

My first real encounter with actual German hip-hop was in late July 2003 at Germany's MTV Hip Hop Open at Stuggard, Germany. Johannes "Strachi" Strachwitz runs 711hiphop.com. Strachi and Alex Ritcher are the co-promoters of the MTV Hip-Hop Open. Alex also runs a major German talent agency called Four Artists. Some of Germany's top hip-hop groups are on Four Artists. MTV was broadcasting the live one-day hip-hop concert that drew around 10,000 German teenagers. I hadn't arrived but a minute and was interviewing some German lowriders at the MTV Hip-Hop Open Fairgrounds. I started paying attention to a German hip-hop song blaring on the loud speakers. The beat was forgettable, but the hook was not. I barely bopping my head to the beat when the hook jumped in saying, "We Das Niggas!" "We Das Niggas!" I thought it was funny hearing the N-word in German and then I realized I was the only "Das Nigga" around a sea of white and unfamiliar faces. But why should I be surprised to see thousands of foreign white folks shouting out "Where My Nigga At?" Or "Nigga Who" or dozens and dozens of "Nigga" hooks on practically every major hit hip-hop song or music video. Our hood or urban culture is everywhere in Germany--the good and the bad. So I laughed off my "We Das Niggas" experience and enjoyed the concert.

The acts at the MTV Open were all popular German hip-hop stars and the only noticeable US performer was RZA of the Wu Tang Clan. RZA at the time had just released a collaboration with Xavier Naidoo called I've Never Seen. Xavier is Germany's equivalent to R-Kelly. He has clean-shaven, coca butter GQ features and a silky smooth voice that even makes typical harsh sounding German lyrics sound relaxing and enjoyable. "I've Never Seen" has a haunting melody that blends well with Xavier's rich voice and RZA's tight lyrical flow. When I watched the "I've Never Seen" video it had the high quality production look. It could've easily aired on our MTV or BET as a RZA video featuring Xavier instead of the other way around. US hip-hop needs far more international collaborations.

What struck me immediately at the MTV Hip-Hop Open was how similar that the German teenagers were to any American kids you'd stumble across at Spring Break or at Hot 97's Summer Jam. They knew when to throw their hands up and sway on cue to RZA. A lot of them knew every rap he was spitting before he could finish a line. But what really flipped me was when I saw a French group called Saian Supa Crew (Paris) throw down. The six members of Saian Supa Crew consists of Vicelow, Feniksi, Specta, Sir Samuel, Leeroy Kesiah and Sly the Mic Buddha. I barely passed French in high school and at USC, but you don't need to speak another language when folks are rapping over popular Dirty South beats. I didn't know or care what Saian Supa Crew was spitting. In fact, I don't think most of the crowd spoke french fluently either even though most Germans are fluent in English and many European languages.

Hip-hop is definitely a tremendous global force that defies any logic at times or common sense. You almost know instinctively how to react when you see 10,000 others really feeling a good MC rocking the crowd. It does not matter whether you can understand him or not. I was quite amazed when Leeroy Kesiah, “self-proclaimed human beat box doctor” did a solo freestyle beat box for ten minutes. That would never happen in the states unless it was a retro Dougie Fresh show. The crowd was pure hip-hop heads and they begged and clapped for more. And right on cue the Saian Supa Crew did another five minutes of freestyle beat boxing. I seriously doubt this scene of fanatical hip-hop fan intensity could be matched in the states. We would cynically think the extended beat boxing was a ploy to stall time or cover up a rapper’s weak show. Yet at a German hip-hop concert even a great French beat boxer can be as entertaining to a crowd as a Wu Tang Clan member’s set.

I took a break from the concert and went to a Porta-John near the VIP bleachers. I was waiting in line when Thenkof, or Tankman, the hardest working hip-hop promoter in Germany, quickly informed me that the thin, bald-head laid-back looking guy in front of me was none other than Curse (Minden). I of course replied, “Curse who?” Tankman tells me that Curse is one of Germany’s biggest hip-hop stars. It took a minute for me to comprehend how Curse could be one of Germany’s biggest hip-hop stars and there were no bodyguards, groupies, “Yes-Men”, Hype Guys, managers or any entourage of any kind. Curse is probably the German equivalent to a cross between Common and Kanye West. I wanted to ask Curse a few detailed questions, but I was too stunned by his plain and unassuming demeanor to rattle off anything meaningful. I also knew I could interview him later after the concert. But what an immediate jolt this was to me.

