



Independence Day

Independent artists are mining major obstacles in music

BY NORMA STANLEY
Contributing Writer

Seemingly lost in the cacophony of mega-stars under the umbrellas of major music labels, more independent artists are learning how to not only survive, but thrive in this extremely competitive market.

Regardless of the challenge, independent artists refuse to be discouraged and many of them have flourished, living comfortably off the results of their early strenuous labor. Independent rap artists, record label icons and multimillionaire businessmen such as rappers Sean (Puffy) Combs, Percy Miller (Master P), and Shawn Corey Carter (Jay Z) are renowned for their humble beginnings, but keen business sense, which led to their success.

Conversely, not all independents are as lucky. Although in most cases the odds are against them, tides are turning and "Indies" as they are called in the music world are plowing through the mire to ensure their music not only adequately showcases their creativity, but its uniqueness and ability to attract paying consumers.

"Independent music projects open more options for consumers to choose from, changing the complexion of music, which is very much needed," said Curtis Jews, co-owner of Infinite Soul Music (www.infinitesoulmusic.com), a rising neo-soul/hip-hop independent artist out of Washington, D.C., and producer of two other artists. "I like to think of my projects as innovative and atypical. To add, I'm thankful that my audience is growing and my CDs are selling thanks to Myspace and supportive mom and pop stores."

Jews, who goes by the stage name "Jewels," also remarked on his avoidance of being limited to the neo-soul designation to which his music is

often referred. He said, "I don't like to be categorized. The term 'neo-soul' is becoming overused. That's why I try to distinguish my music as nu-soul."

Jews will be releasing a CD called *Birth of Movement* for one of his artists this July.

No matter what genre an artist identifies with, getting exposure via airplay on major radio stations is still a major challenge for them all. It is only recently that Indies were even considered for airplay, being perceived as below average in talent and product by major labels and mainstream media. In fact, two years ago, a few radio network station program directors were investigated by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) for taking monies, products, etc., to play the cuts of artists signed under major labels. Sony BMG was fined \$10 million for what the FCC believed was "pay for play" transactions between its representatives and radio station programmers.

"Major labels have a strong hold on radio stations and it's so political it's ridiculous," Jews informed. "Independent artists do their best to pay for advertising to get our products played, but we can't compete with major labels. I don't even listen to major radio stations any longer, because it's so commercialized and they play the same artists over and over," he said. "Consumers want more choices of what to listen to, but they're not getting it, so Internet sales are becoming more successful marketing tools for independents."

Finding other revenue streams and going international where a lot more

music is embraced, Jews' music is taking hold in the United Kingdom via radio air play.

Derek Harper, program director for Radio One's 97.5 and 102.5 here in Atlanta, said that many stations do what they can to offer exposure to independent artists, but maintains that these performers still have much to learn and do before pursuing air play.

"We play the music of independent artists every Thursday on both stations, but Indies still have to go through the proper channels to be successful," said Harper. "They have this dream that when they get on the radio that their success will skyrocket, but that's not the way it works. They need to do their homework like securing distribution. Getting on the radio should be the last stop they make on their way to success."

Eric Fleming, an up-and-coming

Atlanta producer who works with independent artists from a variety of music genres within his company, Kingdom Driven Productions, agrees.

"I produce everything from R&B, hip-hop, gospel and southern gospel and they're a lot of talented independent artists out there, but don't have the money, while there are signed artists with money, who have less talent," said Fleming. "However, that shouldn't stop independent artists from giving it all they've got. If you love your craft enough, it eventually does pay off, but not always in the realm of the super multi-millionaires they hear on radio and see on TV."

Recognizing the need to educate, as well as encourage independent artists to hone their skills, the Atlanta Music Conference and Festival was created 10 years ago. The conference, which takes

place September 19-22 in Atlanta, is an opportunity for unsigned artists of all genres to network and showcase their talents in front of key influencers in the music industry. These include representatives from major labels and performing arts affiliates including the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP).

"Ninety percent of our attendees are independent artists who have the opportunity to network and learn from key people in the industry during our daytime workshops and evening networking events," said Kathy Gates, conference and festival manager. "They need to understand that major music labels are not so much interested in developing artists any more and are moving away from it. Attending the

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5th Annual Southeast Urban Music Conference boasts major sponsors

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The stage is set for the 5th Annual Southeast Urban Music Conference (SUMC), which takes place June 27-30 at the Sheraton Hotel in downtown Atlanta.

"Much of the talent and wisdom that propel the creative energy driving urban music today is not accessible to those attempting to break into the music industry," says SUMC Conference Chairman & Partner Tony

Baraka. "Until now, there has been no way for aspiring artists to effectively interact with and learn from some of the most successful, innovative and knowledgeable members of the urban entertainment community. This conference provides that opportunity."

Baraka says there are many issues facing the music industry, among them declining CD sales, objectionable song lyrics, mixtapes, and lack of support at

urban radio. "We want to explore and debate these issues and see if we can create a blueprint that we all can follow," he says.

For registration information please call 770-973-8441, email smiurban@comcast.net or log onto: www.sumc-lod.com or www.myspace.com/sumclod2007