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THE NEW JEW REVIEW

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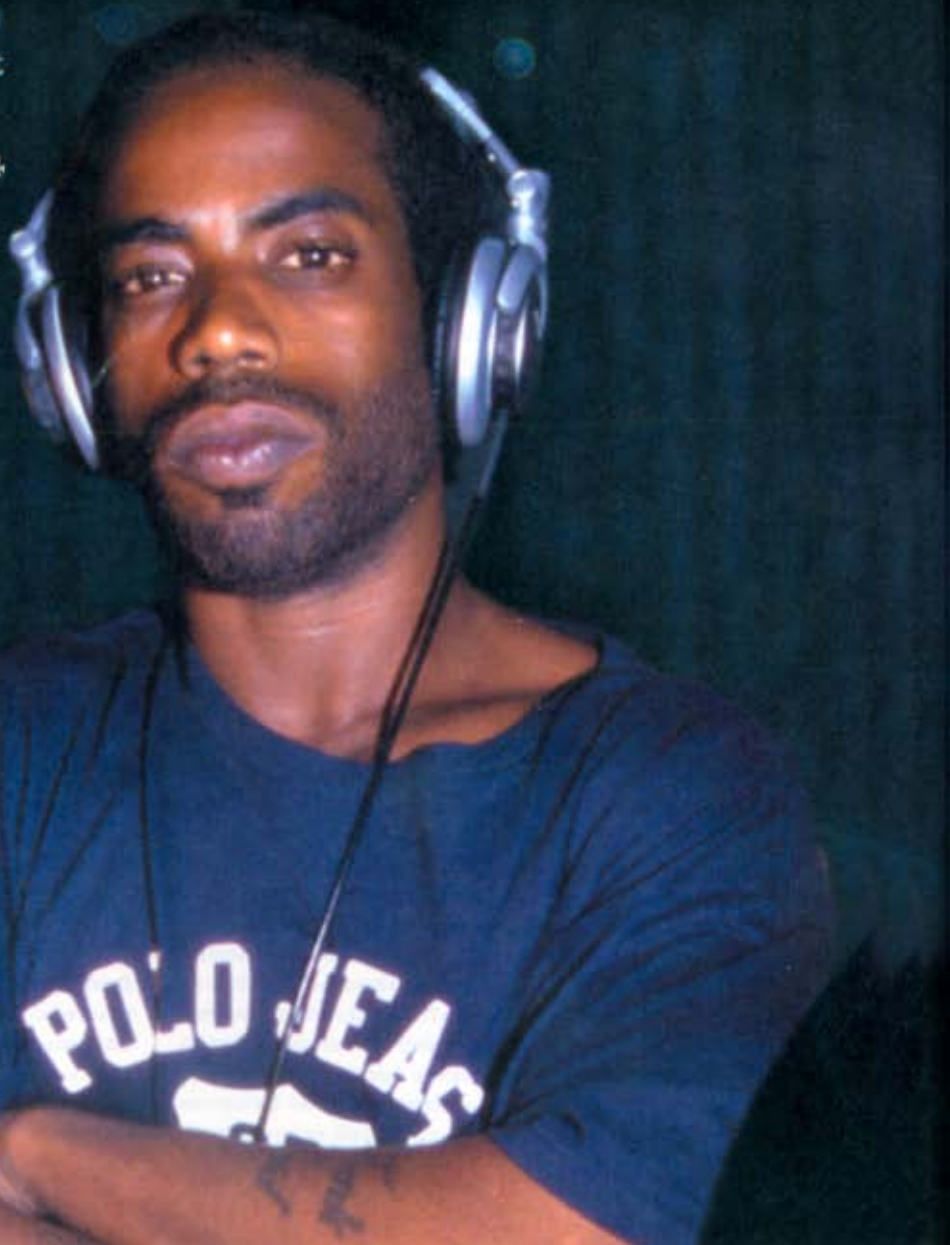
Some of the biggest names in hip-hop are Jewish. Just not the ones on stage

By Matthew Cowan Photographs by Seth Kushner

About two years ago, Jonathan Wolfson, a self-described neurotic Jew from Rockland County, New York, entered Mule Creek State Prison in Ione, California, 45 minutes outside Sacramento. It was Wolfson's first time in any penitentiary, let alone a Level 4 maximum-security penitentiary. The 30-year-old publicist was there to pitch a client.

