

ONWARD AND UPWARD WITH THE ARTS

OLD SCHOOL

The d.j. Peter Rosenberg, hip-hop's reigning purist.

BY ANDREW MARANTZ



If rap music were healthy, would it need a defender, much less a white one?

One of the most influential hosts on hip-hop radio is a man named Peter Rosenberg. He is thirty-four years old and stocky, with a few days of stubble and a you-can't-fire-me-I-quit approach to baldness. Hip-hop is an industry of calibrated personas, and Rosenberg, who was reared in an upper-middle-class Maryland suburb, tries to project confidence without too much self-seriousness. "I will go toe to toe with almost anyone in terms of knowledge, trivia, and love of this music," he told me. "That said, I don't try to front like I'm cooler than I am." He performs d.j. sets under the name Peter Rosenberg. He has called himself "the Jewish Johnny Carson," and in particularly nebbishy moments—while ordering a salad with dressing on the side, or calling his wife to inquire after the health of their dog, a Corgi mix—he interrupts himself to say, "I am so hip-hop."

Every weekday, between 6 and 10 A.M., Rosenberg co-hosts "The Morning Show" on Hot 97, the iconic New York hip-hop station. Between midnight and two every Monday morning,

also on Hot 97, he hosts "Real Late with Peter Rosenberg," one of the few remaining showcases on commercial radio for underground rap—or, more contentiously, "real" hip-hop. He has interviewed, mentored, or publicly harangued every living rapper who matters; and though he occasionally texts with such stars as Drake and Macklemore, he cares more about maintaining friendships with a dozen or so m.c.s—Action Bronson, Bodega Bamz, Joey Bada\$\$—who are talented but one hit shy of celebrity. Rosenberg interviews these rappers' rappers on the radio, and commissions new verses from them for mixtapes that he distributes online. He also invites them to perform in showcase concerts that he hosts at South by Southwest and other festivals. Often, a song that he endorses—a "certified Rosenberg banger," as he sometimes says—fails to crack the Top Forty. At other times, he acts as an emissary between the margins and the mainstream. He says, "Since I have a foot in both worlds, an artist can play me three tracks, and I can go, 'This one only hip-

hop heads like me will appreciate. This one could be big, but it's corny. But this one could reach a lot of people, without you sacrificing who you are.'"

It has become a commonplace among rap snobs that kids these days don't appreciate complex lyrics. Rosenberg frequently aligns himself with the purists, defending old-school craftsmanship against the encroachment of pop hooks and lowest-common-denominator rhymes. Some people see his interventions as a sign of trouble—if hip-hop were healthy, would it need a defender, much less a white one from Chevy Chase? Others are grateful for any traditionalist voice on hip-hop radio. "I'm a motherfuckin' fan of this dude right here," Busta Rhymes, a rapper who combines verbal dexterity with commercial appeal, said upon meeting Rosenberg for the first time. "He's the only motherfucker on the motherfuckin' megahertz frequency that's still trying to implement that filthy-under-the-nail, holy, sacred and pure, unmixed, undiluted, un-tampered-with, real hip-hop shit."

One recent afternoon, I stopped by the Hot 97 studios, in the West Village. Rosenberg had already done "The Morning Show," worked out at a nearby boxing gym, and returned to the office. Wearing a crew-neck sweatshirt and Air Jordans, he was preparing to interview ScHoolboy Q, a rapper he admires, about Q's first major-label album, which was to be released in a week.

Q was walking around the office, wearing tinted granny glasses, a wide-brimmed fedora, and a gray peacoat saturated with pot smoke. A twenty-seven-year-old from South Central Los Angeles with a nimble approach to rhythm, he had a small, devoted following, but he did not make the kind of danceable, melodic songs that are likely to become hits. "I don't even know why I'm here," he said. "They don't be playin' me on the radio."