My unusual Curse encounter takes me to the heart of what German hip-hop is all about: “No Bling! But Lots Of Bang”. What I learned from interviewing lots of German rappers during my three week paid vacation was that nobody did it for the money. That’s because nobody was getting rich in German hip-hop. One should know that after America, Germany has the second biggest hip-hop consumers. Germany has 55 million folks stuffed into a state the size of Ohio. German youths are extremely well educated, experienced world travelers and have plenty of disposable income. If Germans are not working they are supported by their socialistic-if not paternalistic--government until they do find a good job. So, theoretically many German rappers could be and should be millionaires. And German MCs could become rich if by magic America suddenly stopped exporting any R&B and hip-hop CDs. Since that is only going to happen in alternative universe, German rappers will always come out on the short end--as far as getting broke off--compared to their more popular American counterparts. So it is not economics and something much deeper that is keeping German MCs modest, humble and still working 9 to 5’s most of the time.

Most if not all of the top names in German hip-hop have no importance at all to the average US hip-hop fan. Since there has not been a real “breakout” star one has to compare German acts to American stars. I got most of my insights on who’s hot in German hip-hop from my guide Thenkof or “Tankman”, president of DefPro Entertainment. Tankman is a fast rising Turkish German hip-hop promoter who manages about 65 acts from his Frankfurt company. Tankman had such good contacts and a reputation in German that he made my job as a writer/journalist extremely easy. I also learned who was hot in German hip-hop from talking to fans, other rappers and watching videos on German MTV and

I’ll start with Brixx (Cologne) who is a Hungarian born and German raised MC whose style is a mix of Missy Elliot and Gangsta Boo. Brixx got inspired to be a rapper when at an American military base club she heard AMG’s underground playa anthem “Bitch Better Have My Money”. Brixx didn’t know what all of AMG’s x-rated lyrics meant when she first heard them. But she immediately knew that hardcore hip-hop was her calling. Her latest single is appropriately called “F&#\*CK YOU” in the typical AMG tradition. That’s what’s great about hip-hop there is no rhyme or reason what will motivate one to be a rapper, DJ, bomber, beat master, graffiti artists, etc.,. Anything is a possible inspiration nowadays.

Afrob and Samy Deluxe or ASD (Stuggard) are a highly energetic duo that is easily the Deutschland’s Redman and Method Man. I actually like ASD’s song “Sneak Preview.” I have a vague idea what the song is about. But I do now it has a great beat and crowds really love it when ASD performs it live. ILLMATIC (Frankfurt) is the Ja Rule of Germany because has a short haircut, wears head bans 24/7 and has a “studio gangsta” image. Ferris MC (Hamburg) is a wild looking teenage rapper who flows like Murphy Lee. Absolute Beginner (Denyo 77 & Eisfeld 65) (Hamburg) has a mellow-Pop or commercial hip-hop sound like Will Smith. Toni L is an old skool survivor from the mid-80’s that is like DJ Red Alert. Gentleman is reggae DJ that can hold his own with Sean Paul. Olli Banjo is a new and energetic rapper that reminds me of Elephant Man. Kool Savas is a Turkish German that is a thuggish MC similar to DMX, but without all the off-stage drama. Spax conscious commercial flow makes one think of Nas. Preshuz-T (Frankfurt) is a Cincy born rapper who is best described as an International Eve. Phreshuz-T, like Azrel “The Wrecker”, a former American G.I., are black US rappers who prefer to live in Germany. Neither have a desire to get a deal here in the states. Furthermore, I met another Frankfurt based MC called Don Blaze that only raps in English. Blaze like Brixx has no interest in blowing up in Germany. I have only scratched the surface of the fraction of all the many types of German rappers that are spitting today.

In my opinion what's also holding German hip-hop back on a subconscious level is the fear of failing in America. Xavier Naidoo's "I've Never Seen" featuring RZA could be seen as a blatant attempt to create an international "crossover proof" record. This might be the second time for Xavier to attempt a major comeback to the states. He tried in the mid 90's to crossover and he failed big time. Later on I asked an upcoming Frankfurt rapper named Caser about Xavier's new chances at being successful overseas and he was highly pessimistic. Caser, like most German rappers or teens, was convinced that if a German or European artist tries to release an album in the states and it flops then they have no chance of every becoming big in America. It is this "one shot fatalistic" fear that holds back some talented German hip-hop artists from believing they are as good as US hip-hop stars.

Not many German MCs dream of the day when they could become as rich or influential worldwide as Eminem, Jay-Z or 50 Cents. But the unflinching reality is that German rappers are not really concerned with becoming household names outside Germany. I rarely heard German rappers other than Brixx and Blaze truly be concerned with signing with a major American record label. And even when Brixx's first CD was released it had so much of a slick American packaged look that it flopped in her adopted country. Brixx was rapping mainly in English and working with US hip-hop producers. She had no collaborations with any other German hip-hop artists. This plan backfired and alienated her from the typical German hip-hop fan. With poor sales in Germany her label at Columbia decided not to release her first CD in the states. Any German MC I met knew about Xavier's and Brixx's failure. They are now more obsessed with being successful in Germany first rather than hope their music will be a hit anywhere else. What is utterly indisputable to all I talked to during my informative journey overseas was the beginnings of modern German hip-hop does not typically start in 1984 with American GIs bringing over their favorite albums from the "Boogie-Down Bronx". Nor was it the introduction of MTV Germany which has steadily introduced wave after wave of hip-hop music and culture. No the what has really started the independent and self assertive hip-hop movement in German hip-hop is the rise and fall of Def Jam Germany in 2000.

