

Mad beats

While the Midwest seems like the last place you would associate with hip-hop, Madison's newest record label is getting lots of attention.

By Aaron R. Conklin



Photo by Martha Busse

Greg Doby is serious.

Dead serious.

"I want to have the largest record label empire here, based in Madison," he says. Doby is sitting in the basement production and recording studio that houses Regime Records, the label he helped to found in 1997. He's flanked by the tools of his trade - a keyboard, a computer bank and a mixing board. "I want to be the Russell Simmons of the Midwest. That's my goal."

I wait for the punch line, for Doby to crack a smile, for something. And then he laughs, and I realize he's not joking at all.

You can hear the essence of Greg Doby in that laugh. It's an energetic thing he unleashes easily and often, a hearty cackle that's infectious, charming and utterly guileless. It's impossible not to believe in him when you hear that laugh - even when he's talking about establishing a rap and hip-hop empire in Madison, seemingly one of the more hip-hop-phobic cities in the Midwest.

Doby, whose rounded physique and goatee recall an in-his-prime Kirby Puckett, sees the apparent incongruity. "There is no urban scene in Madison," he admits. "Every week, you can probably go and find something, but on a scale of cities, there's really no scene. I've actually gone to clubs where they've said, 'I won't do hip-hop, because if I do, my liquor license is in jeopardy.'"

It's not exactly shocking news. Radio stations like Madison's Z-104 and Janesville's Hot 105.9-FM may spin OutKast and Twista, but they do little to support a local hip-hop and rap scene. Recent incidents of violence at local watering holes like Stillwater's and the now-defunct club called Seven have merely reinforced the perception that hip-hop breeds violence.

None of this, however, has deterred Doby. In March, Regime released its second hip-hop compilation CD: The Land in Between Volume 2 - From the Ground Up, a rock-solid mix of rap and hip-hop that includes artists from the area (Big Three) and New York (Vinnie Blanco). In what may prove to be an especially shrewd business move, Doby contracted with Madison-based Star Point Studios to film a documentary of his musical journey (also titled The Land in Between). The film shows, as he puts it, "all the things you have to do to become successful in this very crazy industry."

As part of the documentary, Doby decided, like Muhammad, to visit the mountain - also known as New York, ground zero of the urban music universe. He cold-called several record companies and made a connection with Mark Smilow, a manager with Junior Entertainment. Doby took a huge risk, handing Smilow a demo of 50-some musical beats he'd produced in his Madison studio.

His trust was rewarded with the keys to several major doors of opportunity: Doby landed contracts to work with artists on both Interscope and Universal Records. He provided beats to G-Unit, the label owned by Grammy-nominated rapper-of-the-moment 50 Cent. He's working with name artists - Mark "Return of the Mack" Morrison and Nas - on comeback and compilation albums. And he's in the running to provide instrumentals to Rockstar Video Games, the producers of the Grand Theft Auto series.

After five on-again, off-again years in the recording and production business, Doby is just now starting to make money. He just had to leave town to do it.

"There's no business here in Madison," says Doby. "For years, I thought I could bring exposure here, but if there's no industry here, no one's looking. It's like pulling teeth to get somebody to fly out here to see a show. You have to go to where the industry is. Otherwise, you can be the best damn musician, the best producer, but you're not going to get the exposure until you find those people."

Regime Records was originally located in the basement of a former cheese house at 1709 Park Street, but the neighborhood location led to visitors of Seinfeld-ian proportions. "You have a sign up saying 'By Appointment Only,' but people are hanging out, and it got to be crazy," says Doby. "So I said, the next place we're in, they're going to have to drive out here."

And so it is that Regime currently resides at 301 University Ave., an address that sounds as though it's in the very heart of Madison. It's not. It's located on the edge of a Middleton business park, in the basement of a small stucco building that looks, like the business that inhabits it, as if it belongs somewhere else.

Doby co-owns the space with Rick Robinson, the head of RJ Management, a well-established local production and recording label whose clients include Bizzy Bone of Bone Thugs-n-Harmony. Like Doby, Robinson has been working for years to establish Madison as a Midwestern mecca for hip-hop and rap.

"When I first heard him, I thought, this stuff needs to be on a major label," says Robinson of his longtime friend and business associate. "Ginx will stand with you until the end. He stood by my side because we saw the same thing: This music is bigger than both of us." "Ginx" is Doby's professional name - Ginx Da Produca - acronym/shorthand for "Giving Instrumentation New eXcitement."

