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Rappin' with the Hip Hop generation

Brothers juggle college with publishing magazine geared to fellow Gen Y-ers

By Gretchen Macchiarella, gmacchiarella@VenturaCountyStar.com
November 27, 2005

Sometimes you have to skip class to interview Destiny's Child.

Brothers Devin and Cameron Lazerine lead a sort of double life as college students. The young entrepreneurs publish Rap-Up magazine, making sure all 80,000 copies make it around the world four times this year.



Matt McClain / Star staff

Devin Lazerine puts together the Gen Y magazine Rap-Up with his brother, Cameron. "You don't have to be in the spotlight, but you can take what you love and make a business out of it," Devin says about what he learned about success during interviews with music stars.



Matt McClain / Star staff

Devin Lazerine is a UC Santa Barbara student and the editor of Rap-Up magazine, a music publication for Gen Y written by Gen Y. Its specialties? An exclusive Q&A format, lots of pictures of female hip-hop stars and catchy writing.

The design is splashy and the text is fast-paced.

"I think a younger audience, who we are really aiming at, they connect with that," said Devin, a five-year veteran of publishing at 22.

Rap-Up is considered the first hip-hop and R&B magazine for Gen Y by Gen Y.

The magazine stands out among titles like Vibe and Source, not just because of the younger demographic but for the strong focus on music instead of the urban lifestyle.

Readers are generally from 14 to 28 years old. They tend to be very diverse, splitting equally between men and women and fairly dispersed among races, Devin said.

When the first issue came out some of the older readers thought the all Q&A format was lazy, but the younger people loved it. The format stuck and now the only prose is a short introduction to interviews describing the location or the look of the artist.

The format lets them produce easy quick reads with a lot of humor.

Every interview includes a "Pop Quiz," where the artist answers irreverent question like: "Martha Stewart or Donald Trump?"; and "Bowling or miniature golf?"

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Also, there is a sort of thread of conversation among the artists in the

magazine called "Pass the mic."

What does Twister want to know from Lil' Kim? She answers on page 52.

It makes the artists a fan, just like the reader, said 20-year-old Cameron.

Music connection

Gen Y, all 70 million or so of them, is about to be the most powerful force since the baby boomers and they are connected by cell phone or computer to one another some 20 hours a week, said futurist Jim Taylor, vice chairman for marketing firm The Harrison Group.

The generation is very insulated from adults, so many media attempts to reach them are ignored.

It only makes sense that young readers would most likely accept something coming from a peer, especially in the realm of music.

Music is one of the few connections that they really respect, Taylor said.

"I don't care what anyone says, this is music for a different generation," said the one-time contributor to Rolling Stone magazine.

Hip-hop as a culture has glorified entrepreneurship, and so has Gen Y.

"These kids believe they don't have to join the machine to be successful," Taylor said.

The fall issue of Rap-Up was the money issue, including a list of "18 Power Hustlers." It is a part of the lifestyle that has resonated with the Lazerines.

"You don't have to be in the spotlight, but you can take what you love and make a business out of it," Devin said.

Cameron and Devin are fans at the core. The fact that they are preppy, white and from an upscale community doesn't mean they don't love hip-hop and R&B, music that is often associated with an urban black culture.

"I don't get many responses about it being ingenuine," Devin said.

The magazine also includes a lot of pictures of women. The hot list featured all women artists, and the only photo shoot the magazine has done itself was a provocative spread of Toni Braxton. And the Web site includes a section of "eye candy" with photos of female artists.

Devin shrugs it off.

"It connects better with readers," he said.

He doesn't take a philosophical stand on the issue. The magazine, however, does avoid anything truly scandalous because of the age of most of the readers. Devin said Rap-Up is not going to turn into Maxim.

Juggling duties

Devin is a transfer student at University of California, Santa Barbara, with a studio apartment in Isla Vista. About twice a week, he drives to the magazine office/family home in Calabasas.

His younger brother, Cameron, attends UC Berkeley, and has gotten on a first-name basis with workers at Southwest Airlines.

With the winter quarterly issue due to the printer tomorrow, the brothers spent the first two-thirds of November madly trying to finish school work and then scrambling to finish the magazine last week. "The extent of my social life is going out to interview celebrities," Devin said.

Every issue has required at least one, if not two, all-nighters.

Cameron, who is enrolled in business school, said his professors have been generally forgiving of his schedule.

The brothers have even received a bit of national notoriety this year from an article in the New York Times.

Rap-Up actually started as a Web site when Devin was 15 and migrated to print shortly after -- surprising to some who think of Gen Y as attached to the computer.

The site, <http://www.rap-up.com>, remains an important part of the

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business, but the glossy magazine full of pictures and graphic layouts is what the readers want.

It was just a year ago that the pair started publishing on their own without the backing of a big publishing house. The magazine has gone through a series of starts and stops for about four years.

Neither of the Lazerines are getting paid yet, but advertising does cover the cost of printing and shipping. The largest advertisers are ring tone providers, while others include the Navy, clothing labels, videogames and, recently, Sony.

Devin figures the best way to stay in the black is to keep editorial costs down.

The writing Devin can't get to is done mostly by college students around the country who need experience, and the photos are often contributed by publicists. The only other regular contributor is art director Ian Lynam, who sends everything online from Japan.

Devin takes care of most of the content and advertising sales, while Cameron deals with production, distribution and developing the brand.

"Most magazines fold after four issues," Devin said. "We don't want to do that."

According to MagazineLaunch.com, two-thirds of start-up magazines stop publishing within a few months, mostly from running out of money.

Possible spinoffs

The Lazerine brothers use their most valuable asset to keep the magazine relevant: their own interests.

"We can brainstorm an idea of not 'what would a reader want?', but what would we want," Cameron said.

The next step might be a book deal. Rap-Up has a book agent in New York working on selling the idea. There are also negotiations for a partnership with a larger company that could expand the brand beyond the magazine, but the details are confidential.

"It is great to see it developing into a brand beyond the magazine and kind of developing a life of its own," Cameron said.

No matter how Rap-Up turns out, the brothers have both grown attached to the freedom of their own company.

Cameron is also ready to throw himself into the business full time. He said the juggling is getting old and he is considering trying to graduate a semester early. Devin figures he has another year in school, because the magazine remains his priority.

"I would love to do it full time," Cameron said.

Soon they are thinking of a media company patterned after some of the most successful rappers, like Diddy and Jay Z.

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