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Local Limelight: The world on his shoulders

With the help of a new record label, this artist has high hopes

by Megan Salisbury
published on Thursday, September 7, 2006

Atlas performs with gangster composure, but his style is classy and polished. Wearing collared shirts and ironed jeans during the day and a "bling" necklace with a T-shirt emblazoned with his song title "I am Hood Famous" during shows, the unique Phoenix hip-hop artist has found an equilibrium between the rap industry and his personal life.

Atlas has Mark Schmitz, a recent biomedical engineering student, partly to thank for his success. After winning ASU's Edson Entrepreneur Initiative Beneficiary a year and a half ago, Schmitz started The Grid Records, Phoenix's newest hip-hop label. With the help of a grant from the ASU program that provides funds to 10 to 15 student-led entrepreneurial ventures each year, The Grid Records is now hustling its way to the top of the industry.

But the company's real success began when Atlas, an upcoming hip-hop artist from Phoenix's Maryvale neighborhood, began a joint venture with the label about a year ago. With Atlas' talent and Schmitz's ambitious attitude, the two have formed a foothold for both of their future careers.

"My focus is on signing Atlas with a major record label," Schmitz says. "50 Cent has signed an artist out of Phoenix, so it may not be long until the Valley's artists become high in demand."

Atlas, 26, whose real name is Lloyd Hopkins, grew up with two other siblings and his mother in the harsh part of Maryvale. He once had a dream of becoming an NBA player but soon uncovered his secret talent for rapping after praise from his friends and family when he spit his lines on the streets. During high school he realized his true passion was music and began his career in rapping.

"I didn't want to end up in prison," Hopkins says. "I always had a talent for music. I always got praised for it, but I never took it seriously. So I started rapping."

Hopkins held true to his adolescent influences such as Outkast and Method Man and says he found inspiration through their music. He says he now hopes to be an outlet and influence for others looking into the hip-hop industry.

"I want to help cultivate talent and develop talent through my music and success," he says. "I want to help people get a taste of it, especially here in Arizona. You are giving so many people a shot that might not have a shot. I want to be a part of that. I want to sit back and see other people that I have helped achieve success."

Hopkins already has two albums out, "The King of AZ," and "Hunger and Starvation," which are available at any Zia Records stores. (The closest is located at 105 W. University Drive.)

Hopkins' next album, "Say Hello to the Crook," comes out in December and features the song "We're Here to Party."

This song has been circulating on at least 14 national radio stations with an average of seven spins per station, according to Moses Media Inc.

The Grid Records' Edson grant term will end in December 2006, but first-time teams are eligible for a second round of funding.

"Contingent upon performance, I do feel a second Edson term would be justified, providing Grid the opportunity to fulfill our commitment to Phoenix, help other artists, and build original brand," says Schmitz.

This feeling of commitment ties into the stage name that Hopkins created for himself. "Atlas" comes from the Greek mythological god Atlas, who had the responsibility of literally carrying the world on his shoulders.

Hopkins says the name represents how he feels he is revolutionizing the music in Phoenix and how he must hold the weight of the city's success in hip-hop on his shoulders.

Reach the reporter at megan.m.salisbury@asu.edu

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