Wolfson sat in a visiting room as the imposing figure of Suge Knight, the controversial CEO of Tha Row Records (formerly Death Row), came out to sit in front of him. "Basically," Wolfson recalls, "I said that Tha Row hadn't had anyone handling their PR in a long time, and that there was going to be a media frenzy upon Suge's release. I threw some numbers at him, and we talked about working together."

Within the first few minutes of their meeting, Knight asked Wolfson about his background.



"I told him I'm Jewish," Wolfson says. "He chuckled and said, 'Yeah, me too.' I joked, 'Yeah, you look it.' He said, 'Seriously, I have a lot of respect for Jews. They came to this country with nothing, they lived in their own communities and had their businesses and supported each other and built themselves up.' He wanted me to know he had respect." Since then, whatever one thinks of Knight's motives, he and Wolfson's work together at Tha Row has been what Wolfson describes as "a roller coaster," but they get along well, and have a productive, personable relationship.

Considering Jews in hip-hop is kind of like finding a stoop sale with a couple of interesting eye-catchers on the sidewalk, and a trove of far more significant treasures further up the stairs. The eye-catchers are the usual suspects—the Beastie Boys, Remedy of the Wu-Tang Clan, Blood of Abraham, Paul Barman—MCs whose skills vary and whose Jewishness defies the hip-hop norm. But, their presence on wax is nothing compared to what goes on behind the scenes. Indeed, some of the biggest names in the business are Jewish—Lyor Cohen of Def Jam, Steve Rifkind of Loud Records, David Mays of *The Source*—to say nothing of those who course throughout the industry as label executives, entertainment lawyers, agents, publicists, producers, clothiers, and jewelers. An inquiry to one inevitably references five more: "Oh, have you talked to Gottleib at FUBU? Or Sonenberg who handles Wyclef?" The Jewish presence in hip-hop is huge, and, for the most part, offstage.

From block parties to the height of pop culture, hip-hop's 20-year ascension has been remarkable for its speed, and adaptability. It has exploded into a global phenomenon with enormous social implications and an economic tsunami with infinite marketing possibilities. Likewise, the cultural input into hip-hop has become dizzying. Japanese kids with perfectly coiffed dreadlocks breakdance to lyrics they don't understand. Jay-Z raps for peace over a Punjabi beat. Jamie Kennedy gets such shine from portraying a corny rapper named Gluckman that he finds himself at nightclubs with real rappers named Li'l Kim and Fabolous. Kids from all backgrounds feel the film "8 Mile"—the money shot of which has a white kid defeating a black kid in a battle by outing him for his bourgeoisness. In this climate, the role of Jews can perhaps only be discussed, not decoded.

Paul Rosenberg is a giant in the industry. Both figuratively—he's Eminem's manager, president of Goliath Records, and vice president of Shady Records, to which both Eminem and 50 Cent are signed—and literally: he's 6 feet 5 inches tall, and 300 pounds. Like Eminem, Rosenberg is from the Detroit area, although from the suburbs rather than the city. "People weren't checking for hip-hop back then in the suburbs like they are now," he says. During his senior year of high school and freshman year of college, Rosenberg began rapping, going by the name MC Paul Bunyan in a group called Rhythm Cartel that played Detroit's few hip-hop venues. After a couple years of moving back and forth between the classroom and the stage, he chose to go to law school rather than pursue a career as a rapper. When asked why, he jokes that being Jewish, he had to. He quickly rescinds the joke, and speaks in earnest about his educational goals. I'm struck by his change in career path and the implications that came from it. Rosenberg was—and is—extremely passionate about hip-hop, and he certainly had the desire to be a rapper. But he somehow ended up more of a contributor to the music's framework than to the music itself.

