Fashion Tip in Rap for Brooklyn Girls

By KELEFA SANNEH

On weekday mornings for the last month or so, the hip-hop radio station Hot 97 has been waking its listeners with a catchy, unusual song called "Cameltoe."

That song, to be officially released on June 3, is by a new female-fronted group called Fannypack. It starts with a fast, trebly beat (there's not really a bass line) and then three young women chanting, "Mm-hmm, that's right, uh-huh, uh-huh." You could be eavesdropping on a junior high school playground.

Star, who was a host with Buc Wild of the "Hot 97 Morning Show" on WQHT-FM (97.1), said he loved the song the first time he heard it. "I thought it was incredibly fresh and new, but still a throwback to the fun days of hip-hop," he said. "It was three young girls rapping about some fun, giggly stuff."

Listeners agreed, Star said, but many had one question: "What's a cameltoe?"

A good question, although answering it requires a certain tact. Cameltoe is slang for a fashion faux pas caused by women wearing snug pants; the term suggests a visual analogy. The song is a cautionary tale, intended to help victims — help them, that is, by ridiculing them — into recovery.
The song's lyrics explain the condition more forthrightly: "Girl, that gotta hurt, take some time and adjust/ Can't you see people staring and making a fuss?"

The Fannypack fable is a quintessential New York story. It starts with a pair of D.J.'s: Matt Goias, 25, and his partner, Fancy, 30. Mr. Goias was known for organizing an underground hip-hop collective called Indie 5000, and Fancy's projects included what he called "weird burlesque lounge parties." The two discovered that they liked a lot of the same music. (Fancy describes their favorite kind as "stupid.")

When they started thinking about putting together an "all-girl dance thing," Mr. Goias said, they recruited Cat Hartwell, a fellow D.J., who had just graduated with a film and television degree from Boston University.

Looking for more members, Mr. Goias and Fancy did what any enterprising producers would do: they headed down to Fulton Mall, in downtown Brooklyn, hoping to run into someone who fit the bill.

They overheard a smart-mouthed young woman, Jessibel Suthiwong, from Park Slope, Brooklyn, who was just finishing her junior year in high school. She had the right look (hot), the right ethnic background (half Puerto Rican, half Thai) and — most important — the right attitude (sassy).

When Mr. Goias and Fancy were having trouble finding a third vocalist, they implored Jessibel to recruit one of her classmates. She found Belinda Lovell, a soft-spoken transplant to New York (she grew up mainly in Hartford, and her parents come from Trinidad) with surprisingly strong rap skills.

Unlike most self-described girl groups, Fannypack counts its two male founders as members. The men write the music and many of the lyrics, and although they don't sing or rap, they jump around in the videos. The group exists as a hybrid quintet halfway between a prefabricated pop act and a friendly music-making collective.

**From Slang to Song**

It's a Saturday afternoon on a soundstage in Queens, and Jessibel, 18, looks absolutely horrified. "I'm going to have nightmares," she says, while Belinda, 16, and Cat, 22, giggle sympathetically.

The group is shooting a video for "Cameltoe," which means the women have spent an entire day squeezing into outlandish outfits in Popsicle-bright colors, lip-synching the lyrics over and over again. (Don't worry; the video's imagery is as circumspect as the lyrics are...
Jessibel and the others are excited to be shooting their first video, which is scheduled for release in mid-June, but when the day starts to drag a bit, Mr. Goias and Fancy think of a way to lighten the mood. They quietly move a few tables and chairs aside, then hide in the hallway; as yet another run-through begins, they rush the stage. Fancy, whose thin body and thinner mustache inevitably evoke John Waters, heads straight for Jessibel, whom he treats to a brief (and very personal) dance routine. No wonder she looks so horrified.

All day long it's clear that Mr. Goias and Fancy are making most of the decisions, guided by their clear ideas about how their group should be presented. The video, directed by Kurt St. Thomas, is to be half live-action and half animated, with some scenes set in a high school. (Fannypack was founded on the conviction that there is no place on earth more glamorous than a Brooklyn high school.)

