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The Construction of "Street Credibility" in Atlanta's Hip-Hop Music Scene: Analyzing the Role of Cultural Gatekeepers

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This article aims to examine the role that on-the ground cultural gatekeepers play in the commodification of rap artists in Atlanta prior to the artists' global distribution. These gatekeepers—including strip club DJs, street teams, local radio hosts/program directors, and media managers—act as intermediaries between the corporations that produce and distribute the rap artists and a wider consumer market. Despite changes in the cultural industries and the availability of new technologies that allow an artist to gain wider distribution more immediately, cultural gatekeepers—particularly in Southern rap music—continue to facilitate a rapper's brand-building and credibility-making efforts within a specific geographic region. This is why conglomerates such as Universal, Warner Music Group, and Sony, which own most of the major recording labels, continue to invest resources in winning the approval of these local intermediaries. This study looks at how these dynamics influence the cultural production process and why they are important in understanding cultural industries, branding in hip-hop music, and the relationships between rappers and local consumers.

Keywords: Cultural production; Hip-hop; Intermediaries; Gatekeepers; Cultural industries

Since the mid-2000s, mainstream rap music has shifted away from the East Coast–West Coast binary to the South. As scholars such as Miller (2004) and Grem (2006) argue, the South, particularly cities such as Atlanta, New Orleans, and Houston, has enjoyed significant visibility in hip-hop and popular culture. Rappers such as Ludacris, T.I., and Lil' Wayne are no longer just popular Southern rappers, having

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emerged as cultural icons and formidable brands in their own right. As a result, Southern cities have benefited as cultural production hubs. Indeed, as Rushton and Thomas (2005) point out in their study of Atlanta's music industries, "success breeds success, as industry players are drawn to the attractions of what economists refer to as a 'thick' market" (p. 9).

The South's rise in hip-hop has made Southern rappers more popular and created "thick" markets in cities such as Atlanta, but it has not significantly shifted the dynamics of production and distribution in the hip-hop industries. Even with the rise of the internet and the prominence of "ring tone" rappers since the late 2000s, the production and distribution of mainstream rap continues to be controlled largely by corporations based in New York and Los Angeles. As a result, the nature of cultural production, particularly in understanding the political economy of the hip-hop and music industries, has not changed dramatically (Hesmondhalgh, 2007). While the distribution of texts has been significantly impacted by technological changes over the past decade, cultural industries have been surprisingly adaptive to these new consumption environments, investing less in artist development and more in short-term strategies—focusing on online-only music sales, re-mixing hit singles, or remaking old songs, and targeting younger consumers at the expense of older, more savvy ones—that yield more immediate returns (Fox, 2005; Williamson & Cloonan, 2007).

The consolidated nature of production and distribution governing the way in which cultural industries operate should not take away from the complex and dynamic processes that take place at the local level. As Verstraeten (1996) points out, political economy often understates or completely ignores the nature of labor processes within larger institutions. As Gibson (2003) also notes, "the 'work' of music cannot be divorced from the social networks of people who make and promote it, and the sites they occupy in order to do so" (p. 205). Despite changes in the cultural industries and the availability of new technologies that allow an artist to gain wider distribution more immediately, cultural gatekeepers, particularly in Southern rap music, continue to wield heavy influence in the construction of artist credibility within a specific geographic region. This is why conglomerates such as Universal, Warner Music Group, and Sony, which own most of the major recording labels, continue to invest resources in winning the approval of these local intermediaries. As Gibson (2003) points out, "cultural production is channeled through gatekeepers, individuals in a range of settings who manage and promote certain flows of sounds images, words and commodities" (p. 205).

In this essay, I argue that local gatekeepers are vital to a corporation's efforts to build a rapper, not only from a perspective of hip-hop legitimacy, but also from an economic one in which the corporation seeks the maximum return on investment. Creative intermediaries help to frame cultural production in ways that are localized and geographically specific, yet still conform to the bottom line. This study, informed by previous scholarship on the cultural industries, looks at how these dynamics influence the cultural production process and why they are important in understanding cultural industries, branding in hip-hop music, and the relationships

between rappers and local consumers. This article focuses on the case of Atlanta rapper Gorilla Zoe and the intermediaries involved in his brand-building efforts before the release of his 2007 debut album *Welcome to The Zoo* and his 2009 follow-up, *Don't Feed Da Animals*.[1] This article includes numerous interviews that serve to highlight the various stages of gatekeeping involved in the cultural production process. The insights of those interviews, as these next pages will show, are invaluable to understanding some of the paradoxes of "glocalization" and the cultural industries (Robertson, 1995).

Cultural Gatekeepers as Creative Intermediaries

Perhaps the biggest tension between scholars of political economy and cultural studies is the idea of who and what exactly influences cultural production, and how these influences manifest themselves in the final cultural product (Banks, 2007; Hesmondhalgh, 2007). Part of the problem in understanding hip-hop as a cultural industry driven by corporate dictates is that previous scholarship has focused too much on differentiating hip-hop from other cultural texts. As a result, there has been too much emphasis on understanding the genre's Otherness and not enough on its symbiotic and co-opted relationship with corporate capitalism (Kelley, 2005).