"I do!" Rosenberg said. "I go ham for your records." Last June, Q released a song called "Collard Greens." It has a jittery, inaccessible beat—a looping four-note bass line, sparse drums, and an echoey top layer of percussion that sounds like a washboard—but it rewards repeat listening. ("Shake it, break it / Hot for the winter / Drop it, cop it / Eyes locked on your inner object.")

Rosenberg played it on “Real Late” for fourteen consecutive weeks. Eventually, it won over enough listeners to enter Hot 97’s drive-time playlist, a space usually reserved for market-tested acts like Rihanna and Eminem. Finally, in November, the song made it onto the *Billboard* Hot 100. Q told me that Rosenberg doesn’t “just go for the orthodox, people-friendly option,” adding, “He likes real music—Wu-Tang, Nas. That’s why he has an ear for my shit.”

Q is a member of a rap collective from Los Angeles called Black Hippy, which updates the gangsta rap of the mid-nineties by infusing it with a looser, loopier sensibility. Rosenberg has championed the group since its inception, in 2009. Kendrick Lamar, another member of Black Hippy, released his major-label debut in 2012. Although it was a concept album whose intricate lyrics were better suited to headphones than to night clubs, it went platinum. One of the singles, “Swimming Pools (Drank),” sounded like a sleek party anthem but was actually a parable about the dangers of alcoholism. “I rode hard for that album, but I thought it was too good to be popular,” Rosenberg said. “I’m glad I was wrong.”

For the interview, Q sat down in a black-box studio, where he greeted everyone, from Rosenberg to the technicians, as “my nigga.” At one point, Q, who has asthma, leaned back in his chair; his inhaler slid out of his pocket and clattered to the floor. Rosenberg smiled and said, “That’s straight hip-hop.”

On “Real Late,” Rosenberg can spin any record he wants, as long as he edits out the curse words. But “The Morning Show” is polished entertainment. Its playlist, based on market research, is created in collaboration with the owner of Hot 97, Emmis Communications, which has its headquarters in Indianapolis. (Emmis also owns radio stations in Los Angeles, St. Louis, and Terre Haute, Indiana.) “A lot of what we play in the morning is stupid,” Rosenberg says. When a talk break ends and a song begins, he often removes his headphones and turns his attention to Twitter.

Rosenberg likes some avant-garde hip-hop—he was an early proponent

of the exuberantly obscene rap collective Odd Future, and he applauds Kanye West’s forays into industrial noise—but most of his favorite new records sound as if they could have been made in 1994. “I will always have a soft spot for lyrical m.c.s and boom-bappy production,” he said, using an onomatopoeic term for the kind of beat generated by a kick drum, a rim-shot, a few samples, and little else. “I try to be open-minded, but everyone knows what my biases are.”

At seven-twenty and eight-twenty every morning, he delivers a critical-comical rant called “The Realness.” In late February, on the morning ScHoolboy Q’s album was released, Rosenberg sounded ebullient as the segment’s theme music began—a bass-heavy sample from a 1995 song by Group Home. Laura Stylez, one of the co-hosts of “The Morning Show,” said, “Keep it real, Rosenberg!”

“A lot of people who I meet are, like, ‘Yo, Rosenberg, when’s hip-hop coming back?’” he said. With m.c.s like Kendrick Lamar and ScHoolboy Q in their prime, he argued, that moment is now. “We have artists who are making great, quote-unquote ‘real,’ hard hip-hop, and it’s selling well, and those are the times when the music can change!” (The next week, Q’s album debuted at No. 1 on the *Billboard* chart.)

Rosenberg is not always so optimistic. In 2012, “Starships,” a bubblegum dance track by Nicki Minaj, spent twenty-one consecutive weeks in the *Billboard* Top Ten. Rosenberg saw the song as a categorical threat. “Nicki loves reminding us every chance she gets that she’s a, quote, ‘underground rapper’ from Queens,” he said one morning. Then he played a clip from “Starships,” which features singsong vocals and a Eurodance chorus. “Is that Nicki Minaj or Katy Perry?” he said. “I am a hip-hop head, and, to be frank, this song right here, ‘Starships,’ is literally one of the most sellout songs in hip-hop history.”

