New York -- On clear weekends here, a boisterous bazaar sets up along the sidewalks that bracket Broadway and Canal Street, and anyone in the market for a gold chain, a bootleg DVD or a Rolex of questionable pedigree can haggle up and down the block. One of the fixtures on this scene is a salesman -- he identifies himself only as "J" (it’s even on his business card) -- who stacks underground rap CDs on a folding table, most priced at $10.

The CDs are called mix tapes, and while the name is defiantly old school in its cassette-era origins, they are the cutting edge of the moment as rap finds some of its future in its own past. A flagship symbol of that phenomenon is best-selling rapper 50 Cent, who this year spun his mix-tape success into major label platinum. J, a proud merchant, is well aware of all of this. "It all starts here," he said with a wave of his hand. "If it’s new, it’s right here."
The mix tapes are the creations of local DJs who take hits, rarities, the works of up-and-coming rappers or all of the above, and use them to turn a blank CD into a highly personal jukebox. There is intense competition among those DJs to get the freshest material, and because the formal music industry has long viewed the whole scene as a copyright nightmare, a spirit of pirate radio pervades.

With his back to traffic and a pair of customers perusing his stock, J the merchant shakes his head when asked about the edgy topics on mix tapes. "So is this a story that is going to get me in trouble?" He doesn’t want to talk about collecting sales tax, either, or the fact that mix tapes sample everyone from Run DMC to 2Pac without permission or payment. "Look, there wouldn’t be a rap music industry if it weren’t for the mix tapes."

In the 1970s, mix tapes were the first recordings of the nascent hip-hop scene in this city, and back then they were often simply a document of a DJ’s playlist at a nightclub on a Saturday night. "We made them and sold them at the clubs and through taxi drivers," hip-hop pioneer Afrika Bambaataa said. "There were no rap records yet, so this was the only way people could take the music with them."

The music crisscrossed the city in those cabs and eventually grew to become one of the biggest commercial forces in American youth culture, largely relegating mix tapes to a quaint chapter of hip-hop’s heritage. Now, though, with the stars aligning just right, the mix tape has not only returned as potent tastemaker, it’s also enjoying such a flurry of interest and respect from the mainstream music industry that it feels like an overnight sensation. Conflicted labels regard the scene as both piracy menace and talent mother lode.

"What’s going on now," Bambaataa said, "is pretty amazing."

Street-level testing

Much of the stir can be attributed to 50 Cent, the thuggish New York rhymer who was a staple of the mix tape scene for years before his major label breakthrough in February set sales records for a rapper’s debut. More than that, established stars such as Snoop Dogg and P. Diddy in recent months have premiered new material through the mix tapes in a form of street-level test marketing and promotion, and Busta Rhymes has plans to follow suit. MTV, arguably the defining indicator of mainstream youth music, now posts reviews of the "mix tape of the week" on its Web site.

And the high-profile feuds of the rap world, the crowd-pleasing bickering and brawls that would make World Wrestling Entertainment proud, are now played out in the forum of mix tapes, be it Snoop’s recent shot at Suge Knight or Eminem slapping down rival Benzino.

When Jay-Z insulted Nas from the stage at a New York-area show, escalating their war of words, the live track was on a mix tape CD within a week. Soon after, one of the hottest mix tapes from Canal Street up to Harlem was a battle collection that alternated songs by Jay-Z and Nas. Many of the most scathing and compelling battles are on the mix tape CD of DJ Kay Slay, viewed by many as the reigning king of the scene.

"They call me the drama king," says DJ Kay Slay, also a New York radio personality. Kay Slay’s reputation makes him a clearinghouse for the hot new sounds. Famous rappers gain street credibility by giving him access to their new work, and street rappers gain fame if they catch his ear. "For those artists that can’t get on MTV, those artists that can’t get on the radio or don’t have a major label to put them on the road to perform and expose themselves to the public, they have the mix tapes. They send their songs to the DJs and say 'Please put this on your mix tape next month.' "
Music executives, always eager to follow a trend, are swooping in to sign the stars of the mix-tape scene, be they rappers, such as 50 Cent, or the DJs who assemble the tapes and imprint them with their personalities, either through their own rapping or musical trademarks.