Making hip-hop music into a commodity has been a more complex process than previous scholarship suggests, particularly as it pertains to the relationships between rappers and corporate decision-makers. For example, Negus (2004) argues that the commodification process is influenced by the values of white music executives who make the management decisions about music labels. The problem with Negus's analysis, as Hesmondhalgh (2007) later points out, is that it assumes too much of a one-to-one relationship between rappers and those who make final production and distribution decisions. Negus's research on rap is also based on an older, pre-conglomerate era of the music industry, when there were more "majors" competing for top artists and bigger market share. What Negus does not deny is that rap music's spectacular profitability, particularly during the 1990s and early 2000s, made owning a piece of the hip-hop market sensible for any major corporation. As a result, the labels that have epitomized hip-hop's prominence in popular culture—Def Jam, Bad Boy, Death Row, Cash Money, So So Def, and Roc-A-Fella—are now either wholly owned by or in joint operating agreements with major corporations such as Universal, Sony, and Warner Music Group (Basu, 2005). The black executives at these labels, including label founders or hip-hop artists such as Russell Simmons, Jermaine Dupri, and Sean "Puffy" Combs, are relegated to the role of being intermediaries between the corporation and the lower levels of labor that are tasked with commodification and accomplishing the corporation's bottom line. Basu (2005) argues that "in essence, they are no longer more than titular CEOs who are 'media moguls by name, millionaires by bank balance, but paid staff nonetheless'" (p. 267). Basu's assessment, while true on face value, tends to oversimplify the organizational hierarchy of corporate-controlled music labels.

Studies that generalize cultural industries also tend to homogenize music scenes, which have become an important focus of study. For example, in their examination of Kingston, Jamaica's music industries, Power and Hallencreutz (2006) note that there are many stakeholders—often with competing interests—in the cultural production process. Peterson (1997, 2005) focuses on gatekeeping as a primary means of establishing a label/corporation's market reach. Peterson notes that the construction of authenticity is a means to sell an artist and a brand; the more authentic a product appears to be, the better the product can sell. Moreover, if a song or an image is successful, "artists, songwriters and those in the industry will look for other songs that could be shaped along the lines of the hit song. Decisions are made ostensibly to satisfy fan tastes, but in practice they are made largely to satisfy the expectations of the next gatekeeper in the decision chain" (Peterson, 2005, p. 1091).

Fleshing out some of Peterson's claims, Ryan (1992) makes note of creative intermediaries, the different actors in the cultural production process responsible for helping the corporation meet its bottom line, yet able to exert some influence in how an artist is commodified. Ryan claims that these creative intermediaries guide the cultural production process while allowing the corporation to maintain a general format by which texts are reproduced. Moreover, there have always been layers between the rapper and the corporate decision-makers, which have helped to give rappers a claim to autonomy and "keeping it real." In Southern rap, these layers are even more pronounced, as rappers in Atlanta and New Orleans are often produced by local recording labels owned by or working in conjunction with one of the "majors" based in New York or Los Angeles (Grem, 2006). Two of the prominent Southern labels are Cash Money, the New Orleans production house owned by Universal since 2000, and Block Entertainment, which has been owned by Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group since 2005. Gorilla Zoe is signed to Block Entertainment, established by former music talent scout, Russell "Block" Spencer. Local labels such as Block are, as one executive noted, recruiting grounds for rappers, and, by extension, their owners are the creative intermediaries with the most on-the-ground impact in the cultural production process.

By allowing the local production houses to develop artists (or for the artists to have their own local label), corporations are able to build a rapper's brand recognition by making him/her consumable for regional audiences. These regional audiences, mediated by the gatekeepers mentioned in the next section, are often the prerequisite for the rapper to gain access to a wider consumption market and to be signified as authentic to a given locale.

Building Street Credibility, Manufacturing Authenticity

The rise of Southern rap, as Watkins (2005) notes, shows how hip-hop spread by appealing to audiences using local vernaculars and subcultural expressions. But the economics of hip-hop do not vary greatly by region. The cultural production process in the Northeast, Midwest, West, and South rap scenes have been heavily intermediated to ensure that artists come close to meeting labels' investments. While

the digital age has contributed greatly to rap music's de-spatialization, place and space continue to be points of emphasis, especially as the need for the consumer to know where a rapper is from often dictates the relationship between a rapper and his/her audience (Forman, 2002; Kahn-Harris, 2006). Southern rap has also distinguished itself from other regions by blurring the urban and rural, particularly in visual representations (Grem, 2006). Moreover, Southern rappers have taken great pains to distance themselves geographically and symbolically from other regions, which has cultivated a perception among rap fans that the cultural production of Southern rap, along with the business practices associated with it, are distinct from other regions (Miller, 2004).

Films such as *Hustle and Flow*, and songs such as Nas's "Get Down" lionize Southern rap as more connected to the streets, often highlighting the selling-music-from-the-trunk-of-one's-car narrative. This street hustle, which has been part of the branding of rappers such as Master P, Ludacris, and David Banner (to name a few), has helped to make Southern rap seem different from the more corporatized structures of New York and Los Angeles, which developed reputations as rap factories in the 2000s (Grem, 2006). Simply put, the perceived functioning of Southern rap industries has augmented Southern rap's narrative of street credibility, which is the genre's most powerful rhetoric.