Doby was born in Milwaukee, but spent most of his life in Madison, growing up in a family that lived and breathed music. His mother, Rosalind, sang in the choir at Mount Zion Baptist Church. His father, a percussionist, faded from the scene when Doby was five, but the man who replaced him had an even stronger musical pedigree: Lee Stanley, the pianist/gospel singer who brings music to elementary school kids through his company, Musically Yours. Doby collaborates with his stepfather often.

"Greg's a great young man with a lot of talent," says Stanley. "I didn't realize he'd grow to become a producer."

But that's the beat Doby has followed, even though he's also blessed with great pipes. In 1994, Doby got a degree in recording engineering from Madison Media Institute and promptly moved to Atlanta.

The mid-90s were a good time to be hanging in the heart of Georgia. The 1994 Olympic Games had just transformed the city, giving rise to a white-hot urban music scene. LaFace Records, the label owned by musical Midases L.A. Reid and Babyface, was busily turning Toni Braxton and Usher into megastars, while Jermaine Dupri's So So Def Recordings was developing Kriss Kross and Da Brat.

Doby was a blip on the scene, an unknown singer fronting an R&B group called Episode and waiting tables at a local Bennigan's. One day, three Fates walked in: T-Boz, Left Eye and Chilli. Or, as they're more famously known, TLC.



Photo by Martha Busse

"It was this big commotion, and the

manager was like, 'Stay away from the table.' I was like, are you crazy?" Doby recalls, unleashing another deep belly laugh. "Of course, I disobeyed my supervisor."

Doby pleaded with the ladies to give his demo a listen; the group's A&R rep, who happened to be sitting at the table with them, agreed to see Doby the following week.

"I went to his office, and he pretty much told me my music was crap," Doby laughs again. "He told me, 'You know, I don't think you're going to make it as a singer, but I really like your production. You just need to upgrade your equipment.'"

Thus began Doby's quest to transform himself into an A-list hip-hop producer. He spent a year as an unpaid intern with LaFace Records, learning the ropes and losing his restaurant gig. Out of cash with nowhere to go, Doby moved back to Madison in 1997.

"I had no intentions of coming back," says Doby, twisting the oversized silver ring on his pointer finger. "But I said, 'hey, while I'm here, I can do exactly what they're doing back in Atlanta.' I wanted to build my own Midwest empire - I figured it's got to come this way eventually."

Doby hooked up with Erin Heinem and Richard Henderson, two of the members of the Madison-based hip-hop group Fresh Force. Together they scrapped together some cash and formed Regime Records, a name connoting another acronym: Robert, Erin and Greg In Music Entertainment. Doby would produce, while Heinem and Henderson would find rappers and vocalists and handle the business end.

The trio conducted talent searches and winnowed a pool of 100 Madison hopefuls down to eight artists, including Holly Smith, the then-lead singer of Smokin' with Superman, as well as rap specialists Big Three and Rob Dz. These three are the only original musicians still with the label.

In 1998, the label printed 10,000 copies of *The Land in Between* Volume 1, blew half of them on promotions and sold the majority of the rest. National mags like *The Source* and *Rap Sheet* took favorable notice. Later that year, Big Three and Rob Dz entered an online MTV contest, and the former took second-place among voters for best hip-hop artist. Things were looking up - and then, as so often happens, the taste of success began to poison the enterprise: one partner dropped out, then two. Suddenly, Doby was sailing solo.

"It's been my show for the last year, and it's definitely hard," says Doby, who admits he was seriously contemplating moving his family to Miami before his business began to boom. "I'm doing everything, from the marketing to the management of the artists to the production to the recording. I'm a one-man show right now, and it's killing me."

Doby is 32, an age that, despite any protestations Aaliyah might have made to the contrary, is far more than just a number. At its core, the recording industry is a youth-driven business, and while it's more forgiving to those in front of the mixing station than those in front of the mic, Doby knows his time to strike is now. And he's ready.

"Now the industry is starting to look toward the Midwest. Z-104 is playing hip-hop. It's here," says Doby. "Younger cats, that's what they want to listen to, and we've got to give them what they want. Is it gonna happen? Am I gonna stay here? I'm very confident. Give me about another year and a half" - a final big laugh - "and you'll see the effect of what I'm doing."

Go on, Greg. Show us what you've got.

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