He told me, “Pop and rap are separate things. It’s one thing for J. Lo to make a dance record, but Nicki was supposed to be one of ours. I didn’t want young kids looking at this dance-pop song, going, ‘This is what rappers do.’”

Billboard began publishing its Hot

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100 list in 1958, and last year marked the first time that no black artist had a No. 1 single. This is partly attributable to multiracial collaboration—one of the biggest hits of 2013, Robin Thicke's "Blurred Lines," owes much of its popularity to Pharrell Williams, who produced the track, and to T.I., who raps on it. But the absence of chart-toppers by black artists may portend a future in which hip-hop becomes denatured. It wouldn't be the first time that a historically black genre has come to look, and sound, increasingly white.

Musical genres are like unstable elements, constantly on the verge of breaking down. Some African-American forms, like disco, grew so popular that they merged with pop music and effectively disappeared; others, like ragtime, maintained their purity but lost their audience. Rosenberg intends to help hip-hop avoid both fates. "I want a future where hip-hop is still relevant," he says. "But I want that music to be related to what hip-hop originally was."

The most important event on the Hot 97 calendar is Summer Jam, an all-day concert held each June at MetLife Stadium, in New Jersey. Several of the most popular acts in hip-hop perform on the stadium's main stage. In the parking lot, a freestanding "festival stage" is devoted to underground rappers.

Rosenberg is one of the hosts of the festival stage. In 2012, to keep the crowd entertained between acts, he continued to castigate Minaj, who was scheduled to perform on the main stage that night. "I know there are some chicks here waiting to sing 'Starships' later," he said. "I'm not talking to y'all right now. Fuck that bullshit. I'm here to talk about real hip-hop shit."

Such bluster is common in the rap world, and is usually forgotten quickly. In this case, unbeknownst to Rosenberg, video feeds from both Summer Jam stages were streaming live on Minaj's Web site. Her fans, who call themselves Barbz, took to Twitter. Someone with the handle JonJon-baby30 posted, "Fuck Peter ROSEN-

BERG, URACIST WANNA BE BLACK FAG-GOT JEW BITCH." Minaj tweeted, "No one deserves this treatment. We're all out here working. Have respect for your guests. #thatsall." Shortly before she was scheduled to perform, she pulled out of the show.

The spat between Rosenberg and the Barbz spiraled into a standoff between Hot 97 and Young Money, Minaj's influential record label. Lil Wayne, Busta Rhymes, and Funkmaster Flex got involved. After nearly a year—just in time for Summer Jam 2013—a détente was reached. Minaj went on "The Morning Show" to make amends, although she couldn't resist throwing a bit of shade first.



"I am sorry that things went as left as they did," Rosenberg said.

A few moments later, Minaj said, "I get it. That's what you do. I guess, to me—I just don't know your résumé, you know what I'm saying? So I never found you funny. . . . I was just, like, 'Who are you?'"

The interview gradually grew more cordial. For her next album, she said, "I'm choosing to get back to my essence and just feed the core hip-hop fan." If Rosenberg's goal had been to steer her away from dance-pop, this was vindication.

Toward the end of the interview, Minaj talked about the double standards she had encountered as a woman in the entertainment industry, and said of herself, "There's a chip on your shoulder, because you've experienced head-strong men."

Rosenberg nodded. "I can see now that—because of your experience with men—me, a stranger, I was just another hating-ass man. And I'm just so—I was a women's-studies minor in college!" (He attended the University of Maryland.) "I am the antithesis of that dude."

Ebro Darden, at that time the station's program director, said, "And you're *white*."

"She never implied anything about white," Rosenberg said.

