

# EYE WEEKLY.COM

## FEATURES



### Step in the arena

BY DEL F. COWIE September 17, 2008 14:09

#### MANIFESTO FESTIVAL 2008

With Pete Rock, DJ Premier,  
Starting From Scratch, many  
more.

Sep 18-Sep 21. For complete  
festival lineup and tickets,  
see [www.themanifesto.ca](http://www.themanifesto.ca).

#### THE MAIN EVENT @ MANIFESTO FESTIVAL 2008

With Rascalz, k-os, K'Naan,  
Notes To Self, D-Sisive,  
HERO, DJ NaNa, more.

Sun, Sep 21. Nathan Phillips  
Square, 100 Queen W. Noon.  
Free.

In 1998, Vancouver hip-hop crew Rascalz and fellow Canadian MCs Checkmate, Kardinal Offishall and Thrust released "Northern Touch," a song that proved to be one of the most influential and important in Canadian hip-hop history. Its popularity fuelled a belief within the domestic hip-hop scene that they were on the verge of seeing sustained commercial success. Ten years later, the national pride those MCs expressed in "Northern Touch" finds an echo in Manifesto, a five-day urban music and art festival taking over venues all over the city of Toronto this week.

Much like last year's inaugural edition, the five-day festival culminates with a free outdoor concert in Nathan Phillips Square. The Main Event, the concert will feature an eclectic and heavyweight lineup of Canadian hip-hop that speaks to the vibrancy, depth and talent of hip-hop artists from Toronto. Celebrated locals such as K'naan and k-os are among those scheduled to perform, but it's the Rascalz themselves who are the headlining act. Their presence at the top of the list provides an opportunity to reflect on the state of hip-hop music in Canada.

In some ways, the hope that "Northern Touch" fuelled turned out to be short-lived. "You would think that we were a lot more advanced in this country," says Rascalz MC Red 1, looking back on the intervening decade. "We've stepped forward and we go like about 15 steps backwards."

So what happened to those efforts to build a homegrown hip-hop industry here in Canada? And where does that leave our artists?



Watch: Rascalz, "Northern Touch"

**Reflecting on the context that birthed "Northern Touch,"** Choclair describes the era as a time of heady expectations. "There were hip-hop artist magazine covers]. The Rascalz were already well-known at the time, Thrust was well-known at the time as well and I was just getting known," he explains, launching himself, launching people like Kardinal [Offishall] and getting a gold record for like the first time in a long time, [it was important]. The the bars that we went to that normally wouldn't do hip-hop — now they do hip-hop all the time. So I think it was a monumental track."

Choclair released his debut full-length shortly afterwards in 2000. Ice Cold went gold, but after his sophomore effort didn't sell as well, his relationship was severed. Since then, he's released his albums independently.

The expectations surrounding the release of Ice Cold were representative of the industry's attitude at the time towards domestic hip-hop.

"There was some pressure, I definitely felt it," Choclair says. "Everybody was looking to see what [Ice Cold] would do. It was like, if Choclair doesn't: real hip-hop music doesn't sell in Canada. Like, that was the overall tone of the pressure that I was feeling. And there was some pressure, but you gotta man up and deal with it."

In the years since the release of "Northern Touch," the presence of hip-hop as a dominant global culture has solidified and is an unassailable fact. Yet hip-hop artists are virtually invisible to the mainstream save for a select few, while US hip-hop artists in comparison receive consistent sales and a high number of outlets. The fact that Kardinal Offishall's "Dangerous," (which was co-produced by Rascalz' DJ Kemo, who also helmed "Northern Touch") is a huge hit recently-released album Not 4 Sale also underlines the reality for Canadian hip-hop artists. Kardinal's status as an artist ready to blow up has been recognized in Canada. His recent success though, is fruit borne from a US deal — admittedly not his first — with Senegal-born R&B singer Akon. So why didn't his success come sooner?

"It's almost like Canadians need to see that American co-sign," says Toronto-born, NY-based producer Marco Polo, who featured Kardinal on his hard-nosed 2007 album Port Authority. "Whatever happened to respecting someone 'cause they were dope, y'know and not who you're rolling with or [from]? But I really feel like that's what's going on with Kardi, myself and a lot of other Canadian artists that have left."

It's not the first time this question has been asked and, in fact, it's been a perpetual reality since the Toronto hip-hop scene's inception. But more than a strong feeling in the scene that change is needed.

