Minding the Peas

Will.I.Am and his mates have captured the interest of hip-hop fans and corporate America.

By Geoff Boucher, Times Staff Writer

San Diego — The man they call Will.I.Am has one of the busiest hard drives in hip-hop these days, and he carries it with him in a case marked "Will's Travel Kit." Last weekend, the lead singer of the Black Eyed Peas slid behind the keyboard of a computer in the mobile music studio that follows him on tour, loaded up the drive and clicked through a directory of his dizzying workload.

There were chunks of the new songs he's producing for Nas, Justin Timberlake, Snoop Dogg, Macy Gray and Diddy, as well as a theme song he's producing for the Wolfgang Petersen film "Poseidon" and recent remixes he's done for the Rolling Stones, Michael Stipe of R.E.M. and Gusta Rhymes.

But the hard drive is more than music projects. Will clicked on a video file. "This is the Adidas campaign I did for the World Cup," he said, bringing up an image of kids playing soccer on a dusty field with their kicks keyed to a pulsing, Latin-flavored soundtrack. "And this one is a short film I did with Snickers; they're doing films because Tivo is killing commercials." The vagaries of the advertising world are important to Will because the Black Eyed Peas are corporate America's leading hip-hop partner and proud of it.

The Peas are now on the Honda Civic Tour, and they have done commercials for Verizon, Apple iTunes and Best Buy. They rewrote one of their songs to accommodate a major NBA advertising campaign. They are also characters in a video game ("The Urbz: Sims in the City"), they have performed at the Super Bowl and, on Sunday afternoon in San Diego, Will and the other three members of the group met with executives of the Hard Rock Hotel to go over plans to create a Black Eyed Peas suite.

As Fergie, the group's female singer, examined a swatch of faux chinchilla fur, Will told a surprised Hard Rock official that the planned multimedia experience for the room wasn't ambitious enough. "Is there any way to hook the room up to the planned multimedia experience for the room wasn't ambitious enough. "Is there any way to hook the room up to my hard drive so I can pick what people see and hear when they stay in the suite? I mean, it's our suite."

The group's members — Will, Fergie, Taboo and Apl.de.Ap — grew up in Los Angeles, and Will, whose childhood home was near the intersection of Olympic Boulevard and Soto Street, said growing up in the city's urban grid primed them to view the world through brand names.

"In Beverly Hills do you have billboards on every damn corner? Do you have posters on every wall, selling stuff in the suburbs? Well, you do where I grew up," he says. "In the urban areas, everything is signs for liquor stores and motels and ads for sneakers and cars and Schlitz malt liquor. They're selling you stuff your whole life. So hip-hop made it part of its culture."

The Peas have a rare spot in hip-hop. Separate in themes and vibe from the gangsta scene that long dominated rap, the group found it hard in the 1990s to capture a mass audience. While they were waiting for "positive" hip-hop to make its mark in America, they toured the rest of the world, which most rappers ignore or find unwelcoming.

"The world caught on before the United States caught on, and the beauty of being able to travel the world was that we turned around that whole concept that you have to be big here first," Taboo said. "In Vietnam, we can go and get big audiences, and we've been going there for so long. A lot of other hip-hop groups don't even go. And that helps with the advertising too. We have a global audience ... we travel, and our name travels."

Homecoming

The Peas also love to come home. Tonight, they will play the second show of a sold-out, two-night stand at the Gibson Amphitheatre. It's their first time as a headliner at the venue, and, in San Diego, it was clear they were excited about
coming back to play to a hometown crowd. Taboo said the venue (then called Universal Amphitheatre) was the site of a major turning-point in 1999 when the group performed with Eminem and others on the Smokin' Grooves tour.

The show was running behind schedule, and some backstage pressure by another act's manager switched the planned lineup and put the Peas on last.

"The place was getting empty; a lot of people had gone home. And we came out and it was our biggest show up to then," Taboo said. "We called out to the balcony and told everybody to come down. Security was there trying to keep people back, but we kept yelling. That was big moment for us. It was a point where we felt we could play the big stages."

Now the band, fresh off a Grammy win in February, comes home on a career trajectory that has made it one of the stars of the moment in music. The Peas had the fifth bestselling album of last year in the U.S., and their appeal to young music consumers is clear in the fact that their song "My Humps" is the first master ring-tone to break the threshold with 2 million tones sold.