"Well, being white also struck a chord with me, if I'm being honest," Minaj said. "Because I was, like, 'Yo, he's on a black station dissing black

people.' I just didn't like the feel of it."

"Who am I gonna dis, if not black people?" Rosenberg said. "I'm on a hip-hop station!"

Later, he allowed that he had been disingenuous. "I'm grateful that hip-hop is a diverse enough culture that I get to be part of it," he told me. "Does that mean that it should be ignored—the fact that I'm white? Of course not."

At Summer Jam last year, one of the performers on the main stage was 2 Chainz, a Southern rapper, who brought out a surprise guest: Minaj. Wearing a baseball cap and shredded jeans—a remarkably straightforward outfit for a woman who once dressed as a gumball machine—she rapped two verses, struck a street-thug pose, and left the stage.

Rosenberg, driving back to Manhattan at the end of the night, said, "I don't take full credit—but she didn't sing or dance, did she? She didn't do any silly voices, did she? Straight up-and-down rap."

A few weeks later, I met Rosenberg at a concert in Central Park, where more than a dozen legendary m.c.s were performing to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of hip-hop. The audience was mostly middle-aged black New Yorkers: first-generation rap fans. Big Daddy Kane performed "Set It Off," and Rosenberg, wearing sunglasses, mouthed the words. As we left the venue, several people grabbed Rosenberg by the arm, or called his name from afar. "You're a funny mother-fucker, Rosenberg!" one person shouted. Someone else said, "Thank you for keeping this real hip-hop alive." Rosenberg stopped to banter with a few admirers. Then he walked across the park to the Upper West Side, where he lives with his wife, a sports reporter, and where his neighbors rarely recognize him.

The next night, on "Real Late," he played, in rough chronological order, classic songs by artists who had been on the bill in Central Park. He described the concert as "awesome," and said, "You are listening to a kid who grew up on this culture—visiting New York, wanting to be a part of it—who is very honored to be able to play music every Sunday night from the birthplace of

hip-hop.” On Twitter, a rapper with the handle 89theBrainchild posted, “24 yrs old and takin notes.”

The house in Chevy Chase where Rosenberg grew up is a pleasantly cluttered brick Colonial a few hundred feet from Rock Creek Park. His parents still live there. His mother, Mindy, is a retired school counsellor; his father, M.J., is a prominent liberal blogger who once worked for AIPAC and has recently called himself an “anti-AIPAC warrior.” Peter said, “Most people in my world have no idea who my dad is, and vice versa. But the ones who know both worlds are, like, ‘Seriously?’” Cipa Sounds, another co-host of “The Morning Show,” said, “Peter’s dad is a funny-ass dude and a mad smart political thinker, and when I met him, at Peter’s wedding, he told me he had more Twitter followers than Peter.” (If so, times have changed: the son currently has two hundred thousand followers; the father has fifteen thousand.)

Not long ago, I joined Rosenberg on a

visit to his parents’ house. In the living room, Mindy put out a tray of nuts and cookies next to a stack of books, with “F.D.R. and the Jews” at the top. M.J., who has a bushy mustache, assured me, “We just went to the library. I didn’t put these out to show you what big intellectuals we are.”

Peter was born two months before “Rapper’s Delight,” by the Sugarhill Gang, was released, in 1979. When he was seven, Run-D.M.C.’s version of “Walk This Way” became a Top Ten hit. Peter’s older brother, Nick, now a lawyer, “did a rap at Peter’s bar mitzvah,” Mindy said. “It was the coolest thing in the world to them, and they never stopped feeling that way.”

When the family visited M.J.’s parents, who lived in Queens, Peter made cassette recordings of radio broadcasts, especially the late-night shows that were mixed live by Marley Marl and DJ Red Alert. In 1992, when Peter was thirteen, Funkmaster Flex took over Saturday nights on Hot 97, a time slot that he still holds. “When I heard Flex, I was, like, ‘That is the job I

want,’” Rosenberg says. In his bedroom, he recorded tapes on which he pretended to have his own radio show.

