By posting MP3s of songs before they hit stores, black gossip and hip-hop bloggers draw visitors, and the notice of record labels

By Vanessa E. Jones, Globe Staff  |  August 28, 2007

When Ahsmi Rawlins uploaded an MP3 of 50 Cent's unreleased single "She Wants It," featuring Justin Timberlake, he was only doing what he'd done almost daily since 2005, when he started his hip-hop blog, Nah Right. Rawlins had always been the first among his friends to discover new music. Offering MP3s, videos, and news on Nah Right allowed him to bring his savviness to a larger crowd.

In the past year, as they've grown in popularity, black gossip and hip-hop blogs such as Nah Right; Concrete Loop; Young, Black and Fabulous; and Crunk & Disorderly have become the place where record companies, producers, publicists, and artists present music to generate buzz and gauge interest in an artist. They're the urban version of indie and rock blogs such as Stereogum and Brooklyn Vegan, which about four years ago began uploading MP3s and videos.

Unlike those sites, the hip-hop and gossip blogs have a forebear in mixtapes: the R&B and hip-hop music compilations that the record industry has used for decades to create early excitement for music. But mixtapes have faced perennial legal hardships because of crackdowns by the Recording Industry Association of America. As mixtapes' popularity wanes, fans have turned to black gossip and hip-hop blogs to find songs by artists such as Kanye West, Beyoncé, Common, and Ne-Yo. The music often arrives on the Web weeks before the official CD is released.

"Music bloggers are the new tastemakers of the moment," says Rawlins, who's based in New York. "It's the immediacy of the medium. We can throw something up so quickly and it reaches people within hours. Me, Concrete Loop, sites like those with a big readership, we've really established this reputation for knowing what's
good, knowing what's going to be next. Our opinion holds weight. They realize it and are trying to take advantage of it."

Like the DJs who make mixtapes, bloggers have received a mixed reception in the record industry. Many executives recognize that Internet exposure can create a following for the artists that can translate into record sales. The Game's CD "Doctor's Advocate" leaked last year yet still debuted in the No. 1 spot of the Billboard album charts, selling 358,000 copies. A recent Capitol Records press release about J. Holiday's R&B single "Bed" featured a quote from Concrete Loop's music editor Brian Davis, as a sign of the single's growing popularity.

"Singles have always gotten into the marketplace before the album," says Ronnie Johnson, executive vice president of Capitol Records' urban music division, which works regularly with the blogs through its interactive marketing department. "If . . . you're only one single deep, then you should have concerns. But if you have real artists and you have a solid album, there should be no real concern."

However, there's a limit to how much exposure the record companies want to give. Capitol, for instance, prefers handing out streaming audio, because free downloads can curtail single and album sales. Relationships can grow tense when material by a major artist or a potential blockbuster song leaks. The day after Rawlins posted "She Wants It," from 50's highly anticipated CD, "Curtis," he received an e-mail from an executive at 50 Cent's label, Interscope, asking Rawlins to remove the song from his blog. Bloggers have been sent cease-and-desist letters from the legal departments of record labels or received calls from record executives asking them to remove songs. One recent Concrete Loop post featured five downloads from M.I.A.'s new CD, "Kala"; the next day the links to the downloadable songs were dead. Nah Right featured a yet-to-be-released video for Talib Kweli's new song "Hot Thing/In the Mood." Within hours the video window simply read "removed by copyright holder."

Interscope Records, which represents M.I.A. and 50 Cent, declined to be interviewed for this story. But there's an increasing realization in the music industry that it needs to adapt to the digital music age. As the number of new media departments at record companies increases, executives are trying to change the way they do business.

"We need business models of our own out there in an offensive way to get people to work with us so we can get paid for our music," says Christian Jorg, a recently hired senior vice president of new media and commerce at Island Def Jam. "We can't go back to selling as many CDs as we did five years ago -- that's just unrealistic."

The music the bloggers post comes from multiple sources. Record labels and online marketing companies such as Iced Media provide video and streaming audio to the blogs. Davis, who will be a senior at Clark Atlanta University, often gets MP3s from the artists and producers who've befriended him through Concrete Loop. Davis makes a point of detailing production credits and analyzing music in his music entries. His friendship with Bryan Michael Cox, who produced Mary J. Blige's smash "Be Without You" among other songs, began after Cox e-mailed Davis telling him he appreciated Davis's support.

In July, when Davis posted an unreleased song produced by Cox featuring the winners of MTV's "Making of the Band 4," which aired its season finale Sunday, Cox didn't get angry. Instead, says Davis, "He called me and was like 'Yo, I saw that you put the song on there."

That's the bad version... I'm going to send you the real version of the song so you can hear it."

Davis will wait until the last episode of "Making of the Band 4" airs before sharing it. Rules of conduct, says Kevin Hofman, Capitol's director of interactive marketing, regulate how bloggers deal with unfinished songs or videos. "The more seasoned bloggers," says Hofman, "they know better than that. It's kind of a code of ethics, believe it or not."

Rawlins gets leaked material like the 50 Cent/Timberlake song online. He wouldn't reveal where he found it, but noted it's not file-sharing websites, which remove copyrighted material if a record label asks. "The sites where I'm getting these leaks," says Rawlins, "the general public and record labels can't even get into. Nothing is pulled off of them."

Rawlins, who works as an online editor for the hip-hop magazine XXL, constantly interacts with the music industry. "I get multiple e-mails a week from labels," Rawlins says. "The independent labels are more open about sending the music. The [major] labels are more hush-hush. They'll say, 'Hey, check out this MP3,' knowing I'm going to post it anyway."

It's these mixed messages from the record companies that annoy the bloggers. As with the mixtapes, most bloggers suspect that the source of the leaks are music industry insiders. "Labels need to get better control of that," Davis says. "It's not us taking music from the studio and sharing it with everybody."

Johnson of Capitol Records pleads ignorance as to the source of the leaked music. He says, "The reality is we don't know where it comes from half the time." Hofman adds, "There are... a lot of different people involved in the production of these tracks, so it's hard to pin down where the leakage is. What we do is try to clean up the mess, replace downloads with streaming links."

Concrete Loop, for instance, used to be rife with downloads. In recent weeks, however, it has shifted to streaming audio. "We're trying as hard as we can to conform to what music industry execs and record labels want," says Davis. "Posting and sharing files illegally is a problem, so we're trying to do our best to move away from that."

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