In L.A., where once Dr. Dre, Snoop and Tupac were the faces of the West Coast sound, now the Peas are the closest thing to the city's house band in hip-hop.

Will and Apl were still known as Will Adams and Allen Pineda when they began rapping together in the eighth grade in 1989. Three years later, they were signed to Eazy-E's Ruthless Records and performed in a trio called Altaban Klann, but the label cooled on the group because its themes seemed out of touch with the rap on the radio and on the charts. By the middle of the decade, Jaime Gomez, a.k.a. Taboo, became the third member, and the group had the more soulful name of Black Eyed Peas.

The Peas got critical acclaim for their Interscope albums in 1998 and 2000, but their major commercial success came with the addition of their fourth member, Stacy "Fergie" Ferguson, who had been in a teen pop group called Wild Orchid and also was a performer on the Disney Channel show "Kids Incorporated." Fergie has become so popular that she is preparing a solo album, and Will has stepped in as a producer on it.

The Peas sound is a lively, buoyant style of hip-hop that melds Will's rapid-fire rhymes and Fergie's wavery singing. Their hit songs are usually playful or lusty. "My Humps," for instance, is a dialogue between a man and a woman about the power of a curvy figure: "What you gonna do with all that junk? All that junk inside your trunk?" The shows and videos feature break-dancing and graffiti art, a nod to their devotion to the early ethos of hip-hop, before the gangsta imagery took center stage in the genre. Apl said that has paid off now by making them seem fresh amid a rap scene filled with stale celebrations of guns, bing and pimps.

"The beauty is too, that we go around the world, and good music and good dancing translates everywhere, but a lot of that bling stuff doesn't really reach people," Apl says. "There was a balance before between [gangsta and non-gangsta] stuff like N.W.A. and A Tribe Called Quest. Now that balance is coming back."

Cultural blend

"Are we in Santa Monica? Are we in San Juan Capistrano? Are we in San Luis Obispo?" Will was shouting into the microphone late Sunday night on a bayside stage at the Embarcadero in San Diego. The crowd, mostly young girls and dotted with parents and their dancing children, cheered back that, no, the Peas were in San Diego. "I know we're not in L.A.," Fergie chimed in.

The crowd cheered loudest when Taboo leaned over and showed a small Mexican flag on his sneaker — the group walks just as comfortably in its multiculturalism. The Peas lace their show with Spanish, and one of their more affecting songs is "The Apl Song," which has Apl de Ap rhyming about the childhood odyssey that brought him from poverty in the Philippines to America and includes a chorus in Tagalog.

The group performs with a live band and has taken a career path that defies the conventions of rap. How many other hip-hop acts have shared a bill with Metallica, opened for the Stones or joined the Vans Warped Tour? It's made for some tough crowds, such as a particularly ugly show in Portland, Ore., where the group was greeted with racial epithets from the rock audience.

"You just don't fight them, you look for a fine chick in the audience, sing to her and make her have a good time, and then all the knuckleheads start watching her and shut up," Will said before the San Diego show.

The crowds these days for their own headlining tour are far more devoted. The 35-city tour kicked off last week in Fresno and ends in Colorado in May. In the past, the tours have visited L.A. as they were winding down.

This time, Fergie said, it's a plus to come home early in the road run. "Before we would come to L.A. and we would be just playing on fumes, all tired and wore out, but this time we're ready and just starting out. But we are still figuring out everything right now with the show. We are not one of those acts that plan everything out; you never know what is going to happen."

Even before taking the stage in San Diego, Will was mapping out his return to L.A. He closed his eyes in his mobile studio and put his hand on an imaginary steering wheel in front of him.

"Yeah, I know L.A. like the back of my hand. And I can get there in an hour from here, you just have to know the speed points.... You can speed through Carlsbad, but as soon as you get to Irvine you slow down. After you pass Disneyland — vroom, vroom, you can go real fast — but you slow down when you get to the Citadel."

The plan for L.A. was simple: Hit the studio in Los Feliz with Nas, play two marathon shows at the Gibson and maybe get Brazilian food at a favorite spot on La Cienega. The rest of the Peas "will be hitting the parties," Will says with a trace of resignation, but then he smiles brightly.

"My after-party will be in 10 years, and it will be sick. I'll have to buy an island for my party. Until then, I got to keep working." Will spun his chair back to face his computer screen. "Work, work, work."