To be "street credible," a rapper must relate to a specific experience or locale, and, more importantly, tie his/her identity with the ghetto and its presumed norms. Despite the fact that the majority of mainstream rap music is consumed by people outside of black and Latino communities, being street credible, as Watkins (2005) argues, implies that a rapper has been approved by inner-city blacks from within his/her own region. Building street credibility is a major aspect of hip-hop's cultural production and commodification, and, as a result, corporate labels have to be savvy in how they produce and market rappers as real. The South's rise to prominence in hip-hop, as scholars such as Miller (2004) and Grem (2006) note, corresponded with the commercial success of groups such as Goodie Mob and Outkast, and the ensuing rush by the majors to work with Southern rap artists. Shawn Prez, head of Bad Boy's marketing arm, Power Moves, notes that "labels like Bad Boy and Def Jam and some of the predominantly East Coast only labels paid attention ... when Soundscan started turning toward the Southern artists" (S. Prez, personal communication, January 29, 2009).

Although the distribution of Southern rap music is not markedly different from the distribution models of rap in other regions, Southern rappers and their labels boast of being independent, small business owners.[2] In the past, Southern rappers such as the Ghetto Boys, Eightball & MJG, and the Dungeon Family—a loosely connected clique of Atlanta rappers that includes Outkast—could reach unofficial platinum sale levels through local distribution models and marketing directly to their base consumers. However, as the "majors" began buying out Atlanta-, Memphis-, New Orleans-, and Houston-based production houses, many of the marketing and outreach efforts continue outwardly to resemble the small business model. This, as Grem (2006) argues, was done in order to help Southern rap labels maintain core

local audiences. When it was time to reach a national audience, however, Southern rappers embraced the majors in order to gain brand recognition and exposure on music video networks such as BET and MTV. The increased attention and investment that major corporations such as Warner Music Group, Universal, and Sony have made in the South, notably Atlanta, which serves as the basis of this study, have helped to spotlight cultural production in the South.

Before defining the gatekeepers, it is important to define the "scene" being studied. Kruse (1993) argues that music scenes are subcultural, where meanings are negotiated before they are appropriated into commodities. Kruse (1993), for example, notes that scenes are vital to understanding the dynamics between artists and their audiences, especially in terms of how they construct their identities. Commodified identities, she argues, might become more fluid in the mainstream, but on the local level, they must have salience to the audience. Condry (2007) notes a more nuanced dialectical relationship between music scenes and cultural industries. Atlanta's music scene is a cluster of industries, as Scott (2000) and Power and Hallencreutz (2006) would argue, although these industries are often consolidated or have overlapping commercial interests. Despite the de-spatialization of popular music consumption as a result of the internet, the local continues to be a heavy source of corporate investment in Atlanta, primarily because the long-established gatekeeping networks that helped to create a formidable rap music scene in the 1990s continue to exist.

The gatekeepers directly involved in the production process are the creative intermediaries, whose task is to ensure that the cultural product yields the highest return on investment (Ryan, 1992). The most influential creative intermediaries are the heads of the Southern production houses that recruit and produce the rappers. Block Spencer, the founder of Block Entertainment, established his studio on Memorial Drive in the heart of Atlanta's Kirkwood and East Lake communities. Spencer's eye for cutting-edge Atlanta sound, coupled with his credibility among the local hip-hop scene, makes him the ideal intermediary for the Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group's New York-based decision-makers. When Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group co-opted Block Entertainment, Spencer was named CEO of Bad Boy South, an imprint that has no Atlanta offices and essentially operates out of the Block Entertainment studio. As music executive Kenny Burns notes, "the only reason Bad Boy South exists is because Puffy wants his hand in the South, so he gets him a person that can lock it down, so to speak, for him" (K. Burns, personal communication, December 29, 2008).

Spencer signs rappers to his label, but he takes on a more informal role that blurs the boundaries between workplace and social space. He acts as the father figure or big brother to the artists he signs, claiming to have their interests at heart and shielding them from the directives of New York decision-makers. Rico Brooks, the manager for Gorilla Zoe and other Block artists, says that Spencer's understanding of the Southern scene helps him to advocate for his artists. He says that having Spencer as a go-between ameliorates the tension that some Southern rappers feel in answering to executives in New York.

> The execs, they're in tall buildings in New York and they . . . don't get the Southern movement, because the way we move, the way we talk, the way we walk, the way we act—it's totally different. Like I know my guys hated going to New York, because in New York it's just a little different, the way they come first with each other. It's not like the whole Southern thing so they do box you in, and they do have a certain conception, it's like a certain perception. (R. Brooks, personal communication, October 23, 2008)

While Brooks's comments appear to validate some of Negus's claims about executives' values, they seem to do more to underscore the importance of creative intermediaries as gatekeepers, as observed by Ryan (1992) and Peterson (1997, 2005). But these comments also seek to re-affirm the perception that the business of Southern rap, whether in Atlanta, Memphis, or New Orleans, is both organizationally and culturally different than that of other regions.

Spencer is a self-described "street CEO," and his connection to Atlanta is a powerful selling point for his label, which in turn helps to legitimize Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group's presence in the Atlanta hip-hop realm. While Spencer is more of the corporate headquarters' eyes and ears when it comes to recruiting and cultivating rappers, he also maintains a say in which artists get signed and which ones get promoted. He is the first gatekeeper a rapper such as Zoe must pass in the commodification process. Without his approval, a rapper such as Zoe would be left without a recording contract and few resources for self-promotion. Spencer says his job is to help build the rapper's brand, especially on the local level, in order for the label to reach the widest consuming base.