The very idea of the machinations of Jews behind the scenes is a topic of historical controversy and itinerant conspiracy theories. There is a well-

documented legacy—painful on both sides—of Jewish involvement in black music. From the early days of jazz and blues through rock n' roll until now, there have been accusations of Jewish executives like Morris Levy and Herman Lubinsky exploiting black talent. In an upcoming documentary produced by Martin Scorsese and directed by Marc Levin, Alfred Chess passionately defends his father and uncle from such charges. The history of black performers being denied musical credit and proper financial remuneration is an injustice in itself, as well as a reminder of so many other facets of racism. Hip-hop is a different game, though. To posit that its contractual dynamics are the same as its musical predecessors is to deny the savvy of black artists and executives; to underestimate the real musical passion of Jews in the industry; and to ignore some of the most egregious examples of abuse (no one, for example, has ever accused a Jew of hanging a rapper out the window by his ankles until he signed over his publishing rights). It is to neglect the changing social climate, the real melting pot that has led more young whites, Jewish and not, to know black people not as an unfamiliar 'other,' but just as the peers with whom they grew up. And most importantly, it denies that the music industry is intrinsically set up to exploit artists, regardless of who they are.

Amid the paraphernalia in entertainment lawyer Michael Selverne's impressive corner office are two huge photos taken by his wife of an old Jewish couple, opposite a blown-up *Rolling Stone* cover autographed by the Fugees ("Mike, keep making us that money"). Selverne argues that animosity between artists and labels is structural rather than ethnic. "The basic model used by all record companies creates a misalignment of interests," he explains. "In our industry, the label invests money, and once that money is repaid, the label continues to own the product, the business, the rights, the right to control the trade name and brand, etc. This is true in artist's agreements, joint ventures, and label deals. It's part of why they don't work. The brand is serving two masters whose economic agendas are not the same. This misalignment of interests promotes the dysfunctional, often adversarial nature of artist-label relations." Or, as Q-Tip put it succinctly in the song, "Check The Rhime"—"Industry rule 4,080/Record company people are shady."

Selverne argues for smaller labels that take more time to cultivate artists and move away from the hit single-driven paradigm that makes today's rap stars so disposable. Tru Criminal Records is such a label. It was started in the early 90s by Lee Resnick, a 29-year-old Jewish kid from Long Island. Like Paul Rosenberg, Resnick—known in the industry as Skill—started out as a rapper. At 17, he got a deal with Geffen from which he was quickly dropped. "I wasn't good enough," he says. "But I knew that I could tell what was." After college, he ran through a couple of internships and had a very Jewish revelation: that he didn't want to work for anyone else. He took \$5,000 of his bar mitzvah savings, his partner did the same, and they started Tru Criminal. The label matched up new artists in whom Resnick

When asked why he chose to go to law school rather than pursue a career as a rapper, Paul Rosenberg jokes that being Jewish, he had to.

Innocent stuff. In this media-saturated era, celebrities and aspiring celebrities won't say much that's controversial, and few straight up dis their current management on the record. But my take on FT's hesitance didn't fully support the utopian ideal that Skill espouses. Again, exploitation is a tempting word to use when the product of a small group of kids (mostly black) make so many ancillary people (mostly white, many Jewish) so much money. But in this instance, it's important to complexify the term. Most hip-hop tells the stories of people in the shadows of American life, told by the people who live there. If we think it's important that the stories of people facing poverty and discrimination are told; and if we think it's best that these stories come from the people actually experiencing that life, rather than the Kozols and Kotlowitzes of the world; and if we take hip-hop seriously; then Skill, by creating a channel for the words of kids he scouts in the projects and the friends of friends out there, would seem to be doing profoundly progressive work. The verse FT kicked over and over in the studio that day engraved itself in my brain: *I ain't in this biz for nothing/Niggas pushing Cadillacs while my ribs is touching/How I got time for a big discussion when I'm hungry and my kids are fussing/But you don't hear me though.* For better or worse, this is a radical statement, and a Jewish kid from Long Island is paving the way for people to hear it.