The Def Jam Germany story or myth goes that back when former Def Jam/Island Music President, Lyor Cohen was expanding the Def Jam Brand internationally he got a call from Boris Cohen, who was Managing Director of Mercury Records in Hamburg. Boris or his better apt nickname "The Bear" is a fifty plus white bearded bombastic sounding man. Imagine Santa Claus as a thick gold chain, throwback wearing B-boy from the Run DMC era. Well, Bear boldly told Lyor that he was the only one in Germany qualified to run the newly proposed Def Jam Germany. At the time Bear had managed Germany's oldest and most known hip-hop group Die Fantastischen Vier (The Fantastic Four). Lyor believed Bear was the man to get things done and turned over reigns to him.

This was a bad decision because Bear immediately chose to sign Berlin's Dean and Harris, a.k.a. the Spezialitz, who are two handsome 6'5 Young Gunz style sounding MCs. Bear also signed an attractive female MC and singer named Bintia who was also from Berlin. Recently Spezialitz, Bintia and Brixx all collaborated "Clubflash" from the Spezialitz's latest CD G.B.Z. - Oholika II.

Almost everyone in the underground and mainstream German hip-hop scene resented Def Jam Germany's lead choices because at that time in Germany they could probably have virtually signed or offered deals to all of the country's top hip-hop acts. Def Jam Germany could have been a powerhouse of artistic talent that rivaled a few American hip-hop record labels. Some international hip-hop insiders speculated that Def Jam should have started Def Jam France first. There were far more mature and successful African MCs in Paris that could have established a credible and profitable foundation in Europe. Then Def Jam Germany could have been launched with less pressure to succeed right away.

But Lyor chose to go to Germany first. Pretty much every MC in Germany wanted to be signed or associated with the legendary Def Jam label. So it was quite a shock when they passed over Curse, ASD, Kool Suvas, etc., to sign relatively unknown and new acts like The Spezialitz and Bintia. Their singles and CDs were released to much hype in Germany and they sold alright. The lackluster sales is what in turn caused the Def Jam Germany experiment to come to a screeching halt. But Def Jam's abrupt failure was a hidden blessing in disguise because it forced every German MC and DJ to stop depending on US hip-hop record labels as an automatic savior or instant way to achieve overnight success.

There are many stories and details that need to be told from Berlin to Hamburg or from Cologne to Munich. Each sector of Germany has developed a particular style of hip-hop based on who lives there and what they experience on a daily basis. For example, in East Germany there are still pockets of intolerance to foreigners or just outright racism. But it is also in East Germany's town of Chemnitz that hosts the SPLASH Festival, which is Europe's biggest hip-hop and reggae festival. Jan Voightmann is one of SPLASH's main promoters and also runs Phlatline Records. SPLASH usually draws 30,000 teenagers over a three-day concert in late July. The scene is like a mini-Woodstock. There is also hip-hop fairground that goes from midnight to sunrise. SPLASH's big name US hip-hop acts last year were Redman, Eric Sermon, De La Soul, Parish, K-Solo, Gangstar, DJ Kool, Petey Pablo, Fatman Scoop and Slum Village. Jan has about a \$1.5 million Euro operating budget to put on the SPLASH Festival each year.

The new and powerful lyrical voices, new promoters, new producers and new indie labels that rose from the ashes of Def Jam Germany is what I will explore in the second part of my exploration of the German hip-hop scene. I will also break down the great opportunities for new and old skool US hip-hop stars to perform in Germany. Why The Source's baseless and media created fear of Eminem and other white rappers taking over hip-hop in America has no meaning in a country of thousands of potential Eminems. How the German society and media supports if not tolerates hip-hop culture in ways that Americans no longer pretend to do. I will also interview Jeffrey L. King, the publisher of Bounce, Europe's #1 R&B and hip-hop magazine. Bounce is distributed monthly in eight countries including Canada. Bounce has plans to soon expand its circulation into America.

What German rappers lack in having expensive music videos, film and TV appearances, experienced marketing campaigns, well coordinated promotional contests, corporate sponsorship, media hype or big paychecks, they make up by having the heart and spirit to do hip-hop 24/7 without any expectation of fame, fortune or respect outside their country. During my three weeks in Germany, I met many proud German MCs that refused to sellout and just do music that we in the states think are commercial and profitable. Like I said before, German hip-hop does not have the bling, but it does have the bang.