While Spencer might be overstating his influence in the commodification process, he is an invaluable part of Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group's investment in Southern rap. Without local intermediaries such as him, New York-based corporations would not be able to stay ahead of regional trends. As Grem (2006) notes, this is why the outsourcing of production and the delegation of talent development to local powerbrokers such as Spencer is so beneficial to corporations seeking to increase their market share.

In addition to Spencer's approval, Zoe and other Atlanta rappers must work with and get past four other critical gatekeepers before they are viewed as legitimate for wider consumption: media managers, street teams, strip club DJs, and local radio hosts/program directors.

Media Management

Prior to Zoe's debut, Block Entertainment had to make him recognizable to local consumers, particularly those savvy enough to know Atlanta's non-mainstream hip-hop scene. While other cultural industries can mass market commodities without the approval of specific locales, hip-hop's relationship with the local—and its commodification of it—makes a layered media management imperative to cultivate a rapper's brand.

Block Entertainment promoted Zoe as a former drug dealer who used his street knowledge to become a successful rapper, a narrative that has been repeated for decades in hip-hop. However, in Atlanta, the neighborhood or block a rapper claims serves as a brand signifier to help authenticate her/him to a local consuming audience. But an artist's "roll out" is carefully scripted by what Ryan calls publicity regimes, and is done according to how well the production house and the label think he/she will do among consumers. The marketing efforts are then implemented to ensure that the rapper meets or exceeds his expected unit sales. Thanks to the ringtone and internet success of "Hood Nigga," Zoe's ode to women of different backgrounds, Zoe established a name for himself as a "trap artist," a subgenre of Atlanta rap music commonly known as dope boy music for its illicit references to drug dealing.

Zoe and other rappers from the Block label claim the drug-dealing lifestyle as an essential aspect of their biographies. Zoe boasts that he gave up a life of "slanging" (drug-dealing) in order to get involved in rap. "I decided that the streets wasn't the way I wanted to live and I took interest in music" (A. Mathis, personal communication, October 28, 2008). He gained notoriety by appearing in music videos by fellow Atlanta rapper Yung Joc and as a new member of Bad Boy and Block's ensemble rap group, Boyz N Da Hood. Part of Zoe's appeal as a rapper is his ability to project a manly image in his rap videos. He is husky and has a deep baritone voice, which resonates in the hook for "Hood Nigga." Zoe also raps in a cadence, allowing his delivery to keep pace with a hanging bass. His deep tone and his big boy image—which contrasts with the slender dope boy personas cultivated by fellow trap artists such as T.I., Jody Breeze, and Yung Joc—made him marketable as a gangsta rapper in a music scene that was teeming with "dope boy" rappers in the mid to late 2000s.

In 2008, Block hired Tahira Wright, an independent publicist, to do the label's in-house promotions. One of her goals was to increase Zoe's visibility prior to the release of his second album. She also had to sell Zoe to the local consuming base and to a larger audience in order for him to become a profitable investment for the Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group. To do this, she simultaneously promoted his street credibility within Atlanta and his connection to the more established, authenticated Atlanta rap scene to a wider audience. Wright says the biggest challenge she faced was to ensure that Zoe's image is consistent with the brand name that Block Entertainment has cultivated, especially with hits by former label mates Yung Joc and Young Jeezy. Moreover, she also had to make Zoe accessible to casual hip-hop fans, especially those who are likely to download his singles as ringtones or for their i-Pods. To do this, the publicity regimes tasked with expanding the brand went outside of hip-hop media in order to make Zoe into a more consumable product. Wright secured an interview for Zoe in a tattoo magazine and helped Zoe to start a website, www.dontfeeddaanimal.com, that detailed the rapper's weight loss efforts.

Wright also helped to spread the word about Zoe to the music reviewers in local alternative weeklies in the Atlanta region, such as *InTown* (42,000 circulation), the

city's prominent black newspapers, *The Atlanta Inquirer* (61,000 circulation), and *The Atlanta Tribune* (30,000 circulation) as well as regional hip-hop blogs such as www.downsouthhiphop.com and www.dirtysouthrap.com that have grown in influence over the past decade. College publications such as Georgia State's *The Signal*, Morehouse's *Maroon Tiger*, and the University of Georgia's *Red and Black* are also potent sites of brand-building as they reach diverse audiences looking for the next "big" thing out of the city. These alternatives to the mainstream press cater to the loyal core of Atlanta hip-hop followers, whether they are the working class residents of places such as East Point and Mechanicsville, college students at Morehouse, Emory, or Georgia State who download music, or the more affluent and educated "hipsters" in Inman Park and Decatur who consume the local hip-hop scene to acquire cultural capital among their peers.

Wright's buy-in was important to advance the brand-building process. Wright says she has to believe in an artist's success in order to help him build the story, as she did with Zoe prior to the release of his second album. If Wright does not appear to show a readiness to help the artist maximize his/her potential, which in turn yields the label a high return on investment, she jeopardizes her prospects for future employment. Alhough Wright is a replaceable intermediary in the cultural production process, she played a pivotal role in branding Zoe to the local audience.