He attended a large public high school. “I had a *Source* magazine under my arm, and I d.j.’d a lot of house parties,” he says. He was charming and confident, but also “short, not well dressed—the only objectively cool thing about me was my association with hip-hop.”

“I can’t say I ever fully appreciated rap,” M.J. says—his taste runs more to Carly Simon and Billy Joel—but he liked anything that infuriated the Moral Majority. “I could never separate the music from the politics,” he said. “I told Nick to read ‘The Autobiography of Malcolm X,’ and it changed his life, and Nick passed it down to Peter. To this day, it might be one of the two or three books Peter has read.”

“I read most of it,” Peter said. “But then the movie came out.”

Mindy rolled her eyes and said, “Sometimes I think Peter was switched at birth.”

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page versus in a mike booth—to me, there is no difference,” Peter said.

“We are the People of the Book, Peter!” M.J. said. “Not of the record!”

On the wall was a framed poster from a 2007 concert that Rosenberg hosted, featuring the rapper Raekwon. Peter said, “Many people have told me, ‘Raekwon loves you. He’s always talking about how you’re the realest dude in New York.’ Yet he has this line on ‘Only Built 4 Cuban Linx,’ arguably my favorite hip-hop album of all time, about ‘Jew lies and white guys.’”

M.J. looked stricken. “And we have his poster *on the wall?*”

“Dad, he loves me now,” Peter said. “It was a long time ago.” (Raekwon maintains that the lyric was “True lies and white guys.”)

Jews have produced and distributed African-American music for more than a century, and have sometimes exploited black musicians in the process. Given this history—and the fact that a disproportionate number of rappers subscribe to the teachings of Louis Farrakhan—hip-hop has not always been a safe space for Yiddishkeit. In early rap lyrics, Jews were portrayed as tight-fisted bankers or tenacious criminal lawyers. M.J. said, “Early in Peter’s career, I told him he would have to change his name. I said, ‘Why not Pete Rose?’”

“That’s how old-school paranoid my dad is,” Rosenberg said. “Better to be associated with a disgraced athlete than to be Jewish.”

Hip-hop is having a Semitophilic moment. Drake, who was brought up Jewish in a wealthy part of Toronto, has rhymed “more than high” with “Mordechai.” Jay Z and will.i.am have incorporated “Tchaim” and “mazel tov” into their verses. In 2012, Rick Ross released a mixtape called “Black Bar Mitzvah”; it featured a skit in which a rabbi—played by Peter Rosenberg—invites celebrants to join him at a Miami strip club, to “have a nosh.”

“Peter told me, ‘The world has changed,’” M.J. said. “It looks like he was right.”

A month before Rosenberg began taking classes at the University of Maryland, in 1997, he started appearing on the college radio station. Using the name PMD—“P” for Peter, “MD” for Maryland—he hosted a late-night un-

THE ONE WHO DISAPPEARED

Now that it’s warm to sit on the porch at night
Someone happened to remember a neighbor,
Though it had been more than thirty years
Since she went for a little walk after dinner
And never came back to her husband and children.

No one present could recall much about her,
Except how she’d smile and grow thoughtful
All of a sudden and would not say what about,
When asked, as if she already carried a secret,
Or was heartbroken that she didn’t have one.

—Charles Simic

derground rap show. On early tapes, he can be heard alternating between quasi-Ebonics (“Yo, we gon’ leave the phone lines open, kid”) and middle-class white vernacular (“That was very enjoyable”), before settling on a hybrid approach that sounded more natural: he occasionally used street slang, but deployed it with a hint of irony. “I decided, if the topic is something I know about, like music or sports, I’ll speak on it,” Rosenberg said. “If it’s something I know nothing about, like cooking crack, I’ll go, ‘I know nothing about that.’”

