

home-grown



NICK LAMMERS — Staff

HIP-HOP

Bay Area rappers
are earning
profits and
self-respect
producing and
marketing their
own recordings

By Dave Becker
STAFF WRITER

THE floors are grimy, a few broken-down pieces of furniture provide little promise of comfort, and the only heat on a chilly winter's day comes from a few burners on the gas range. While the house is in a dilapidated state, there's not too much to distinguish it from many of its neighbors in San Francisco's poor and crime-ridden Fillmore District.

Until 22-year-old Joseph Thomas removes the padlock from a door in a corner of the living room and reveals a modern recording studio, complete with a 48-track mixing board, a state-of-the-art Macintosh loaded with the latest digital sampling and mixing programs, and banks of keyboards and digital recorders.

Thomas, better known as J.T. the Bigga Figga, is representative of the new breed of

self-made Bay Area rap stars. Instead of waiting for a major label to jump on their demo tape, aspiring hip-hop stars are doing it themselves, applying street-level business skills to the record industry and coming out winners.

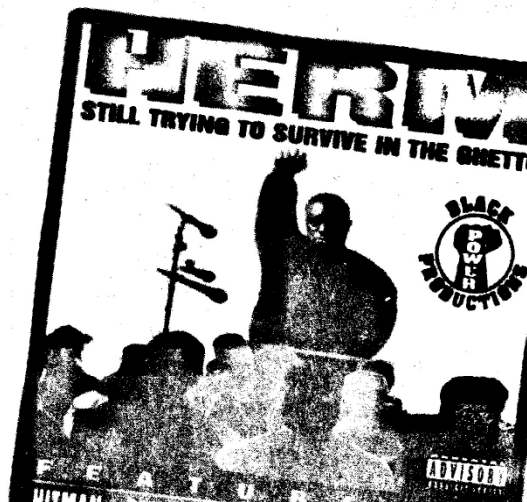
➤ For a list of local rappers, see page CUE-7.

While the big labels dominate the hip-hop scenes in other urban centers, the Bay Area is an independent-label game. Rappers start

out selling homemade tapes from the trunk of a car, appealing to friends and homeboys with lyrics that comment on neighborhood people and issues. And if they've got the music and business skills, they can bust out beyond their hood, utilizing the Bay Area's network of small record stores to sell units at a pace that would be the envy of most major labels.

"Your destiny is in your hands," says

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Rappers: Doing it themselves

Continued from CUE-1

Thomas, whose latest album, "Dwellin' in tha Labb," is still climbing the national Billboard charts. "If you come out with product people want and get it to them, you'll make it.

"I started off selling tapes in a 10-block radius from my house. Once I had those people as customers, I started branching out and reaching people in Hunters Point and Daly City, and I just kept going from there.

"It ain't easy, but when this is all you got, you work at it."

"More than any other market, rap artists in the Bay Area have done it for themselves," says "Buddha" Bob Reichley, promotions and sales manager for City Hall Records, which handles distribution for many Bay Area indies. "Chuck D (of Public Enemy) said when he was here last year that this is the most underground and independent scene in the country, and he's right. People in New York and L.A. envy what we've got going here."

Necessity is the prime motive for many of the Bay Area rappers who combine business with music. Major labels are inundated with dozens of demo tapes every day, and they tend to focus on artists from Los Angeles and New York, where most record companies are based.

"Going to a big label and asking them to listen to your demo, that's like a one-in-a-million chance," says Richmond rapper Master P (Percy Miller), whose No Limit Records was one of the early success stories in Bay Area rap. "It's a waste of time."

"I wanted to get signed, but wasn't nobody hearing me," adds J.T. "I just basically decided I was going to have to do it myself, and I took it step by step."

Once an artist decides to go the do-it-yourself route, he finds plenty of incentive to make it work. Major-label artists seldom see much money slip through the complex legal web of advances and royalties. If you run your own label, though, the profit goes straight to you. That's a powerful lure, especially for young African-American men facing a bleak economic and employment future.

"There aren't many avenues for

Big names on the rap circuit

Here's a quick rundown of some of the major players on the Bay Area rap scene:

► **Jason Blaine:** After years of working in the distribution end of the record business, Blaine decided in 1989 to start his own record label and focus on the dozens of promising new rap acts coming out of the Bay Area. His Oakland-based In-A-Minute Records has grown to become one of the biggest independent labels in hip-hop, home to influential artists such as RBL Posse, Totally Insane and Ill Mannered Playas.

► **E-40:** Controversial gangsta rapper E-40 put Vallejo on the hip-hop map and popularized the "pimps and players" style of street rap. He also revolutionized the business end of hip-hop with his Sick Wid It label, which challenged traditional distribution practices by selling directly to small stores at discount prices.

► **Billy Jam:** Writer, pirate radio DJ and all-around player, Jam is one of the most visible and persuasive supporters of Bay

Area hip-hop.

► **Herm Lewis:** While Oakland has been considered a major hip-hop center for years, San Francisco didn't get much respect until Herm Lewis came along with his Black Power Productions record label. Lewis' compilations of San Francisco rappers sold amazingly well for indie releases and helped pump up the careers of Rappin' 4-Tay and J.T. the Bigga Figga.