Street Teams/Guerilla Marketing

While media management professionals such as Wright are part of well-established publicity regimes, corporations have relied on a much more cost-effective way—street teams—to help build street credibility. Street teams have been used to promote rappers since the genre's early days, when small rap labels did not have the distribution or the resources to advertise their catalogs. However, corporations now use street teams and guerilla marketing tactics as low-cost ways to manufacture a grassroots following for certain products (McChesney, 2004).

At Block Entertainment, informal workers who make up street teams or other aspects of production come into the offices at all hours of the day, often for little or no pay. They are, as Gibson (2003) calls them, "a reserve army of labor" whose individual importance is minimal but whose collective role is indispensable (p. 205). As Kruse (1993) also adds, these workers also share the common identity of being part of a scene that resonates within their community. Young people—some of them teenagers from the East Lake and Kirkwood neighborhoods—hang out and tend to the needs of the rappers or producers in the studio. They are not officially employees, but are organized as part of the label's street teams. Prez notes that Block's street teams are made up of area teens and college students who are looking for ways to get into the music industry. Sometimes, they are aspiring rappers or R & B artists looking to curry favor with someone such as Spencer in hopes of passing along their demo. No matter their motivations, the street teams are highly trained for guerilla marketing throughout Atlanta and—due to the uncertainty of their employment—are dedicated to the label's efforts. In the months before Gorilla Zoe's album release,

for example, a printed sign hung outside the door of the studio's office. The sign read: "Before U Enter . . . As we get closer to March 17, we will be getting CRAZY busy in the office! . . . Right now, it's all about ZOE! If you can't contribute to the cause, keep it outside." Such an implicit warning is meant to ensure street team members' loyalty.

The street teams mostly work the neighborhoods where the rappers need to gain the most credibility, as well as in venues such as Underground Atlanta, where promoting an up-and-coming artist is essential to creating more widespread buzz in the city. The marketing efforts include postering store walls, distributing free sample CDs to passersby, and creating word-of-mouth interest among friends. As McChesney (2004) notes, "even personal relationships are deployed to sell" (p. 162). Part of legitimizing the artist in some of Atlanta's neighborhoods is to ensure that he is "branded" as being part of Block Entertainment (Bad Boy is not as emphasized because it does not carry the same amount of credibility among many Atlanta hip-hop fans). Branding the artist as being part of a famous *local* label is not a new practice in hip-hop, but in the South it signifies the power of the role that kinship—being a member of a hip-hop family—plays in rap production and consumption. For instance, in the late 1990s, any rapper associated with the New Orleans-based label No Limit Records gained street credibility by being signed to self-made rap mogul Master P's recording empire. As Watkins (2005) points out, "the down-home, rowdy image" of No Limit "established the 'Dirty South' as a vital region in hip-hop," because it seemed antithetical to the New York-based commercial rap music that proliferated on the radio waves of the 1990s (p. 65). Moreover, Master P, by virtue of making the Calliope Projects of New Orleans world famous through his music, became a legend not only in the Big Easy, but the entire state of Louisiana. While his reputation has not come close to what Master P achieved in his prime, Block Spencer's reputation carries a lot of weight in Atlanta, and a Block artist such as Zoe is "introduced" to the public with that relationship factoring prominently in promotions. The street teams distribute materials showing pictures of Zoe posing outside of the Block studio—a landmark in the Kirkwood neighborhood—with fellow Block rappers Yung Joc (who left the label in 2009 following a financial dispute with Spencer) and Jody Breeze, a former member of Block's Boyz N Da Hood group.

Another aspect to guerilla marketing in the internet age is the use of hip-hop fan sites to authenticate a rapper as "underground" or "street," key words that are meant to affirm an artist's status as being non-mainstream and untainted by commercialism.

Promoting Zoe as a "hot" artist in Atlanta is often enough to generate buzz among listeners and on internet hip-hop sites such as sohh.com and downsouth.com, even though this buzz is often manipulated and shaped by the label through strategic leaks of songs and the use of comments and discussion boards to proliferate promotional information. Corporations can use guerilla marketing tactics to create buzz under the pretense of grassroots fan interest.

Strip Clubs

While cultural production in the South might have similarities to other regions, Southern rap does have one unique gatekeeper: strip clubs. Atlanta strip clubs are key facilitators in the commodification and promotion of rap artists. As rappers such as Jermaine Dupri, Gorilla Zoe, and Yung Joc point out in several of their songs, "Magic City Mondays"—which refers to the notorious Atlanta strip club Magic City—are both an opportunity to view the spectacle of strippers shaking to their music *and* a litmus test of whether the song can be successful on a mass scale. The strip club, in many ways, becomes a validation of the rapper's authenticity if she/he is able to successfully get the women to request his songs and "p-pop" and "twirt" to his music. Tahira Wright, who has helped to coordinate strip club listening sessions, notes that the strip club is a powerful social networking space. "A lot of people in the industry go there, so it's a good place to get your songs out," she says. "Regular dance clubs have segregated music nights, so it's harder to get play there" (T. Wright, personal communication, January 22, 2009). Strip clubs such as Magic City, which cater mostly to black men, become sites of cultural production, as they turn into unofficial gatekeepers. The strip club circuit helped get rappers such as the Ying Yang Twinz and Mike Jones notoriety and street buzz before they inked deals with major labels.