In the early aughts, Eminem became rap’s biggest star. The next milestone, Rosenberg assumed, would be a white d.j. who was taken seriously on hip-hop radio. “That was going to be my gimmick,” he said. “My only fear was that someone would take that spot first.”

After college, he interviewed with the program director at Hot 97, a middle-aged white man from Utah, but the conversation went nowhere. Rosenberg continued to live near the University of Maryland, working as a talk-show host at local radio stations, with the occasional d.j. gig at a college bar. One night, a pretty sophomore asked him to play “Ride wit Me,” an insipid single by Nelly. It was not the kind of song he was known for playing. “But of course I played it, because this hot girl was requesting it,” Rosenberg recalls. Her name was Alexa Datt. She is now Alexa Rosenberg, Peter’s wife.

In early 2007, Ebro Darden took over as Hot 97’s program director, and he called Rosenberg in for another

meeting. Darden was brought up in Oakland by a Jewish mother and a father who was a Black Panther. “Peter came up here, like, ‘What up? I’m PMD,’” Darden said. “I went, ‘No, you’re not. You’re Rosenberg.’” Darden was intent on broadening the station’s repertoire—he recently claimed “Royals,” a hit song by Lorde, as a hip-hop track, and moved it into heavy rotation—but he wanted to honor hip-hop’s roots as a rebellious subculture. “The brand needed an outspoken advocate for that underground, rappy-rap stuff,” Darden told me. “I knew that the irony of having that person be very clearly white and not from New York would jar some people, and I welcomed that.” In June, 2007, Rosenberg moved in with his grandparents in Queens and started hosting “Real Late.”

To ease Rosenberg’s entry into the New York market, Darden paired him with Cipa Sounds (born Luis Diaz), an industry veteran who had worked as a touring d.j. for Lil Kim. Cipa said of Rosenberg, “He knew the music—but as an appreciator, not from living it. He had to look to me for knowledge of how the game worked.”

Darden suggested that Rosenberg and Cipa record together before going on the air. Their conversations turned into a weekly podcast, which they called “Juan Epstein,” after a Jewish Puerto Rican character on “Welcome Back, Kotter.” Some of the early episodes sound like awkward dates on which neither person has the courage to ask for the check. But they developed a rapport,

and “Juan Epstein” has become an encyclopedic oral history of hip-hop, including unusually candid interviews with such luminaries as Jay Z and Q-Tip. While interviewing the producer Large Professor, Rosenberg analyzed three of his tracks with nerdy fervor: “You can blend ‘Looking at the Front Door,’ ‘Live at the Barbecue,’ and ‘Fakin’ the Funk—all within a few beats per minute.”

Darden says of Rosenberg and Cipa, “I wanted them to be partners, and it worked. When people went, ‘Who the fuck is that crazy white boy?’ Cipa went, ‘That crazy white boy is with me.’ By now, they’ve been doing it for long enough that most people know who the crazy white boy is.”

In 2011, Kendrick Lamar released “Section.80,” his debut album, on iTunes. It was inconsistent, but it established him as a prodigiously skilled m.c., and a few gatekeepers, including Rosenberg, took notice. He began playing the track “Ronald Reagan Era” on his evening show, and included an original verse by Lamar on his mixtape “What’s Poppin Volume 1.”

In February, 2012, Lamar visited the Hot 97 studio for the first time, and he sat for an extended interview with Rosenberg. “You are in a blessed position these days of being one of the few dudes who does real hip-hop music that is actually getting buzz,” Rosenberg said. “What kind of deal with the Devil did you make?” He continued to promote Lamar and host his shows in New York. At one point, Lamar texted Rosenberg, “We gon have a long ride in this music thing together homie.”

