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BOD SQUAD

The Dad Bod Rap Pod wraps up its first five years

BY ETHAN GREGORY DODGE P8

POD FUTURE

San Jose's Dad Bod Rap Pod has spent half a decade documenting hip hop stories **BY ETHAN GREGORY DODGE**

DEMONE CARTER looks into his laptop's built-in webcam as the conference call begins. It's difficult to tell where his white shirt ends as it blends into the wall behind him. The feed of David Ma, Carter's co-host, causes the contrast of his black and gray tattoos against his light skin to appear starker than in reality. But the video is not important. The two talk back and forth, their voices flowing in the now familiar semi-garbled manner characteristic of these calls.

60 East, a Southern California rapper and this episode's guest, soon enters the virtual conference room. There's small talk back and forth until they're ready to record. Carter's commanding voice sounds as he introduces the show:

"Dad Bod Rap Pod, every week we are talking to people who are moving and shaking hip hop culture."

It's the start of the final segment in the show's 241st episode. Next week, Dad Bod Rap Pod celebrates five years of earnest discussion and studious analysis of the hip hop world.

Created by three 40-something South Bay natives—Carter, Ma and fellow hip hop head Nate LeBlanc—the show has become a staple in the underground rap community since launching in 2017. Now with thousands of listeners across the globe, the humble podcast is more fit than its name would lead you to believe.

STONY ISLAND

Chicago-based rapper and comedian Open Mike Eagle first became aware of Dad Bod Rap Pod through fellow rapper R.A.P. Ferrerira. The first time he listened, he was smitten with the content.

"I liked the perspective," he says. "Hip hop being a genre that's really not been often discussed in the podcast realm. The way they were doing it felt so journalistic."

In the fall of 2019, Open Mike Eagle was a guest on the podcast's 89th episode. One year later, Dad Bod Rap Pod was announced as one of the inaugural shows on Eagle's podcast network, Stony Island Audio.

"Conversations with them started almost immediately," he says. "I always had them in mind when I was talking to different distributors about podcasts that already existed in this space."

Eagle thinks that podcasts like Dad Bod Rap Pod can eventually play a similar role to the ones once held by music magazines. Specifically, he finds the show reminiscent of *Ego Trip*, a New York City hip hop

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THREE MICS *Since starting in 2017, the tireless trio of Dad Bod Rap Pod have logged 240 episodes.*

magazine started by independent music journalists in the mid-'90s.

"It was obviously driven by fans of music who were writers that had their own opinions and their own things they wanted to spotlight," Eagle recalls. "That honesty and integrity is what is reflected in Dad Bod."

Eagle also notices Dad Bod's influence growing.

"I can tell that these guests wanted to be on that show because they knew it would expose them to new people," he says. "Artists are recognizing that this is a valuable show to be on for exposure to people who could be into their music."

Allen Johnson, owner of Needle to the Groove Records, a record store and music label in downtown San Jose, attributes that success to several reasons beyond the trio's hip hop knowledge.

"They waited to a time in their lives when it made sense to dig deeper," he says. "They didn't do a podcast in their 20s on hip hop. The timing worked out well for them. Underground hip hop music had a renaissance and podcasting became one of the largest media outlets."

SAVE IT FOR THE POD

In the podcast's introduction, Carter raps over synth beats about how it all started: "Three underground rap nerds walk into a bar. An argument ensues about who the GOATs are."

That bar was Fountainhead in San Jose's SoFA district. It was the fall of 2017. Of course, the three nerds were Carter, LeBlanc and Ma. But in reality, LeBlanc wasn't there. That fateful argument over the greatest rappers of all time involved only Carter and Ma.

"It was such a stupid argument to get into," recalls Carter. "We don't talk or think in these terms anymore. But, we got in an argument about who the greatest female rapper of all time was."

Ma argued in favor of Lauryn Hill. "I'm a big MC Lyte fan myself," Carter says.

It was then that Carter threw out the idea of publishing these types of discussions in the form of a podcast. Ma agreed and immediately wanted to include LeBlanc.