However, major labels have also caught on to the idea of strip clubs as important places of filtering what's hot and what's not *before* circulating a rapper or his music to the various forms of hip-hop media. For Prez, who made a name by promoting Bad Boy artists along the East Coast and getting their songs played on radio stations and night clubs, accessing black strip clubs in Atlanta and other parts of the South is integral in product development and credibility. "This is part of their culture," he says. "And they knew intuitively and instinctively and just do it. This is where I need to be, this is where if we're going to start a record we obviously want to be places like . . . all of the bigger strip clubs in Atlanta and just throughout the south because that's where people are hanging out" (S. Prez, personal communication, January 29, 2009).

"Part of their culture" might seem like a generalization, but in the South the strip club is an important litmus test for a song's hotness and an artist's viability. Strip clubs in Atlanta have been institutions in the city for years, and the venues catered specifically to black men gained notoriety thanks to Freaknik and "shout outs" to clubs given by groups such as Outkast, Goodie Mob, and the 69 Boyz. *The Players Club*, a 1998 movie starring Jamie Foxx about a black strip club, was a composite of the city's top Black strip clubs—Magic City, Body Tap, and Club Blaze—and featured a hard-edged soundtrack co-produced by Ice Cube (who co-starred in the film). Beyond popular culture, the importance of Atlanta black-oriented strip clubs is heightened by the *de facto* segregation of gentleman's establishments in the city. "White" clubs such as the Cheetah Lounge and the Pink Pony are located in more upscale areas of the city, catering to patrons who often come from the northern and western suburbs. The dancers in those clubs are almost all white, the majority of whom are blondes catered to fit the "Georgia Peach" archetype. Black strip clubs such as Magic City and Body Tap, located in Southwest Atlanta and downtown,

respectively, feature mostly African-American dancers and play Southern "booty music" that emphasizes a woman's ability to "pop that thing."

Bad Boy tasks Block with pushing the music to the strip clubs, namely Magic City and Body Tap, where there is a level of "street credibility" to being in the DJs rotation. As Spring (2004) argues in his study of the rave scene in eastern Michigan, DJs enjoy a tremendous degree of influence in what they play, reflecting both audience demand and playing "music the dancers would want to hear" (p. 56). Block's aim is to get the DJs to do the latter. The music gets into the hands of the DJ in several ways, but one notable practice is inviting DJs from strip clubs, night clubs, and radio stations to the Block Entertainment Studio for listening sessions. The DJs are often wined and dined to ensure a successful agreement to play a selected song. Because Atlanta's dope boy music, also known as trap music, is not as dance-friendly as crunk or snap music,[3] the singles that are chosen for strip clubs do not always make it to the radio or beyond. The singles in the strip club are often exclusively used as means to an end—wider recognition of the artist. For a rapper such as Gorilla Zoe, a song like "Pussy Talkback," which features African-American porn star Roxy Reynolds, is an ideal track to generate buzz for Zoe in the strip club. As Tahira Wright notes, "There's a connection—a lot of rappers watch porn, and they recognize that's one way to get their name out there" (T. Wright, personal communication, January 22, 2009).

In order to pass the strip club litmus test, a song must first be requested by a stripper. If she gets tips during a particular song or can make the crowd "get hype" during her performance, she will request the song again and again. As a result, a song that gets circulated in the strip club often makes it out to other clubs and even radio stations, especially if a radio DJ is a guest spinner at the venue. If the music is "approved" at a place such as Magic City or Body Tap, then the strip club circuit expands to other cities in Georgia such as Macon and Savannah, and then beyond. In relating how Bad Boy—through Block—got its artists promoted on the strip club circuit, Prez notes:

> You came up the Carolinas and you really took it state by state, but we realize the power of the small, the much smaller markets surrounding Atlanta that matter, taking it straight down. Hitting places like Jacksonville, Florida, and ... the Alabamas, going down into the Biloxis and Louisiana and things like that. It was different in a sense it's almost, we're used to starting at the top and working our way down. Now we're starting at the bottom and working our way up. (S. Prez, personal communication, January 29, 2009)

Prez's comments highlight the importance corporations place on manufacturing brand credibility through gatekeepers such as strip clubs in order to position the artist as a product of grassroots authentication. Getting the strip club's "approval" legitimates Zoe among Southern consumers—the non-mainstream base that is vital for building street credibility—and provides Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group with the foundation they need for wider distribution.