"It’s absolutely nuts right now, the scene is going bananas" is how Riggs Morales described the mix tape mania. Morales is a music executive at Shady Records, the label that is run by superstar Eminem and is home to 50 Cent. Morales, 26, has been an avid collector of mix tapes since he can remember, and his office is piled high with discs old and new. But even he is surprised by the intensity of interest now putting the scene on fast forward.

"It’s gotten so big now," he said, "if you make a really big mix tape, you are liable to get a record deal." Morales rattled off a list of mix tape stars breaking through to the major labels: "Whoo Kid just got a deal on Capitol Records, Kay Slay has a deal on Columbia, Clue has a deal with Roc-a-Fella, DJ Envy just dropped an album with Epic.... It just gets more and more. Mix tapes are now the newspaper of the ghetto. Everything you want to find out is there."

If mix tapes are the newspaper of rap feuds and trends, they also are the radio for frustrated purists. "Radio is so bad, you have to go to mix tapes to get the more aggressive stuff, the real stuff," he said. "Look, 50 Cent wasn’t on the radio six months ago; you had to go to mix tapes to hear him. The lousy radio stations don’t break new artists in rap, it’s the mix tape DJs calling the shots now. They are telling you who is hot."

Specialized collections

The mix tape culture has been defined by New York, where the DJs in the 1970s would supplement their income by making live recordings of their nightclub sets or, at rates of $1 a minute or more, would tailor a collection of specialized music for fans. (Some DJs would call out the buyer’s name during the music as a personalizing touch.) The scene has spread somewhat, with the CDs available online and in specialty stores in major urban centers. But New York remains the one true hub, and its catalog of mix tapes is staggering. "You know how you can go buy a mountain bike magazine or a yoga magazine or a hip-hop magazine?" Morales said. "Mix tapes here are like that. But the music industry hasn’t really understood that before."

The term "mix tape" in hip-hop is a large umbrella. Some feature a boisterous DJ talking between and over tracks, exhorting listeners to get their party on and stirring a crowd with shout-outs. That was the signature style of Kid Capri, a defining name in the mix tape scene in the 1990s. Other mix tapes take one style of music such as, say, classic soul, and mesh it with new beats for a hybrid creation. Some specialize in freestyles -- the extemporaneous rhymes by rappers that are vital in the search for street credibility.

You can buy mix tapes that feature nothing but obscure hard-core rappers, or "best of" surveys that pinch the hits, rarities and freestyles of the genre’s biggest stars. It’s the issues highlighted by that latter category, especially, that put the mix tape’s many species on an endangered list in the 1990s.

The digital and Internet era has made the corporate ships of the music industry especially vulnerable and sensitive to piracy threats, and that sent the Recording Industry Assn. of America after the mix tape scene. The DJs were not securing permission for the music they included in their mixes and, even if the rappers were happy about the street circulation, their record labels were not.

The RIAA went after the CD factories handling the mix tape orders as
contractual side work and ignoring the copyright issues. After a series of large judgments, the mix tape supply on the streets began to dry up.

"In the late 1980s and the early 1990s, the mix tape had really become something, you had DJs like Kid Capri taking it to the next level," Morales said. "There were all these new cats, everything was fine and dandy, and then in the mid-1990s the RIAA started getting in the scene. By then you had all these Web sites and companies devoted to mix tapes, and the RIAA sees that and, boom, here come the bigwigs. After that, it was quiet for years."

Then technology gave mix tape makers the edge over the copyright enforcers, and the CDs were back, in force, on the street. Frank Creighton, the anti-piracy chief of the RIAA, said that today, mix tape makers "daisy-chain" CD burners to produce 1,000 discs a day. He said most mix tapes will have a manufacturer’s run of anywhere from 500 to 10,000, but that with hot titles the larger players step in to make their own copies -- and copies could swell to 50,000.

