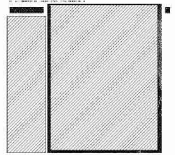


CHICAGO'S LEADERS OF THE NEW SCHOOL

A GENERATION OF DIVERSE ARTISTS IS PUTTING
CHICAGO ON TOP OF THE HIP-HOP GAME AGAIN



BY ADRIENNE SAMUELS GIBBS
Staff Reporter

Chicago's latest social media craze comes courtesy of a song called "Pop Out" by an artist named Katie Got Bandz. It's not a new song; the video has been on YouTube for months. Officially it has about 940,000 plays online, but if you add in all the people who ripped the video to their own sites, that viewership rises to over a million. If you frequent clubs such as Lumen on the North Side or Adrianna's out in Harvey, you've heard it in heavy rotation. If you listen to Power 92.3, you know the song was added to the weekly lineup in August and gets played somewhere around 50 times a week there.

Already signed to a local record label, Katie also just inked a deal with New York's **eOne Music**. As a result, some songs in her iTunes store jumped to \$1.29 from 99 cents. Her endgame?

"I want a gold record," said Katie, whose legal name is Kiara Johnson, 20. She hails from the Low End, near 35th Street, and calls herself a "Drillery Queen." "I want to be successful. I want to be as big as Jay Z and Kanye West. I want to set a trend for the females. I want to sell out arenas. I want to go on tour. I want to go overseas. I want to do it all."

And she's not alone, nor is she the first. Katie's growing popularity was paved by the work of the city's other massive hip-hop stars, including Da Brat, Common, Twista, Lupe Fiasco and, of course, Kanye West, who performs Tuesday and Wednesday at the United Center. She's part of a new generation of rappers offering a diversity to hip-hop and creating a sound that is fresh, new and that could quite possibly take over the nation. Granted, she's not as far along as Chief Keef, Chance the Rapper or Rockie Fresh — all of whom have national recognition — but she's getting there.

It seems that with all this new attention, Chicago artists could have a very good 2014.

"It's like history repeating itself," said

ROCKIE FRESH

Part of Rick Ross' Maybach Music Group, he's on a minitour now with Casey Veggies. Their joint mixtape, "Fresh Veggies," drops Monday.

JESSICA KOSCIELNIAK/SUN-TIMES

King Louie, also known as King L but born Louis Johnson. He is a featured rapper on labelmate Katie's "Pop Out" and a star in his own right: He's one year into a contract with Epic Records, is releasing the mixtape "Drilluminati 2" on Tuesday and was recently in Paris working with Kanye on a special project. He tosses out the successes of Twista and Common, adding that their careers dovetailed with a larger narrative of Chicago's strife. "All the violence and stuff just goes hand in hand with the music. It's Chicago's time just like it was Atlanta's [for the last five years.] It's everybody's time. All at once several artists have the light. We all got hip to YouTube. [We make] marketable music that people will purchase."

Social media is the new way to snag a record deal.

Louie proves it.

After getting put out of both South Shore and Hyde

Park high schools, he turned full time to music. He was growing in popularity but then he got hit by a car, an accident that broke both of his legs and put his career on hold. He had to learn to walk again. Now he's back on track. He was signed 18 months ago after having worked with Kanye's former manager, John "Monop" Monopoly, who saw Louie's YouTube videos. Monop introduced Louie to Larry "Larro" Wilson, CEO of local record company Lawless Inc.

Larro has several artists signed to his label, including Katie.

"Economically, [producing the Chicago sound] brings more into the city," said Larro, a father of four who hails from the Racine Courts housing area in the Morgan Park neighborhood. "The DJs gotta eat. The bottle girls gotta eat. The club owners gotta eat. The graphic designers who make the pluggers for the parties gotta eat. The print shop, those people gotta eat. All these people eat from a stream of revenue from having a major label in the city."

It can happen. It's happening now."