At the time, LeBlanc and Ma were good friends but Carter was more of an acquaintance. Yet from the very start they found the discussion between the three of them to be very cohesive.

"We just vibed from the beginning. We were hanging out and talking, talking, talking. Then we just turned mics on," Carter says. "It's the same stuff. Now we just package the banter."

Now, when discussing hip hop, they frequently stop the conversation to "save it for the pod."

"We all bring something unique to the table with our different specialties," Ma says. According to LeBlanc, he and Ma are "musical twins."

"We like the same song, on the same album, by the same guy, for the same reason." Just last month, the two DJ'd at Camino Brewing's Wax Wednesday. Both arrived equipped with nearly an identical set of records to play.

Demone's views on rap music, meanwhile, brings a much needed element to the show.

"If Demone had not come along and the podcast was just me and Dave agreeing all the time, it would be so boring," LeBlanc says.

"He was an underground rapper and we talk about underground rap, so his perspective is already different," LeBlanc says. "He thinks underground rap peaked in 1996 and I think it peaked in 2001. That's a big difference in terms of what was available."

PAID IN FULL

Demone Carter grew up in South East San Jose near Senter and Monterey. Raised in a family of DJs, he was always around music and familiar with '80s pop, rock and R&B. Though he was aware of hip hop, it hadn't stolen his heart until one fateful day in the summer of 1988 when his stepfather came home with a certain 12-inch vinyl.

It was Eric B and Rakim's eternal album *Paid in Full*. The album's title track starts with a crisp beat on a closed hi-hat and deep bass drum as Eric B and Rakim talk back and forth. After the conversation, a smooth bass line enters. Though the song's opening beat has become one of the most sampled in hip hop, Carter was particularly entranced by what came next: Rakim's vocals and lyrics.

Without Googling, Carter rattles off his favorite line of the song: "Me and Eric B, and a nice big plate of fish, which is my favorite dish, but without no money it's still a wish."

He says he played it on the family record player "thousands of times."

"That's when I first started to fall in love with the idea of being a rapper," Carter says. "It was straight forward storytelling that he was doing that appealed to me. It felt like something I could do."

From there, he began recording *Yo! MTV Raps* on VHS every day after school. The show was MTV's first hip hop program and Carter ate it up. He used the tapes to memorize his favorite songs during the height of the golden age of hip hop.

▸10

In San Jose, Carter saw his Chicano and Asian American peers rally around their racial identities through events, vendors, food, ethnic music and a shared language. As a Black man growing up in San Jose, however, he didn't always find the same representation.

"I could see other people practicing their culture, their ethnic identity in a way that I couldn't necessarily," he recalls. "We always had Juneteenth but we were always small and very disparate. So you didn't have that sense."

Hip hop changed everything.

"It gave me a sense of connection as a Black San Josean, a minority amongst minorities," he says. "Particularly what was coming out of New York at the time, I saw myself reflected. I saw Afro-centricity and all these ideas from the Nation of Islam and Malcolm X were percolating through the music. That made me fall in love with it and gave me a sense of identity as a Black man."

The first song Carter remembers memorizing "from top to bottom" was "My Philosophy" by Boogie Down Productions. The group's front man, rapper KRS-One, speaks of Black intellectualism.

"Up to that point, rap was gold chain, tough guy shit," Carters says. "At the time, I was in eighth grade and I was like 'That's it, I'm rappin'. This is what I'm doing.'"

At the age of 12, Carter began writing his own verses. But it wasn't until a high school pep rally in which he and the late Sultan Banks (aka producer Traxamillion) rapped together that Carter identified as a rapper. He and Banks went on to form the hip hop trio Lackadaisical with their friend Jessie Jones. The trio released one EP and toured as far as Seattle.

The group was short-lived, but it made an impact on its members. As Traxamillion, Banks went on to define the sound of Bay Area hip hop in the 2000s, producing some of the most landmark beats in hyphy. Carter still performs to this day under the moniker DEM ONE.

THE WHISTLE: *Carter, Ma and LeBlanc talk with Bay Area legend Too $hort for episode 200 of* Dad Bod Rap Pod.