Local DJs/Program Directors

Like their counterparts in the strip club, radio DJs and program directors are essential to ensuring that the rapper gets enough visibility to build a following. Although "traditional" FM radio has lost some of its popularity in the internet era, it is still an important medium for consumers who do not have regular access to technological innovations such as internet radio, satellite radio, and HD radio. Urban radio stations also have a unique relationship with their audiences, because they claim to represent and be a part of the communities in which they broadcast, branding themselves as both street credible and community conscious. As a result, they continue to be powerful intermediaries between corporate labels and hip-hop consumers. As Kelley (2005) and Miller (2005) point out, "urban" stations controlled by major corporations such as Radio One, Clear Channel, and Emmis are the dominant distributors of rap music, creating playlists that reflect the catalogs of corporate-owned major labels. However, station owners, perhaps aware of the community dynamics existing between the stations and listeners, give program directors and DJs some leeway in introducing acts. At stations like Atlanta's Hot 107.9, which helped to launch Ludacris's career, DJs have an enormous amount of influence over what is played, even in the age of consolidated playlists. This is why labels are aggressive in cultivating relationships with radio DJs who have credibility among local audiences. Radio DJs are even more influential than strip club DJs, because they have the ability to make a rapper into a household name, especially in a city such as Atlanta, where unknown hip-hop artists are constantly vying for recognition. Although payola is still common practice, according to former BET executive and radio DJ Paul Porter, most labels try to curry favor by hosting private listening sessions or by providing industry access. DJs often take advantage of these incentives in hopes of boosting their own cultural capital among listeners (Taylor, 2003).

Although Hot 107.9 is subject to the playlists of its owner, Radio One, the D.C.-based conglomerate founded by African-American businesswoman Cathy Hughes, local hosts and program directors have some autonomy in promoting up-and-coming regional artists in order to boost Atlanta's reputation as a cutting-edge site of cultural production. This is part of a quid-pro-quo relationship in which they as intermediaries are able to exercise some discretion in hopes of gaining favor among some of the industry movers-and-shakers. In turn, labels benefit from local promotions because they intensify the brand-building process. DJs, particularly on urban radio stations, are often celebrities in their own right, and a plug for an up-and-coming rapper such as Zoe would be tantamount to a testimonial. Once a DJ gives his/her thumbs up for an artist, it is easier for the label to promote the artist to a mainstream audience. As Wright notes, "Atlanta is so well respected . . . that people are more intrigued about artists that are from here now, where before when New York was like a heavy on East Coast rappers, East Coast/West Coast thing, and Southern rappers were looked at as sort of lower. But I think it's actually easier now to get them exposure" (T. Wright, personal communication, January 22, 2009). Even if the DJ is influenced by the label to make a plug for an artist on his or her show, the

testimonial—no matter how tainted—is enough to make a rapper like Zoe credible. Even if Zoe does not crack the playlists of urban radio stations outside of Atlanta, his viability among local consumers is still an important benchmark for the label as it proceeds with his global commodification. In Zoe's case, "Hood Nigga" became a radio hit while "Lost," the first single on his second album, was relegated to Atlanta stations and the internet. Still, the buzz Zoe received as a result of being a known commodity among Atlanta listeners helped boost *Don't Feed Da Animals* to the number one position in Billboard's hip-hop category after its release. Moreover, Zoe's absence on mainstream urban radio stations outside of Atlanta seemed more to reflect the changes in popular consumption of music, particularly as consumers rely more heavily on internet music sites such as Pandora and Groupshark. As the web trade publication Digital Music News reported, "Whether 'Lost' fits the current definition of Urban 'stationality' appears a major issue for Urban [program directors], though radio stations risk becoming late-movers on a song with major mass appeal" (Robinson, 2009). This trend will be explored more in the next section, particularly as it pertains to how changes to the consumption of hip-hop have impacted the roles of the gatekeepers mentioned in the previous pages.

Analysis/Discussion

While hip-hop, particularly mainstream rap music, is still produced in accordance with corporate ownership's bottom line goals, the case study of Zoe and Atlanta shows how local gatekeepers still figure prominently in the cultural production process, helping to manufacture the label's bottom-up brand-building efforts. There has been much discussion about how the internet has shaped popular music consumption and whether artists need to rely on gatekeepers to reach mass audiences (Lee & Peterson, 2004; Williamson & Cloonan, 2007). Rappers such as Soulja Boy and Nicki Minaj have risen to international fame through sites such as YouTube and MySpace, ostensibly bypassing the traditional gatekeeping and cultural production routes.[4] However, a closer examination shows that prominent gatekeepers—Mr. Collipark for Soulja Boy and Lil' Wayne for Minaj—who discovered both artists, helped to expedite the construction of their street credibility. Indeed, even in the age of YouTube and other social media sites, including hip-hop blogs such as www.sohh.com and www.allstarhiphop.com, gatekeepers continue to hold sway in providing mainstream distribution for internet performers. The local gatekeepers are important mediators, because they play significant roles in shaping and validating a rapper's street credibility, which in turn makes him on her more consumable for audiences. Street credibility goes hand-in-hand with notions of authenticity, and, as a result, corporate labels must ensure that the narrative passes the litmus test of local gatekeepers. This article has several key conclusions that underscore the layered and intertwined processes of cultural production. First, gatekeepers are not independent of corporate-governed cultural production and in fact are often part of the labor involved in commodification. While these gatekeepers do have to a certain buy-in to whom they are promoting, they are also dependent upon the corporation for work

and the social (and sometimes economic) capital that comes with being in the hip-hop industry. This is why they hold dual roles of being both workers *and* intermediaries in the cultural production process. Moreover, the gatekeepers highlighted in this study are willing participants in commodification. Their roles in commodification and cultural production seem to contradict some of the orthodoxies of previous political economic scholarship, particularly the idea that cultural production is purely a top-down process. This study offers evidence that there is substantive interaction between the corporation and the various intermediaries that shapes the final product.