Hip-hop is a game so much about money that it's tempting to boil the whole topic down to one sentence: Everybody wants to get paid. But I like to think it's about more than that. In many ways, it crystallizes two of American cultures' most interesting strains. The first is that of the outlaw—the tradition of plowing a renegade path to power when the conventional paths are prohibited. My thoughts about hip-hop as an outlaw form were echoed by Marc Levin. Levin, the director of *Slam*, *Whiteboyz*, and *Brooklyn Babylon*, is a middle-aged, middle-class Jewish guy who has made some of the most honest and searching films about hip-hop. "Gangster culture is about being an outsider," Levin says. His cluttered office is filled with placards bearing the names of actors who will be appearing in upcoming episodes of the show he produces, "Street Time," a cop drama on Showtime. One scrawled pair of index cards announces the unlikely pairing of Judd Hirsch with Fat Joe. "You have a white Protestant culture, and you have the immigrants," he continues. "The entertainment world was seen as somehow below what respectable people would do, so it opened up to the outsiders. Being gangsters was outside. Gangster capitalism was how many Jewish businesses started, Italian businesses started, black businesses started. These guys ran the whorehouses and the dives, the jazz clubs and the speakeasies. There has always been an intersection between the creative and entertaining, and the muscle, the mob and crime, because they were both outside what was considered legitimate. Jews were part of it, a big part. Look at Arnold Rothstein," he says, referring to the iconic gambler and gangster who allegedly fixed the 1919 World Series. "Lucky Luciano and Meyer Lansky were students of Rothstein's." This gangster aesthetic is all over rap music—a whole subsection of the music is called "gangsta," of course, and artists name themselves after Capone, Gotti, Murder Inc. and even Meyer Lansky. The drive to succeed in spite of the mainstream's barriers is no longer as relevant to Jews now that, generations into our American experience, we enjoy unfettered access to virtually all the hallways of power. But it is still in our system, and it still connects us to a world that celebrates the triumph of the outlaw—a world where determination, ruthlessness, and boundless energy have a fighting chance against the barriers put up to keep outsiders out.

**We're still connected to a world that celebrates the triumph of the outlaw.**

The other metaphorical space in which hip-hop resides is the utopian. Although the kind of activism espoused by the civil rights movement has been mostly marginalized, there are certain parts of hip-hop culture that address the same combination of black empowerment, cultural harmony, and progressive politics that informed that movement. Multifaceted urban mogul Russell Simmons and Rabbi Mark Schneier are the cornerstones of the Foundation for Ethnic Understanding, a group that aims to bring blacks and Jews together to lobby for mutually beneficial political goals. In the Upper East Side brownstone from which the foundation runs, the smooth-talking, immaculately dressed Schneier emphasizes the utopian goals of the organization, which has honored Jay-Z, Lyor Cohen, P-Diddy, Steve Resnick, and Damon Dash, among others. "We're a voice of conscience," he says. "Blacks and Jews need to take a step back and acknowledge that we have this genuine relationship, and remind ourselves that it was the alliance of blacks and Jews that brought about the greatest social change in the history of this country. When you see someone like Russell Simmons or P-Diddy or Jay-Z putting their stamp on this cause, that will disseminate, that will trickle down to young people. We have to recognize the strength of our similarities. We're minorities, we have shared concerns—discrimination, hate crimes, foreign aid."

Simmons echoes Schneier: "A lot of my business partners have been Jewish," he says. "As far as relationships in the industry go, I think we're past any discrimination. The alliance between blacks and Jews is a natural one."

