetic of *Fishing Blues* there were striving for.²¹³

Within Atmosphere's extensive catalogue of albums includes one double EP, *To All My Friends, Blood Makes the Blade Holy: The Atmosphere EPs*, released in 2010.

Unlike other double EPs, such as the United Kingdom's release of The Beatles *Magical*

²¹² The three songs that made the LP were "If I Had," "Just Don't Give a Fuck," and "'97 Bonnie & Clyde" (retitled "Just the Two of Us"). Like the *Overcast! EP*, *Slim Shady EP* contained edit-for-radio versions of "If I Had" and "Just Don't Give a #?@!".

²¹³ Sean Daley, "Slug of Atmosphere Talks New Album, Voting, Soundset and More," interview by Mr. Peter Parker, *Go Radio MN 95.3*, posted June 22, 2016, YouTube video, 24:21, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UAzhV6TcqWk&t=10s>.

Mystery Tour, this Atmosphere double EP is essentially two separate EPs: *To All My Friends EP* and *Blood Makes the Blade Holy EP*.²¹⁴ During an interview with Microphone Mathematics, Slug explained that the album originated as a single 10” vinyl EP intended to accompany a forthcoming photo book, *7 Years With Atmosphere & Rhymesayers* by friend Dan Monick. Over the better part of a decade, Monick followed Atmosphere and other Rhymesayers artists on tour throughout the world, a tribute to the label of friends made along the way, hence the name of the EP, *To All My Friends*. However, Slug became concerned with the accessibility of the EP available only as a vinyl, so he decided to record another EP, *Blood Makes the Blade Holy*, an ode to his enemies and those no longer friends with, a direct opposition to the *To All My Friends EP*, and released them together as a double EP available on CD. In the end, *7 Years With Atmosphere & Rhymesayers* included a compilation CD “featuring songs from the seven year period the photos were taken” in addition limited number of deluxe versions that also included the 10” vinyl of the *To All My Friends EP*.²¹⁵

The final EP from Atmosphere’s discography under consideration here is *Leak at Will*, an EP released online as a free download on July 4th of 2009. Unlike any other of Atmosphere’s EPs, this seems to be a true extended play; here *Leak at Will* is a direct extension/continuation of their album *Strictly Leakage*, released on Christmas of 2007, also made available online as a free download. Akin to a cliff-hanger at the end of a gripping television drama, *Leak at Will* picks up directly where *Strictly Leakage* leaves

²¹⁴ The release of *The Magical Mystery Tour* in the U.K. was a double EP, but in the United States it was an LP with five additional tracks.

²¹⁵ The compilation contains the track “The Best Day,” which is found on the *Blood Makes the Blade Holy EP*.

off. The final track of *Strictly Leakage*, “Road to Riches,” ends with an unknown sample repeating the word “c’mon” as the song fades to silence; the opening track for *Leak at Will* begins exactly where “Road to Riches” leaves off, with the repetition of the word “c’mon” leading into the first track aptly titled “C’mon.” By ending *Strictly Leakage* and beginning *Leak at Will* in the way Atmosphere has done exemplifies a true, seamless continuation from one project to the next creating one overall cohesive product and work of art, a concept possibly influenced by Brother Ali.

Pre-dating Atmosphere’s *Strictly Leakage* and *Leak at Will*, Brother Ali composed two truly extended EPs. One year after *Shadows on the Sun*, Brother Ali released a sequel EP, *Champion EP*, in 2004, a title is derivative of *Shadows*’ second track. *The Undisputed Truth* (2007), also received a sequel EP, *The Truth Is Here*, two years later in March of 2009.²¹⁶ Unlike *Leak at Will*, however, I consider Brother Ali’s EPs to be “sequels.” Although they each continue the same concept as their correlated album, the transitions between Brother Ali’s LPs and EPs are not as seamless as Atmosphere’s, which could have been done by Slug or Ant to set themselves apart.

²¹⁶ *The Truth Is Here* received its title from a line in *The Undisputed Truth*’s third track, “Truth Is.”

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Over the past twenty-five years, Atmosphere and Rhymesayers Entertainment have successfully created a blueprint for running a successful independent underground label that thrives without the assistance of a major label. The second chapter saw the creating of The Headshots Crew, a gathering of like-minded people who share a similar passion for hip-hop music. Despite not having much of a local scene, the Headshots Crew took it upon themselves to develop their own scene by creating performance spaces and opportunities; they then were able to monetize this aspect and market themselves through their series of mixtapes. The following they accumulated during this time facilitated the transition from amateurs to label owners.

