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Gay Rappers: Too Real For Hip-Hop?

By TOURÉ
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IT'S Friday night in Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn, and Caushun is chilling on the third floor of his parents' brownstone. He is totally street: baggy jeans, wrist bands, fresh black Timberlands, a diamond stud in his left ear and a baseball cap (worn to the back, at an angle) with his name spray-painted across the bill in graffiti bubble letters. Caushun is a rapper, and he's getting ready to rhyme, but right now he's flipping through Vogue. He did Kimora Lee Simmons's hair for her photo shoot, and he wants to see how it turned out.

Caushun can get fierce with some hair. "I'm nasty with mine," he said.

He calls himself "the weave king," an extensions specialist. He's done hairdos for J-Lo and Sarah Michelle Gellar, and he's the stereotype of the celebrity hairdresser. He's a b-boy with a poodle named Wesley and an apartment with ornate pillows with silk flowers on them and beautiful vases filled with giant lilies. Caushun is a 25-year-old openly gay rapper from the same neighborhood as Biggie Smalls, with flippy wrists, a gay twang and a flow that is liquid and cool and ready for the big time. He wants to be hip-hop's homosexual Jackie Robinson.

Hip-hop is now as large a cultural stage as baseball was in the 50's, yet the mainstream is just as closed to gay rappers as the major leagues were to black men before Robinson. And, as with Robinson, for Caushun to break through could have a profound impact on how gay people are perceived throughout America.

"He's going to open up discussion about one of the last acceptable prejudices," said his manager, Ivan Matias. "With homosexuals having so much influence over hip-hop from behind the scenes, it's time that they had a voice." He was referring to the gay executives, managers, stylists and magazine editors in the music business.

Caushun said simply: "Look, I'm keepin' it real. Don't let me find out that I'm keepin' it too real for hip-hop. Should that be the name of my album? 'Too Real for Hip-Hop?'"

Caushun recently signed with Baby Phat Records, and his debut album, "Shock and Awe," will come out at the end of June before Gay Pride Day. His self-confidence is so strong that he doesn't believe his being gay will keep him from selling a million records and having a video played on MTV 20 times a week -- in other words, from becoming a star.

The hip-hop impresario Russell Simmons, whose wife, Kimora Lee, is the owner and chief executive of Baby Phat, knows it will be hard to make Caushun a star, but he's hopeful.

"Rap music is one of the most homophobic musics we know," Mr. Simmons said. "But he's dope and he's unique because of his perspective on the world. I can't imagine that people aren't going to buy it. You think women and gay men won't buy it? It's a huge possibility."

Caushun says there were labels that wanted to turn him into a house-music artist or into the RuPaul of hip-hop, but he said no. He wants to be mainstream: "You got Jay-Z talking about girls, girls, girls. Nelly, take your clothes off. They put their sexuality out front. What's the big deal if I put mine up front and come out open?"

He learned to rhyme just hanging around his neighborhood. He says he would sit up in his parents house with his boys, smoking weed, and someone would start to rhyme, it was no big deal. "I rhyme about everything," he said. "I just rhyme from a gay perspective. And it's not

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like it's a flamboyant gay perspective. It's the next-door neighbor. We saying the same thing. I just might put a little gay terminology in there."

He plucked a few grapes from a bowl on a table, walked over to his iMac and put on a beat. The beat's just O.K. and the hook is kind of corny, but Caushun is witty, and he surely can flow.

What is recognized as the first hip-hop record by an openly gay person was "Hip-Hop Don't Stop" by Man Parish, recorded in 1986. According to industry figures and Web sites devoted to the subject, there are now at least 40 to 50 openly gay rappers worldwide. Most don't use homosexuality in the campy, cartoonish way Caushun does. The Deep Dickcollective is a loose assemblage of black men based in San Francisco. Two regular members are Juba Kalamka, who rhymes as Pointfivefag, and Tim'm West, a widely respected rapper. Mr. West, who is H.I.V.-positive, is also an AIDS activist and a schoolteacher.

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Touré, a contributing editor at Rolling Stone, is the author of "The Portable Promised Land," a collection of short stories.

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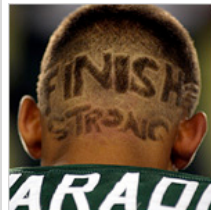


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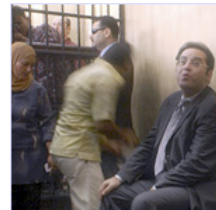
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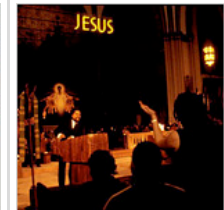
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