When Lamar released his first major-label album, “good kid, m.A.A.d. city,” in October, 2012, some critics immediately deemed it a classic. Rosenberg was reluctant to go that far. “You’ve got to give it a few years,” he said on the air. On a “Realness” segment, a few days later, he changed his mind. “It’s a classic,” he said. “It, like, defies the era that it even exists in. . . . The lyrics, man, the beats, the vibe, the features he chose, the different flows he has. . . . You always hear nerds be, like, ‘What about the flow?’ . . . No, this guy has flows. He can rhyme a million different ways. He could have made a pop album. He could

have tried to chase hits. He didn’t. He did him. And it paid off.”

Late one night last year, Rosenberg sent me a text message: “Yooooo!” An hour earlier, Big Sean had released “Control,” a song featuring a guest verse by Lamar. In his verse—a three-minute performance delivered with the ferocity of a Coltrane solo—Lamar declared himself “the king of New York,” even though he is from Compton. Within days, more than a dozen New York rappers had recorded response tracks.

One of them was by Papoose, an m.c. from Bedford-Stuyvesant. On “The Morning Show,” Rosenberg said of the track, “It’s ridiculous, and it ends up making Pap look crazy.” Minutes later, Papoose called in to defend himself: “Rosenberg, with all due respect, there’s no need for me and you to do this, because you are biased, bro.” They had met a few times, and Rosenberg had played Papoose’s records on “Real Late”; nevertheless, Papoose accused Rosenberg of being on “Team Kendrick.”

The argument grew heated. Race did not come up, but geography did. “You’re not from New York,” Papoose said.

“Everyone can tell me I’m not from New York over and over again,” Rosenberg said. “But, week in and week out, and night in and night out, I go to shows with twenty-three people in them to support New York hip-hop. I don’t see you at all those shows, Pap.”

“Rosenberg, you out there with the weirdos,” Papoose said.

The following Monday night, Rosenberg was at S.O.B.’s, a mid-sized venue on Varick Street. At eleven, he took the stage to introduce YC the Cynic, a relatively unknown rapper from the Bronx. YC had contributed a standout track to another Rosenberg mixtape, “New York Renaissance,” and seemed to be auditioning for a slot on Rosenberg’s roster of favored m.c.s. There were about two hundred people in the audience, most of them young people of color. “It’s good to be out here with all the weirdos!” Rosenberg said. The crowd cheered with recognition.

Late last year, a screening committee of the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences, which awards the Grammys, drafted its preliminary list of nominees for Best Rap



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Album. Drake, Jay Z, Kanye West, and Kendrick Lamar made the cut; Macklemore, a hugely successful white rapper who is sometimes accused of being an interloper from the pop world, did not. "It's not that they don't think he's a rapper," an anonymous source who was present at the meeting told the Associated Press. "It's just that, when you're trying to protect categories and someone has become popular, it should be judged as such."

A few weeks later, the Academy overrode the committee's decision, and Macklemore's "The Heist," whose biggest hit is about bargain shopping, was nominated for Best Rap Album. It won. The night the awards were televised, Rosenberg tweeted, "I LOVE @macklemore but I am disgusted by the Grammys . . . nothing for @kendricklamar?!" He texted Lamar, "u know the game . . . if there's a white man for white people to vote on, he wins."

The next day on "The Morning Show," Rosenberg called Macklemore and said, "I've been ranting and raving all morning about how the Grammys snubbed Kendrick Lamar. As a white guy, it's one of those moments that feels a little embarrassing, where you feel like white people have been given something yet again that we shouldn't have been given."

"Yeah, try being the guy that won that award," Macklemore said. "I think we made a great album. I think Kendrick made a better rap album." Macklemore's concession was a subtle one. He wasn't saying that his album wasn't rap, or that Lamar's album was superior; he was acknowledging that Lamar's album sounded more like archetypal hip-hop.

Darden asked, "Is you winning that category—do you believe that it's racial? . . . Is that what makes it awkward for you?"

Macklemore said, "What makes it awkward for me is the fact that you never want to be the person that is robbing somebody else."