Instead of moving towards larger hip-hop hubs such as Los Angeles and New York City, Siddiq, Ant, Slug, and Beyond decided they would remain in Minnesota while continuing their hip-hop careers, founding their own record label in 1995. Most independent hip-hop labels, such as Definitive Jux, did not have a long life-span and were either bought out or dissolved by larger corporations. Rhymesayers noticed that other independent labels continued to struggle to remain in business after a few years of service, despite having a plethora of talent. To combat this prevailing issue, Rhymesayers signed artists with unique sounds and creative signatures so as to not be characterized by one specific artist or aesthetic. In order for these artists to be successful they were given the upmost freedom to explore their artistic integrity and discover their own voice free from restrictions or label expectations. The first artist from the Rhymesayers roster to exercise this flexibility was Slug of Atmosphere.

Without question, Atmosphere is the most successful act from Rhymesayers Entertainment, their achievements are a direct result of the artistic independence allowed at their label. Unlike most hip-hop artists, Atmosphere has been able to sustain a prosperous career featuring a four phase career arc that has spanned three decades. An impressive feat for any musician, their achievements are largely credited to their freedom to change, grow, and evolve as artists. Their success reflects several excellent choices: Atmosphere not only distributed their own set of tapes, the *Sad Clown Bad Dub* series, similar to the Headshots mixtapes, but also reinvented and repurposed the EP format to purport their artistic desires.

Notably absent from this thesis is the discussion of race and racial politics as it relates to a primarily black musical genre in an overwhelmingly white geography.²¹⁷ This was intentionally done out of respect for the opinions of both Ant and Slug, who are each multi-racial, sharing white, black, and native American ancestry. Rarely are they asked to speak on race, however, during a promotional interview for *When Life Gives You Lemons, You Paint That Shit Gold*, they were asked how their ethnicities have affected their musical journey. Although time did not allow them to give as much detail as they would have preferred, Slug answered that

it's affected way more than just the musical journey, it's affected everything. Music is just another part of the life that has been affected by that ... this is where we live, this is a place where people draw a lot of dotted lines and separate each other from each other ... one of the things I learned early on was that sports and hip-hop was a way to break down some of those dotted lines in the

²¹⁷ During the 2000 census of Minnesota, those who identified as white made up 89.45% of the population. Census Viewer, "Population of Minnesota: Census 2010 and 2000 Interactive Map, Demographic, Statistics, Quick Facts," Minnesota, accessed April 13, 2020, <http://censusviewer.com/state/MN>.

neighborhoods. They brought people together and people were coming and bonding over this music ... what's crazy is over time, as we got older and we became Atmosphere, people used our racial make-up to actually separate us and start those dotted lines up again ... this hip-hop stuff was supposed to bring us together, that way the thugs could actually get along with the lesbians who actually got along with the vegetarians and everybody can just be happy together with this music.²¹⁸

For many reasons I tend to agree with Slug, especially in the political atmosphere in which this thesis is being written, but as a scholar I realize that it is my responsibility to report about race in a scientific and academic manner. However, the racial climate of underground hip-hop is far too intricate to be discussed here and will be saved for a future project that focus exclusively on racial dynamics of underground hip-hop.

Creating this base framework of not only Minnesota hip-hop, but also underground hip-hop has significant value moving forward in my academic endeavors. One of the largest difficulties in this project was being able to draw comparisons to Atmosphere's underground contemporaries, who have also been neglected by academia. Moving forward I plan to build on the foundation created here to further expand the multiple branches of underground hip-hop, connecting the Minnesota scene to that of Los Angeles, New York, the Bay Area, and North Carolina, to name a few. In doing so, it is my desire that others, including myself, will use this foundational biographical and historical structure to accurately portray not only underground hip-hop artists, but those in the mainstream as well.

²¹⁸ Sean Daley and Anthony Davis, "Atmosphere's Paint it Gold - Episode 6," *Rhymesayers Entertainment*, posted March 30, 2008, YouTube video, 13:47, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ON0Ql-8JyNQ&t=1s>.

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APPENDIX A

TIMELINE

07/11/1993 – Urban Atmosphere opens for Micranots at 3rd Floor

1994 – Micranots leave Minnesota to Atlanta

12/31/1994 - Basement Freestyle: Knowledge MC (The Abstract Pack) from Stress' Basement

01/15/1995 – The World Famous Capri Theater (Abstract Pack, Urban Atmosphere, Phull Surkle, and others) Winners represent MN at Microphone Check Showcase Showdown in NYC

03/12/1995 – Microphone Check Showcase Showdown II: Black Moon (a lot of people were there, Ant, Beyond, Slug, Abstract Pack

03/13/1995 – Urban Atmosphere at a show, slug says “1995 year of Headshots”

04/02/1995 – Universal Parliament of Hip-Hop: featuring Microphone Check Showcase Finalists: The Abstract Pack, Pull Surkle, and Black Hole (if we win, they win video)