Second, establishing street credibility in rap music is a deliberate effort in which corporations rely on different intermediaries to help build a brand, or in the words of hip-hop music insiders, "build the story." A label such as Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group cannot just sign a rapper such as Zoe and build a story from the *outside*. This is why the various intermediaries in cities such as Atlanta are so valuable in vouching for an artist's brand.

Third, the local, as Condry (2007) argues, is inextricably connected to the global. Moreover, to advance an argument made by Appadurai (2000), globalization, as it is diffused locally, "extends the earlier logics of empire, trade, and political dominion" (p. 3). These logics include the affirmation of localized rhetoric that emphasizes a rapper's consumable authenticity. In this regard, constructing street credibility in Atlanta's music scene, while important on the local level, is a means to an end for cultural producers on the global scale. Kahn-Harris's (2004) study of Sepultura notes the dynamic by which cultural producers must incorporate the local in a globalized product, but even when such products are distributed locally, the global forces are often at work behind the scenes. To refer to the statements made by Burns and Prez, corporations such as Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group would not invest in building the street credibility of rappers such as Gorilla Zoe within Atlanta and the surrounding region if there were not potential for wider distribution and greater consumption. To borrow from Glynn and Lounsbury's (2005) study of critics and their role in the cultural production process, gatekeepers such as media managers and street teams "play an important interstitial role in connecting the localized meanings and interpretations of cultural products to broader institutional meaning systems" (p. 1032).

Highlighting this interstitiality are strip clubs, which have unique roles in the South as cultural gatekeepers in hip-hop because they can help to validate a rapper's "underground" bona fides. This is because strip club playlists have become trendsetters in rap music, and corporations have had to adjust the way they promote rappers—particularly in the South—in order to account for strip clubs' importance. The subtle changes corporations have made in adjusting the way they commodify their artists suggests that cultural industries have flexibility and are willing to adapt to social and economic changes in order to maximize returns on their investments. Rather than being highly regimented, these industries, as Glynn and Lounsbury (2005) suggest, are responsive to change in order to ensure the sustainability of their operation.

Lastly, despite the internet's impact on cultural production and consumption, gatekeepers and intermediaries in rap music can make or break an artist, particularly since hip-hop's proliferation continues to be seen by many consumers as outside of traditional cultural industries. Atlanta's hip-hop radio stations, particularly 107.9 FM, might not have the same ratings stranglehold in the era before satellite radio, mp3 players and internet jukeboxes, but they still have enormous sway among their listeners. If a rapper such as Zoe is unable to gain the endorsement of a local radio DJ or programming director who can "put him on," he and the Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group miss out on an important step in brand-building. Moreover, if Zoe cannot get the buy-in from street teams and media managers, it is unlikely that he would be able to have traction among local audiences. Despite being structured in a way that perpetuates conformity to the bottom line, labels cannot manufacture or force these intermediaries' buy-in. This is why, as Gibson (2003) and Banks (2007) argue, these intermediaries are not simply disposable parts of the machine, but active parts that must work properly in order for the commodification process to go smoothly. While labor *is* replaceable and the armies of street team workers and media professionals are not individually significant, when taken as a whole, the approval power that these gatekeepers have cannot be overstated. For example, if Block Spencer does not validate Zoe to the Atlantic/Bad Boy/Warner Music Group's corporate decision-makers in New York, Zoe is not a sellable rapper. Similarly, Zoe's brand-building efforts become more difficult without the street teams and radio DJs serving as intermediaries to consumers. These gatekeepers are not just vital to the bottom line, they are indispensable to the production process itself.

The last conclusion perhaps can inform future research. Since scholarship on gatekeepers and creative intermediaries has long drawn from old paradigms of the cultural industries, it is important now to see how gatekeepers, particularly in hip-hop, function in the digital age. It would also be critical to examine whether corporations, in the age of declining revenues and continuing consolidation, look for ways to build a rapper's street credibility without going through the intermediary-laden channels that currently factor so prominently in the cultural production and commodification process. Moreover, it will be of interest to see if rappers such as Zoe become more active in their own commodification, relying less on intermediaries and more on direct access to consumers, a trend that has grown in recent years. But before we buy into recent internet-inspired successes such as Soulja Boy and Nicki Minaj as signs of the diminished role of intermediaries, it might be worth noting that as cultural industries change and new gatekeepers emerge, cultural production is and will continue to be a mediated process.

Notes

[1] The interviews in this study were conducted as part of the author's dissertation research during the fall of 2008 and the spring of 2009.

[2] Alhough I did not conduct similar research in other regions, several books, including Quinn's *Ain't Nothin' But a G-Thang*, Ronin Ro's *Have Gun Will Travel*, and *Bad Boy: The*

Influence of Sean "Puffy" Combs on the Music Industry highlight rap distribution models in Los Angeles and New York.

[3] Crunk is a form of Southern rap that uses heavy bass and electric music, along with elements of heavy metal. Crunk, popularized by Atlanta producer Lil' Jon reached its peak in the mid-2000s. Snap music, drawn from crunk, is slower and is symbolized by finger snapping and choreographed moves to specific songs.

[4] Rapper Soulja Boy was signed to a record deal as a result of raps he posted on the web (YouTube) while Nicki Minaj was "discovered" on MySpace.

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