"We have to shift gears," says Kardinal Offishall. "[How] people gauge success here is compared to other things that have come before it, but because we're not able to raise the hurdles, people are just happy with jumping the baby gate instead of the hurdles.

Meanwhile people around the world are hopping skyscrapers. Just because we've never hopped skyscrapers it doesn't mean that we can't. It just means we haven't done it before."



*Watch: Kardinal Offishall, feat. Akon, "Dangerous"*

**In the past decade (and even before),** the industry at large has played the part of the commitment-phobic partner — always promising they'll stick following up with a real pledge to develop the relationship.

Ty Harper, co-host of Flow 93.5's popular show OTA Live as well as the Megacity Countdown, quotes one of the godfathers of Canadian hip-hop's inside.

"I talked to Maestro and he broke it down best," says Harper. "He said 'Look, man we don't have an industry. We never had an industry. We have a f

"The successes are few and far between and we don't have a handle on why so and so is successful and why the other person wasn't. When Maestro came out in '89 and it's like another five or six years, if not more before we have another success story, maybe like a Chocclair, then we don't have an industry," says Harper. "We have spurts; spurts that are not necessarily connected to one standard or formula and that is not an industry."

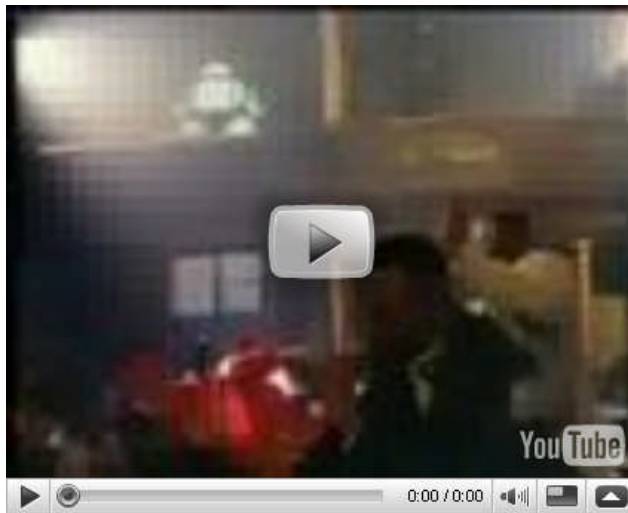
Says concert promoter Jonathan Ramos of REMG Entertainment, "The long and the short of it is I just don't think we have the base in terms of the market to support a lot of our talent."

"We can talk about the makeup of our country. If you can be an artist who just breaks and is successful within black music with a black audience in Toronto for a whole career. There's just tonnes of them, going back decades, who have done it. But you can't really be a black artist and have a solely black audience. It doesn't exist. You have to be mainstream — you have to cross over, so to speak."

The reason that artists such as k-os and Swollen Members have been successful is that they've been able to negotiate this reality. But without mainstream connections things can quickly go awry. Early tracks from Maestro (then known as Maestro Fresh Wes) and his hit 1989 album *Symphony in Effect* were mainstay radio stations. However, when radio didn't embrace his grittier sophomore release *Black Tie Affair*, it wasn't long before Maestro headed to the US in the hip-hop career. Soon, domestic hip-hop was virtually absent from all the Canadian major labels.

Of course, being signed to a major label in 2008 means something entirely different than to be signed to a major label in the '80s and '90s. The reality has affected all artists across all genres and the bottom line of record companies globally, and has spurred on the use of DIY promotion tactics. For hip-hop, it further accentuates the need for self-reliance.

"You don't really need a label to blow you up," says Koch Entertainment label manager Jay Devonish. "Labels aren't really into developing artists anymore about taking someone who has a buzz and making their buzz bigger."



Watch: *Maestro Fresh Wes, "Let Your Backbone Slide"*

**Toronto hip-hop artists are using a variety of strategies to generate that often-amorphous buzz** around their material. With home-recording drastically reducing the cost of making music and the proliferation of digital marketing and social networking, artists are focusing on building their pe on-line videos, producing mixtapes and sometimes giving away their music — though that approach comes with its own problems.

"[The question is,] how do you get all these lovers of hip-hop in Toronto to, in some way, give something in return for the great music that they're getting from great artists?" asks Harper. "Right now we have artists who are releasing songs and giving up their most valuable asset in a vicious cycle of building buzz: OK, I know Drake, or I know Mayhem Morearty because of the stuff they're giving away, but now that I know them, what's the next step? And that's short."