In many corners of the hip-hop world, the visions extend far beyond alliances between blacks and Jews. Identity and 'realness' are such currency in this community that, at its best, people are forced to fully embrace who they really are and where they come from and are then invited to join in on a world that embraces rebellion against authority, progressive politics, ecstatic multiculturalism and transgressive humor. Hip-hop is one of few subcultures in which people say "peace" to one another without irony. At its inclusive best, hip-hop is today's bohemia, where creativity and spontaneity are supremely celebrated. Like jazz and rock n' roll before it, hip-hop can be a retreat into meritocratic ideals backed by a nice beat. The culture of hip-hop is exciting mostly because it's still flush with possibility.

About a year after Jonathan Wolfson pitched his PR services to Suge Knight, a young, black hip-hop producer named Eddie Bezael was riding shotgun in a Jeep making its way through Lower Manhattan. Driving the car was a colleague of Bezael's, an entrepreneurial hip-hop veteran—let's call him IQ—another young black man, and he was angry. IQ was venting to Bezael about an older, white executive they both knew. "That dude is mad shysty," IQ fumed. "He's Jewish, man. He's definitely Jewish." This rant would seem to be evidence of the rancor felt towards Jewish guys in the business, but the conversation took a quick and unexpected turn: "Look, are we cool?" Bezael asked IQ. "Yeah, we're cool," IQ responded. "Well, let me tell you something," continued Bezael, the son of Ethiopian Orthodox Jews and a proud graduate of Westchester Hebrew High School. "That dude is shysty, but he's not Jewish. I'm Jewish." As a black Jew in the music business, Bezael is in a rarefied position to weigh in on this particular intersection of ethnicity, culture and commerce. As he recounted this story to me, it was clear he didn't believe IQ harbored genuinely anti-Semitic feelings, but was rather employing a kind of unfortunate ethnic shorthand that comes to many in moments of anger. "People in the industry have all kinds of perceptions," Bezael summarizes. "But in the end, what really matters is that you bring music that's really hot." **H**

saw potential with established producers, and a few of their early records made some noise, including "Heavy Metal Things" featuring Pharoah Monche. Resnick rolled all the profits back into the company and lived at home to save money. "All my friends moved to the city, were getting laid, and I couldn't even take a girl home because I was living with my parents," he says. Now the tables have turned. "I own my place in Manhattan. I'm more financially stable than most of them. And best of all, I don't have to wear a suit."

When I met Skill, he most definitely wasn't wearing a suit. He told me I'd recognize him because he looks "like MC Serch without glasses." His is the paradigmatic aesthetic of the young Jew in hip-hop—the oversized sportswear, the close-cropped hair shaved to a suede-like terrain, a modified pimp roll, and an easy way with slang. The term "suedehead" to describe this aesthetic was introduced to me by Larry Zimmer, president of the Johnny Blaze clothing line, when I ran into Skill in Zimmer's office a couple days after we'd met. Zimmer is a Jewish hip-hop icon of another type. In his fifties with longish hair and an open collar, he chain-smokes Bel-Airs and is more likely to dip into Yiddish than street slang. Like other Jews who produce hip-hop fashion at companies like FUBU, Phat Farm, and Lutz, Zimmer and his ilk are basically old-time schmatte salesmen who now deal in baggy jeans and retro-sports jerseys. He sees his work as part of a cultural tradition. "Jews have always been in the garment business," he declares. "I think if you go back to our European origins, we all had to have a trade, and Jews had a flair for clothes." When Zimmer started Johnny Blaze in 1997, he was more into Bob Seger and Chicago than Wu-Tang and Lauryn Hill, but like all good businessmen, he had his ear to the ground (or, in this case, BET). "I was in young menswear, and whether I liked the music or not, I saw that this is where the business was going." Since then, Zimmer says he has come to enjoy and embrace the music. He especially likes DMX and P-Diddy, and can talk about what styles the kids are going to "feel" with surprising authority.