"We've seen a real spike, and that’s directly due to the cost of CD burners and blank media ....Now that you can get those blank CD-Rs in bulk for under 5 cents a piece, the practice has become as attractive as narcotics. The profits are just as great." He added that "thousands" of seizures and arrests are made each year.

Looking for a way to stem the flow, the RIAA last year launched a crackdown on retailers, mostly the small specialty shops that sell the hip-hop mix tapes. Instead of seeking a cease-and-desist order, as in the past, the trade association is now threatening civil action and pushing for a financial settlement as soon as mix tapes are spotted on store shelves. This will certainly be another body blow for independent stores, which have already been hammered by the digital download phenomenon and razor-thin profit margins. But Creighton says those same problems and "the nature of the economic position" facing the music labels are driving the policy.

A sense of history

The trade association and its attorneys make no distinction between, say, a counterfeited copy of a well-known Notorious B.I.G. album and a small-run mix tape that features the late rapper’s music enmeshed with new sounds and beats, Creighton said. But others see the mix tapes as a way to find new talent, promote established stars and create a sense of history among young fans who otherwise might not hear artists such as Doug E. Fresh or Kid Flash.

Among those with that point of view is Sway Calloway. Calloway became well known to rap fans as co-host of the syndicated radio program "The Wake-Up Show," launched in 1990 in the Bay Area, and more recently as MTV’s hip-hop correspondent for its news shows. "The Wake Up Show," still heard here on the Beat (KKBT-FM, 100.3), also spawned a famous run of mix tapes featuring guests such as 2Pac, the Fugees and Wu Tang Clan performing freestyle raps for the broadcast. Calloway frequently encountered the mainstream music industry’s position on many mix tapes, especially the ones by mix tape heroes such as DJ Clue, who was famous for scoring yet-to-be-released material from big-name stars for his offerings.

"The label people would say, 'You’re destroying my marketing plan,' " Calloway said. "'We wanted the pop-sounding single first. You are putting out this hard-core-sounding single -- and it’s going to upset the balance of what we created in this boardroom.' Whatever. But we, the DJs, were so connected to the streets we knew what people wanted to hear. Then these people realized that if you allowed these DJs to use a song from your artist on their tape, it could get that artist exposure and credibility."
That is exactly what happened in the case of 50 Cent. The rapper was deemed too volatile for the major labels after several violent street confrontations, including one in May 2000 that left him bullet-ridden and near death. Even after he recovered, a sub-label of Columbia Records that previously had him under contract wanted nothing to do with him. So the rapper immersed himself in the mix tape scene in New York and made celebrated appearances on collections by DJ Whoo Kid and others.

One of those mix tapes got in the hands of Morales, who loaned it to a bodyguard for Eminem. Eminem heard a star in the mix, and that led to 50 Cent's $1-million signing to Shady Records. The result was the fastest-selling rap debut since the SoundScan era of tracking sales began in 1991.

While the legal and financial departments at record labels see mix tapes as part of the piracy threat, many of the artists, and executives such as Morales who scout talent, see the mix tape as a filter and a proving ground. He says the wave of mix tape stars is just now starting to build. "It’s just going to get bigger and bigger. You can feel it."

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**Stars of the scene**

The mix tape scene is now pushing its own style and stars up from the underground. Among them:

**50 Cent:** The rapper was a controversial hero of mix tapes for more than three years. In February, his major-label release set sales records for a rap debut.

**The Diplomats:** Rapper Cam’ron and his crew sifted through their popular work on mix tapes and compiled the best of it into a double album that debuted at No. 8 on the U.S. pop charts last month.

**DJ Kay Slay:** The "drama king" of mix tapes is set for his major label debut this month, and while casual rap fans may not know his name, he has a parade of stars on the disc, among them Eminem, Nas and Busta Rhymes.

**The X-ecutioners:** The collective just released "Scratchology," a mix tape-style album that tracks the history of turntable artistry in the hip-hop era and features pioneers of the mix tape scene, such as Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five.

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