08/01/1995 – Headshots Vol. 1: Wbboy Session

10/21/1995 – Headshots perform first cafe show at Jitters (still Urban Atmosphere)

02/27/1996 – Beyond: Comparison (first album released by Rhymesayers)

03/01/1996 – Headshots Vol. 2: Arrogance

03/09/1996 – Headshots perform cafe show at Mighty Fine Café

03/18/1996 – The Fugees feat. The Roots and Goodie Mob concert at First Avenue and 7th St. Entry

04/01/1996 – Headshots Vol. 3: Compensation

05/21/1996 – Headshots perform cafe show at Mighty Fine Cafe

10/10/1996 – Sess of the Abstract Pack dies in car accident

12/01/1996 – Headshots Vol. 4: History

02/16/1997 – Rhyme Sayers Showcase Part Two at 7th St. Entry (featuring Casino Royal, Dynospectrum, Pull Surkle, Beyond, Atmosphere)

05/18/1997 – 7th St. Entry Show: Atmosphere, Beyond, Phull Surkle, Extreme, Native Ones, Illusions

06/01/1997 – Headshots Vol 5: Effort

1997 – Atmosphere: Overcast! EP

08/05/1997 – Atmosphere: Overcast!

09/01/1997 – Headshots Vol 6: Industrial Warfare

10/13/1998 – The Dynospectrum

1999 – Deep Puddle Dynamics: The Taste of Rain ... Why Kneel
- Atmosphere: Sad Clown Bad Dub

05/01/1999 – Headshots Vol 7: Se7en; Beyond: Be-Sides

04/01/2000 – Brother Ali: Rites of Passage

09/01/2000 – Atmosphere: Ford One; Ford Two

09/21/2000 – Atmosphere: Sad Clown Bad Dub II

10/03/2000 – Musab: Actin' Rich

10/17/2000 – Eyedea and Abilities: Pushing Buttons

02/01/2001 – Atmosphere: Lucy Ford – The Atmosphere EP's

10/01/2001 – Eyedea and Abilities: First Born (Instrumentals)

10/23/2001 – Eyedea and Abilities: First Born

12/06/2001 – Atmosphere: Sad Clown Bad Dub 3 (recorded)

06/11/2002 – Atmosphere: God Loves Ugly

11/11/2002 – Felt: A Tribute to Christina Ricci

2003 – Sad Clown Bad Dub 4 (God Loves Ugly release parties)

05/02/2003 – Brother Ali: Shadows on the Sun

09/23/2003 – Atmosphere: Seven's Travels

05/11/2004 – Brother Ali: Champion EP

11/16/2004 – MF Doom: Mm...Food

2004 – Atmosphere / Mr. Dibbs: Sad Clown Bad Dub 7 / Random Vol. 3

01/04/2005 – Atmosphere: Headshots: Se7en

2005 – Sad Clown Bad Dub 5 & Sad Clown Bad Dub 6 (although recorded in '98)

07/12/2005 – Felt: Felt 2: A Tribute to Lisa Bonet

10/04/2005 – Atmosphere: You Can't Imagine How Much Fun We're Having

2006 – Happy Clown Bad Dub 8/ The Fun EP

04/10/2007 – Brother Ali: The Undisputed Truth

08/21/2007 – Atmosphere: Sad Clown Bad Summer #9

10/16/2007 – Atmosphere: Sad Clown Bad Fall #10

12/18/2007 – Atmosphere: Sad Clown Bad Winter #11

12/25/2007 – Atmosphere: Strictly Leakage

04/01/2008 – Atmosphere: Sad Clown Bad Spring #12

04/22/2008 – Atmosphere: When Life Gives You Lemons, You Paint That Shit Gold & Sad Clown Bad Dub #13

01/20/2009 – Atmosphere: God Loves Ugly (re-release) w/ Sad Clown Bad Dub 4

03/09/2009 – Brother Ali: The Truth Is Here

07/04/2009 – Atmosphere: Leak at Will

11/17/2009 – Felt: Felt 3: A Tribute to Rosie Perez

09/07/2010 – Atmosphere: To All My Friends, Blood Makes The Blade Holy: The Atmosphere EPs

10/31/2009 - 7 Years With Atmosphere & Rhymesayers

04/12/2011 – Atmosphere: The Family Sign

04/20/2013 – Demosexual 7”

04/19/2014 – Atmosphere: Lake Nokomis Maxi Single

05/06/2014 – Atmosphere: Southsiders

08/12/2016 – Atmosphere: Fishing Blues

12/09/2016 – Atmosphere: Frida Kahlo vs Ezra Pound

10/05/2018 – Atmosphere: Mi Vida Local

12/12/2019 – Atmosphere: Whenever