The first commercial jazz recording, released in 1917, was by the Original Dixieland Jass Band: five white musicians from New Orleans. Today, jazz is correctly understood to be an African-American invention. Yet the genre's old masters are increasingly cosseted within

universities or foundations, and the tables at Birdland are often filled with middle-aged white men, if they're filled at all.

Hip-hop is two generations younger than jazz, and it has at least a few years of innovation left. Still, it is beginning to look backward as much as forward. In recent years, the rapper Bun B, whose resonant baritone is recognizable from his guest verse on Jay Z's "Big Pimpin'," has been a Distinguished Lecturer at Rice University, where he co-taught a course on rap and religion. At Harvard, the Hip-Hop Archive and Research Institute recently accepted applications for the Nasir Jones Hip-Hop Fellowship. Rosenberg's concerts still draw diverse, youthful crowds; but what proportion of the audience will be young and black when Jay Z plays the Barclays Center in 2024?

Rosenberg remains hopeful. A few weeks after the Grammys, he drove to a brownstone in Bedford-Stuyvesant to meet with Joey Bada\$\$, a nineteen-year-old m.c. with short dreadlocks. "He's one of the most promising dudes New York has right now," Rosenberg said. Four years ago, Joey, then in high school, began posting freestyles on YouTube. Rosenberg invited him to a hip-hop showcase at South by Southwest and began mentioning his name to producers. "He sounded modern and retro at the same time," Rosenberg says—Joey rapped with youthful vibrancy about cell phones and the Trayvon Martin case, yet his timbre and delivery had a laid-back, timeless quality.

Joey's lyrics are unflashy, but they're dense with internal rhyme. ("Get your intel right/Your intelligence is irrelevant/But it's definite/I spit more than speech impediments.") In a video interview posted online, Rosenberg asked him what kind of music he listened to as a child. Joey mentioned "Illmatic," by Nas, and "Ready to Die," by Biggie—"That's what was bumpin' in the car." With an envious grin, Rosenberg said, "That was my Paul Simon and James Taylor."

The door to the brownstone opened, and Junior, Joey's cousin and one of his managers, said, "Don't worry about taking off your shoes." Framed family photographs lined the walls of the foyer. Downstairs, in a half-finished base-

ment, Joey had set up two speakers, a laptop, a beat machine, and a microphone. He leaned back in a leather office chair, smoking a blunt while watching a YouTube video of a Darwinist debating a creationist. On a whiteboard, he had listed his "2k14 Goals": "Know Worth"; "Innovate RAP"; "Make \$1 mil."

"This your place?" Rosenberg said.

"Me and Mom Dukes," Joey said.

Joey is putting together his debut album, which he hopes to release this fall. He already has too many songs, and he wanted Rosenberg to help him select the best ones. He played a beat with a classic syncopated kick-snare pattern and one with a jazzy upright bass.

"Look, I love everything you've played so far," Rosenberg said. "This is my shit. But sometimes I get nervous if I like it too much."

Joey said, "Let me try something else out on you." He played an uptempo, synthesizer-driven beat without a prominent kick drum to anchor it. "I don't think this is the one," Rosenberg said. Joey nodded and played a song with a pop hook that sounded a bit closer to Katy Perry. Rosenberg looked uncertain.

"It depends what you want," he said. "Are you trying to have an album that is critically adored and makes your movement one notch bigger? Or do you take more risks and try to find hits?"

Joey said that he was open to anything, but he added, "I'm not gonna conform. No matter how dope it is, if I don't feel it, I'm just not gonna do it."

"I know you well enough to trust that," Rosenberg said.

While they chatted, Joey played a song by Jeru the Damaja, a Brooklyn rapper who gained a cult following in the nineties. "You put me onto Jeru, actually," Joey said.

"I did?" Rosenberg said.

"One time you told me, 'Come up to the station—I got a Jeru instrumental I want you to spit over.' At that time, I knew the name but not his music."

"Oh," Rosenberg said. "Well, then! You're welcome." ♦

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