SPOKE TO ME

Like Carter, LeBlanc's parents had a passion for music. His dad raised him listening to the likes of Bob Dylan and Neil Young, but growing up in Evergreen, local radio stations like KMEL with Chuy Gomez had him and his friends singing Jodeci songs into hair brushes.

"They would play freestyle, '90s R&B and hip hop," LeBlanc says. "I still love all that music. That's my musical DNA. That's the music of San Jose."

LeBlanc recalls liking "uncool" hip hop for a time ("I memorized all the words to 'U Can't Touch This' and thought it was the greatest thing in the world"), but then sometime in the early '90s, he got his hands on A Tribe Called Quest's album *Midnight Marauders*.

"I still have the original cassette," he says. "The writing is worn off. I played it thousands of times. It's my favorite album of all time. It's perfect and I will hear no other theories on that."

The album's lyrical references led LeBlanc to discover more hip hop artists. Likewise, the musical samples led to an exploration of jazz musicians.

"If you follow that tree as it splits into more fractals, it gets huge," he says. That musical curiosity soon became a way of life for him. *Midnight Marauders* was an entry point into a musical world that would come to engross him.

"I love Bob Dylan, the Beatles and Jimi Hendrix, but I'm a hip hop person," he says. "That's the music that's always spoken to me and I'm obsessed with it. I've spent so much more time thinking about that than any other thing in my life. I used to just think it and not tell anyone."

While in college, LeBlanc and his childhood friend Paulo (aka DJ Cutso, from the San Jose crew the Bangerz) made what would become a precursor to Dad Bod Rap Pod.

"[We] used to make fake radio shows when we were in college," he says. "We have many cassette tapes of us doing basically the same thing [as the podcast], except we used to play records, too. We were basically running a fake radio station in the bedroom I grew up in, giving the cassettes one at a time to people who could bear 90 minutes of our attempts at comedy and good music." For LeBlanc, everything always came back to one simple fact: he liked music, and liked talking to people about it.

"Liking music was always part of my personal identity. I always had tapes. I always made tapes. I always compiled the songs that I liked. I taped songs off the radio. I liked talking to people about music."

HIP HOP JOURNALISM

Born in Malaysia to Vietnamese refugees, Ma moved to Santa Clara with his parents when he was two months old.

"I am very much of the immigrant diaspora," he says. "A lot of Asian American kids who are second generation, everything we have is because of what our parents did. I'm able to do a lot of the art things that

I care about mainly because of their hustle. I never take it for granted."

In high school, Ma felt like rapper Earl Sweatshirt when he says: "Too Black for the white kids and too white for the Blacks."

"I was always too Asian for the whites and too white for the Asians," he remembers.

He found solace in music, hip hop in particular.

I think we disarm our guests. They can tell that we love the music, that we have done the research, and that we're real hip hop heads.

"Some of the best hip hop that exists was still on the radio," he says. "You still heard De La Soul, A Tribe Called Quest and Wu Tang Clan on the radio. Aesthetically, I just always really liked it."

After high school Ma started record collecting. That led him to a phase of exploration and discovery beyond what he heard on the radio. Like LeBlanc, the interconnectivity between artists fascinated him.

"I'd hear a song and want to know who played the flute on it. So I'd go check out that artist and that's a whole new catalog to check out. It's a never-ending web."

Currently, Ma teaches a course on the history of hip hop at San Jose State University. "I tell my students that hip hop is one of the few genres that teaches you about every other type of music. You hear a Jay-Z song and it samples Beethoven. Then you hear a bass line and it's [jazz bassist Charles] Mingus. I'm very much about the discovery aspect of music."

Ma has also channeled his musical passions into a robust career in music journalism. He has interviewed artists spanning multiple genres for outlets such as *Rolling Stone*, NPR, *Pitchfork* and *Wax Poetics*. It has made him one of the most reputable music journalists in the South Bay. Earlier this year, he and LeBlanc wrote the liner notes for the reissue of LA hip hop crew Freestyle Fellowship's debut album, *To Whom It May Concern*. This week, the album was announced as a nominee for the 2022 Grammy for Best Historical Album.

HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

A few weeks after their momentous conversation at the Fountainhead, Carter and Ma gathered at LeBlanc's house to record their very first episode. The hit Broadway hip-hop musical *Hamilton* had swept the Tony Awards the year before. The three decided discussing their mutual loathing for the production would make a good first episode.

Carter came equipped with an "awful" USB microphone. With no prior podcast production experience, they placed the microphone on LeBlanc's coffee table, sat down on the couch, and started talking. By the time they finished, they had enough content for more than one episode. But, according to LeBlanc, the sound quality wasn't great.

"We were sitting too far away," recalls LeBlanc. "I had no control. I was moving and laughing and we were interrupting each other. For the first year and a half of the podcast, I had to write myself a note not to interrupt."

LeBlanc was so embarrassed by the quality that he didn't find them suitable for public consumption. To this day, the podcast's feed does not include this content and lists the first episode as episode 3.

"No one has ever heard those. Not even us," he says. "I've never listened back to them. They're on a hard drive

on a desk in my room, but I don't plan on listening to them anytime soon."

Motivated by the experience, LeBlanc took it upon himself to learn the basics of audio production.

"YouTube is amazing for learning how to do something that you don't know how to do. And so, we made a couple episodes we thought were decent. We put them on SoundCloud around Thanksgiving of 2017 and got enough response from our friends that we kept going."

In an effort to add more content, the trio began to interview hip hop artists. Ma's connections as a journalist helped them do so.

"It was Dave hustling to get people to believe it was worth coming on," Carter says.

Now, the show has enough recognition that hustle isn't required. "We got to meet and talk to literal heroes of ours," says Carter. He says they didn't create the podcast with the intent to talk to rappers of the caliber of Too $hort, Darryl McDaniels or Fatlip—all of whom have been on the show—it happened organically.

"I think we disarm our guests," Ma says. "They can tell that we love the music, that we have done the research, and that we're real hip hop heads. Some of the best interviews that I've had as a journalist have been through the podcast."

Carter refers to the discussion on the show as the "loving dissection" of hip hop. "We have to tell our own stories or it's going to be TMZ only reporting about my homie when he dies. So if we don't take the media into our own hands and tell our own stories then we just keep getting savagely misrepresented. Our culture is ours."

Humor is also an essential element of Dad Bod Rap Pod, as conveyed in its name. The name was originally suggested by LeBlanc as a joke, but as soon as Carter heard it, he knew that had to be it. "It's catchy. It's memorable. It's SEO friendly. In that moment, I knew that was the title. I had to fight with them for two more days."

"We have a wholesome sense of humor," says Ma. "We take the music seriously, but we don't take ourselves too seriously."

"Nuanced conversation, a little humor—we crack more jokes than the average hip hop podcast—and then the innate parasocial relationship listeners form with a group of friends who talk for a living," LeBlanc says. "That's what people like."

TIL INFINITY

When asked if they thought Dad Bod Rap Pod would ever make it five years, all three responded with a resounding "no." They credit their longevity to multiple factors.

"Everyone was at home for a year," LeBlanc says. "It helped with guest availability. We leveled up a lot during the pandemic. Partly because of the world changing and people listening to more podcasts. We also got better."

"There will be these weird perks that come along through relationships with artists," Carter adds. "We got to go to some festivals. We do those things on a clip that refreshes us. If it was just the podcast for five years, I think we would have got a little stale."

"Also, it's not just about us," Ma says, jumping. "I think rap music is more interesting and inventive than ever. That keeps us engaged."

The show's notable rise in listenership provided a nice motivation as well.

"I don't think we would have screamed into the void for five years," LeBlanc jokes.

But when asked about the next five years, the crew is not quite so confident.

"It would be hard for me to see us doing it for another five years," Carter says. "But who knows what this partnership will birth."

Ma agrees.

"It could move or morph into other things."

"So listen now," LeBlanc quips before the interview ends.

Carter hops in to finish his thought.

"While you still can."