Indeed, it is the business of the fashion world to know how trends unfold, and it is acknowledged that embracing urban youth is the best way to market to kids worldwide. Larry Schwartz is the CEO of Lutz, a company that has cooled off since its heyday in the 90s, but was then near-ubiquitous in the hip-hop world, endorsed by such rap icons as Funkmaster Flex, Rakim, Snoop and EPMD. Schwartz's grandfather had a shoe business on Duane Street in lower Manhattan. On the wall of Schwartz's SoHo office hangs the old sign that adorned his grandfather's store, and on his desk sits a signed picture of KRS-ONE ("To Larry, you are hip-hop"). Schwartz marries a concern for the issues facing urban youth with a near-scientific understanding of fashions' paths. "A new trend starts with a group of kids in New York, goes down to Philly, Baltimore and DC," he says confidently. "Once it gets to Atlanta, it'll go throughout the South, and at the same time jump across to Chicago and to Oakland and then San Francisco. While the trend moves down the coast, it will also go down the I-80 corridor. And then of course to Tokyo, Paris, Düsseldorf, and so forth."

There's an obvious difference between guys like Zimmer and Schwartz, who are businessmen embracing a market, and guys like Rosenberg and Skill, who have been personally immersed in hip-hop culture for most of their lives. But they all have an optimistic view of intercultural relations as

it pertains to their work. Zimmer gushes about what he sees uniting them. "Jews, Italians and blacks were the only ones to step up [to the hip-hop market]," he says. "The WASPs were sailing with Biffy on Sundays—they don't give a shit about us. We're passionate people. We'll grab a brother, grab a good friend, hug him and kiss him. If you're a passionate person, you work best around other passionate people."

Schwartz is more circumspect about his relationship with the hip-hop community. For him, it's more about respect than commonality. Sensitivity towards the culture to which he markets is both a moral choice and a marketing decision. "We've been fair and honest in our dealings and respectful of the culture," he says. "That's how we'd do it anyway, but since it's a culture that's not our own, we go the extra mile to understand it. When you make mistakes, you show you're not down."

Rosenberg and Skill, with their rapping backgrounds and easy socialization with hip-hop heads of all colors, are more reflexive with their race- and religion-blindness. "I think one of the great things about rap music right now is that there's just not much stigma attached to race and religion," Rosenberg says. He had just gotten back from a tour in Japan with Eminem and Xhibit. Asked if issues of culture and ethnicity ever came up in the course of their travels, his laugh and prompt dismissal of the question indicated just how far off that idea was from the reality of what happens backstage. Skill, likewise, senses no conflict between his Jewishness and his career. He speaks with great pride and concern about his artists, and with passion about the connection between them. "We're all from different backgrounds, we all grew up completely differently," he says. "But we all have the same belief in each other. That's what's important."

I believe Zimmer and Schwartz when they say they respect the people who comprise their market, and I believe Skill and Rosenberg when they talk about the egalitarianism they experience in hip-hop. But I also know that the philosophy espoused during an interview can differ from how things go down in actuality. With Skill's permission, I attended a recording session at which a Tru Criminal artist named Fue That recorded a new track over a lush Just Blaze beat. For all the glamour and dynamism of the music industry, actually watching a song come together can be excruciatingly boring. For five hours, FT (as he's called) lays down the first of three verses over the track. Just off the Anger

Management Tour with Eminem and Ludacris, FT is poised to blow up. He came to Tru Criminal through a friend of Skill's, and his lyrical talent and endearing personality have brought him quickly into the fold. By the time I interviewed him, he had been rhyming and chain-smoking blunts for hours. It was apparent that he thought our conversation would be standard hip-hop journalist fare—"How do you get inspiration for your lyrics? Do you have beef with anyone else in the industry?"—and he seemed taken aback by questions about the Jewish head of his label. At one point, he looked at his friend like, "What the fuck is this?" I asked about Skill's contention that everyone at Tru Criminal was in the game together. He acknowledged that they are in it together, that they're close, and that their financial fortunes co-mingle. But he was guarded as well. "I don't know about us all having each other's back," he said. "When the big business decisions come down, I turn to my family, my mom and my pops."

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