► **Lauchlan McIntyre:** As publisher and editor-in-chief of Berkeley-based 4080, a magazine that's grown from a few photocopied sheets into a major glossy over the past few years, McIntyre has helped spread awareness of Bay Area hip-hop around the world.

► **Too Short:** The first Bay Area rapper to go nationwide, Too Short set the pattern for local rap with his tales of pimping and pushing. Short (real name Todd Shaw) also inspired the Bay Area's do-it-yourself ethic by starting out selling homemade tapes out of the trunk of his car.

the black man as far as accumulating a substantial amount of money so he can be stable and acquire some property and look out for his loved ones," says Herm Lewis, founder of San Francisco-based record label Black Power Productions.

"The majority of brothers, before they got involved in rap, they were involved in illegal activity, because they are the only two options for young brothers in the 'hood, if you ain't a Shaquille O'Neal or Barry Bonds. If brothers didn't have rap to strive for success in that area, things would be even worse."

"The basic motivation for me (to start No Limit) was thinking about what I want — 15 percent or 100 percent," explains Master P. "Wasn't a tough choice."

To realize that economic potential, however, would-be rap entrepreneurs have to be ready for a lot of hard work. While major labels

have specialists for every little job, an indie owner has to be able to do it all, from producing the record to making sure it gets into stores.

"You have to take total responsibility for everything," says Jo Treggiari, co-owner (with Chris Graham) of Oakland-based Dogday Records, home of hip-hop artists UDI and 11/5. "We've only got the two of us, but we still do everything in-house short of actually manufacturing the records."

"It's a game," adds Master P. "You've got to know how to do the

same thing the majors are doing with a fraction of the budget."

Like most rappers-turned-record-executives, J.T. had no business experience before he started his Straight From the Labb label. He learned how to operate all the equipment in a recording studio and deal with complex business matters (he recently signed a distribution-only deal with national rap powerhouse Priority Records) by reading and asking questions.

"I've tried to deal with every perspective of the business for myself," he says. "I went down and negotiated the deal with Priority myself — I didn't want my lawyer talking for me.

"Your lawyer can only help you so much, your manager can only help you so much. Experience is the best teacher."

Once the money started coming in, J.T. says, he plowed it all back into the label, putting together his home recording studio piece by piece.

"The money I make all goes back into the studio," he says. "The cars and diamond rings and all that stuff, that can hold off — they don't generate any income."

There are a few factors besides knowledge, thrift and hard work, however, that work to the advantage of local rappers who decide to go it on their own. One is that hip-hop tastes in the Bay Area are strongly localized — people want to hear rappers talk about their city, or better yet, their specific neighborhood.

"Rap fans in the Bay Area tend to support their own," says Billy Jam, host of pirate radio show "Hip-Hop Slam." "If I'm a rapper from Milpitas or the Fillmore or wherever, the people from my 'hood are going to be the first ones to support me."

The Bay Area also has an unusually large network of small, locally owned record stores, many serving the inner-city neighborhoods where rap dominates. That means an artist like Vallejo's E-40, who set the pattern for local rap entrepreneurs with his Sick Wid It label, can thrive without paying much attention to the big chain stores.

"The mom-and-pop stores play a big role in being successful," says Master P. "The stores like Wauzis Records (in Oakland), that's a big part of what we call the underdog music."

And with both production and re-

tail at a grass-roots level, artists can react more quickly to the ever-changing tastes of hip-hop fans.

"With an indie, you can put out three albums a year if you think people are that excited about what you're doing," Lewis says. "When you're on a major label, they dictate when your album is going to come out."

"We can feel when something's popping and get them out there fast," adds City Hall's Reichley. "I can get a demo tape on my desk today and within a month have something in stores."

A big part of the reason that product can get out to the streets so quickly and cheaply is technology. While studio-quality recording equipment was once out of the reach of most individuals, digital tape decks now sell for well under \$1,000, allowing just about anyone to produce clean master tapes at home.

"To me, it's really exciting to think that any street you drive down, behind the doors of one of those little houses there might be a studio where the next hit is going to come from," says Billy Jam.

The benefits of having a strong indie scene go beyond the hip-hop industry, too. Small labels generally rely on friends and neighbors to handle everything from album-cover graphics to production.

"It's an economic revolution," says Jam. "It's all black-owned and black-operated, and it's creating a lot of jobs in the community."

"I hope people see me as an inspiration," says Master P. "I come out of the ghetto, and I let people know that if you keep your head on strong and strive and keep your goals clear, you can make it out of the ghetto. If you take something and really invest in it, it'll grow and you will grow."

"There's a lot of obstacles coming up as a youth in this community," reflects J.T., who was amassing a record of petty crimes before he got into rap. "I wanted something positive, but I didn't see no hope. I had to look beyond my present condition and see that it could get better with determination and energy.

"God told me, 'You don't have to wait for someone to give you something. You can do it yourself.'

"Ain't no money going to fall out of the sky. You can pray all you want, but you got to get off your behind if anything's going to happen."