There are three dancers in the video, too, and they are wearing outfits they probably would not have chosen for themselves. "We were kind of disappointed when we found out it was young, hip-looking boys," Mr. Goias said. So he dressed them in pink shorts, white socks, white and pink sneakers, two-tone pink headbands and not much else. Everyone agrees this is very funny. Jessibel eyes one of the dancers and delivers her verdict: "His nipples are percolating."

Could this be the beginning of a new song? The group's debut album, "So Stylistic" (Tommy Boy), is due in July, and it is full of ingenious, addictive songs, many of which began with casual utterances just like this one.

Belinda explains how the Fannypack songwriting process usually works: "Matt would ask us, 'What kind of slang do you use? What do you guys want to sing about?' " she said. "And he interprets it and makes it into songs."

Other times, though, the producers are a bit sneakier. One of the group's best songs, "Hey Mami," has verses that playfully dismiss aspiring suitors, including "British guys playing rugby/ Brooklyn boys who wanna thug me."

The chorus — in which Jessibel imitates men who call out, "Hey, Mami! You sexy!" — comes straight from a conversation. "We would have Jessibel come over, and I would secretly turn on the microphones," Fancy said. Remembering the genesis of "Hey Mami," Mr. Goias sounds less like a producer than an intrepid researcher, chronicling the exotic ways of Brooklyn teenagers. "We never told her
to sing that," he says. "It's a slice of her vernacular."

Perhaps there is something uncomfortable about this arrangement — armchair anthropologists manipulating their native informants — but everyone seems to be in on the joke. (Although Jessibel admits that at first she didn't want to perform "Cameltoe.")

`All in Good Fun'

The members of Fannypack seem eager to stress that the whole thing is a bit of a goof. "It's all in good fun," said Cat, whose age and sensibility put her somewhere between the anthropologists and the informants.

For his part, Mr. Goias said their debut album shouldn't be taken too seriously. "We don't want it to be judged as a rap record," he said.

What makes "So Stylistic" so good, though, is a clever combination of irreverence and its opposite. The music pays loving tribute to groups like 2 Live Crew and Salt-n-Pepa, both of which released debut albums in 1986 — the year Belinda was born. And the lyrics include sly references to hip-hop classics, including Gang Starr's "Place Where We Dwell" and Whodini's "Freaks Come Out at Night."

Other songs on the album (including "All Around," the band's professed least favorite song on the album) use beats borrowed from house and techno. And between songs there are charming snippets of group members goofing off; the album ends with Jessibel talking about "dirty guys and girls" at her high school, Cobble Hill School of American Studies.

Even before "So Stylistic" is released, the group is gaining momentum. After Star started playing "Cameltoe" on Hot 97, other New York stations picked it up, including WKTU-FM (103.5) and Z100, (WHTZ-FM, 100.3), and on those other stations it became the most-requested song. The "Cameltoe" video, which is nearly finished, may give the group national exposure. Jessibel and Belinda had been keeping their double lives secret from classmates, but after group members were interviewed on Hot 97 two weeks ago, their cover was blown. Now Jessibel is hoping all the fuss doesn't ruin her senior prom.

It seems likely that Fannypack will become a cult favorite this summer, but it is also possible to imagine how this group might find an even bigger audience.

Tom Silverman, founder and chief executive of Tommy Boy Records,
Marvels at the sudden popularity of "Cameltoe," comparing it to other Tommy Boy hits like "O.P.P.," by Naughty by Nature. "I've never seen anything like this in my life," he said. The album, he added, "could be a 10-million seller — it's possible."

The bigger "Cameltoe" gets, the more explaining Fannypack's members will have to do.

Jessibel remembers playing the song for her father for the first time. "My father's very old-fashioned," she said. "So he was like, 'Why are you singing about a camel?'"