One recent initiative that is attempting to address this issue has been Koch Entertainment Canada's launch of their HipHopCanada Digital label in conjunction with [www.hiphopcanada.com](http://www.hiphopcanada.com), which has been set up for Canadian artists to sell their music in a digital marketplace.

"I think the model of the music industry has changed," says Koch Entertainment Canada's Devonish, explaining the motivation behind the label. "Radio is now the only ways people are now exposed to music; a lot of it is viral and online. So I think for me [it was] just seeing all the amazing talent in the singles and knowing that these guys have no means other than little street mom-and-pop shops to hustle to get their music out. If you're out there promoting and your video is in rotation and you have people interested in your product, there's gotta be a point of sale."

Notably, some Toronto hip-hop artists are taking that point of sale outside of the country, and even North America. Local crew Notes to Self (featuring champ DJ Dopey) have signed with tastemaker UK label BBE and are working with widely respected US group Dilated Peoples; Toronto turntablist du inked a deal with a label in Germany and Masia One just recently launched her new record in Japan.



Watch: Masia One, "Split Second Time"

**While global ambitions are admirable**, there's no greater avenue for hip-hop artists than beginning to build their rep doing shows locally and beyond. This applies to artists in all genres of music, but in the absence of an infrastructure in Canada for urban music, it becomes even more crucial for hip-hop a

"It's the only way," says Red 1. "The only way. You have to tour, it's the only way. If you want to make any, any, any headway in this [industry] you might judge you a certain way from your music but once they see you live [they] get to make that connection. They might be on the fence but once it that's when they really choose 'Yo, I love these guys' or 'Yeah, they're OK' or 'I don't like these guys.'"

However, promoters' famous reluctance to book hip-hop acts still exists, a condition that's sometimes based on ignorance, fear and prejudice. "There with hip-hop," says Choclair, who regularly tours across the country. "I remember some places were [billing me as] 'gangster rap.' I was like, 'Really:

Manifesto performers HERO, a Toronto/NY duo who are both originally from Edmonton, released their debut album *E-dot & Darp*. Malone are Hero ear generated much praise in US publications like *URB* and *XXL*. Though their brand of "grown-folks hip-hop" gets approval from heads in the scene, their soulful live show also attract people who usually don't even usually listen to hip-hop. Yet despite having put on many shows in California, Las Vegas, Toronto, touring Canada still hasn't been easy for them.

"As far as other regions in Canada go, it's been very difficult," says Malone. "We reached out to some independent booking agents and they weren't v

However, Ramos — who has booked HERO — says he has seen increasing willingness to book hip-hop acts in venues and says the opportunity exists

"That used to be an excuse where there was a lot of stigma attached to hip-hop shows and black artists," says Ramos. "But now, if you call up, at the artists and venues want to make money."

Whether or not the prospect of doing shows at home and abroad is getting better, there's no doubt that touring is a critical component in building a career if artists have to take matters into their own hands to make it happen. In the last year, MC Isis has toured several countries as one half of Thunderhead joined producer Grahmzilla, Isis once booked an entire solo tour that winged its way through the US strictly from her MySpace page, crashing at the homes of friends along the way.

"It was the MySpace / Your Couch tour," says Isis. "I slept on couches, did shows, sold CDs and it worked out well."

"Everyone talks about how hungry they are but being hungry doesn't mean you go to every open mic and freestyle. That's not being hungry. Being hungry is practical, tangible ideas. When everybody knows you can rap that's the first step. It's way bigger than being able to rap."



Watch: Thunderheist, "Jerk It"

**There's no single, comprehensive formula** to combatting the obstacles confronting hip-hop artists in Toronto and around the country. But there are initiatives, and the artistic pool of hip-hop talent still has yet to be adequately tapped. A manifestation of what many people are missing will be on display at The Main Event.

"If we look at it like a business, putting all these artists together on a stage makes it look like we have a product," says Brassmunk's King Reign. "After I went to the last [Manifesto], I heard them saying it kind of gave them a clearer picture of what we're dealing with.

"Sometimes you gotta put all your change together to see how much money you really have."

---

Email us at: [LETTERS@EYEWEEKLY.COM](mailto:LETTERS@EYEWEEKLY.COM) or send your questions to [EYEWEEKLY.COM](mailto:EYEWEEKLY.COM)  
625 Church St, 6th Floor, Toronto M4Y 2G1