Katie and Louie are part of a movement of gritty, to-the-point "drill" music, a South Side-centric, subgenre of Chicago hip-hop. Chief Keef, the city's newest musical bad boy, performs drill too, although, to be clear, he didn't create it. Leave that designation to Young Chop, one of the genre's top producers.

Born Tyree Pittman, Young Chop was signed in summer 2012 to Warner Bros. Records, and he creates beats for a slew of artists who aren't Keef, including Kanye and French Montana. The city's diverse hip-hop sound is well-known, in his experience.

"[Industry insiders] know the scene," said Chop, 20, with history in Gresham but roots in Englewood. Right now he's working with Wiz Khalifa and P. Diddy on separate projects. "They be listening to everything! I swear to God. It shocks me every time. I be thinking we just listen to these people, but nah, the whole word is listening."

"IT'S CHICAGO'S TIME JUST LIKE IT WAS ATLANTA'S. IT'S EVERYBODY'S TIME. ALL AT ONCE SEVERAL ARTISTS HAVE THE LIGHT." KING LOUIE ON THE CITY'S HIP-HOP SCENE

Drill is popular, but it's not the only sound. Rockie delves into kind of an alt-rap, and Chance (just voted Spin magazine's rapper of the year and whose free mixtape, "Acid Rap," landed in the 63 spot on Billboard's rap charts the first week of release) has a signature sound that includes intricate, sometimes singsongy wordplay.

"I had a good rapport for having a different sound of music," said Fresh, 22, whose given name is Donald Pullen and who recently was signed to Rick Ross' Maybach Music Group. He's working on a 2014 album release and is on a mini-tour with Casey Veggies.

"I serve one purpose. Keef serves one purpose. Chance serves one purpose. You get a lot of different perspectives about what Chicago represents. It just depends what you're into," Fresh said.

Marcale "Calez" Lewis, 21, one of the city's more melodic rappers, is a fixture on the indie scene. He's popular. So much so that he's turned

down two music deals so he could stay an independent artist. He had to, he said, because they wanted him to change his flow to something more simplistic. More drill-ish.

"People have been throwing me offers, but it's really not about taking and running for me," said Calez, whose song "Peaceful" pretty much sums up his spirit. "It's really about building a foundation. They didn't see my vision. They wanted me to do it the way they wanted to do it. But I believe in myself."

That's a bold — and probably necessary — move, said Jitu "the Juggernaut" Brown, one of the members of Ten Tray, who in 1991 became the city's first rap group to snag a major record deal, "A lot of them have established themselves as solid independent artists and the option is theirs if they want to sign to a major deal or work their indie brand," said Brown, now a community organizer with the Kenwood Oakland Community Organization. "When we don't own our art, artists that try to say

something can't say it."

New artist Bebe O'hare is definitely saying what she wants. She's also, as of yet, unsigned. The Kenwood Academy grad, born Brittany Davis, has a management contract with a group with ties to Atlantic Records. Her mixtape "Fashionably Late," debuted on hip-hop blog fake-shoredrive last week and features a collaboration with Wiz Khalifa — a good sign. "It's all about progression," she said. "I want the next album to be even better."

Stay tuned for 2014.

"Now we have a scene where somebody is almost getting signed every other month. So it's really interesting," said King Thelonious, whose legal name is Thelonious Martin. He produced for Curren\$y and Rockie Fresh and last week was in the studio with hip-hop collective Odd Future. "Each and every way to attack hip-hop? Chicago got it all covered."

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KING LOUIE

Signed to Lawless Inc. and to Epic Records, Louie's "Drilluminati 2" releases Dec. 17.

JESSICA KOSCIELNIAK/SUN-TIMES

BEBE O'HARE

The unsigned artist's mixtape, "Fashionably Late," debuted on fakeshoredrive.com last week. Best Bet? Download "Southside."



YAZID BRITT PHOTO



KATIE GOT BANDZ

Signed to Lawless and eOne, her debut album will release in 2014.



CALEZ

One of Chicago's more melodic rappers and a fixture on the indie scene. He has turned down two music deals so he could stay an independent artist.