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HEADLINE: Little Rock producer gives film street-smart sound

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BODY:

In 1994, when director Marc Levin was preparing to release *Gang War: Bangin'* in Little Rock, his documentary about gang life in Arkansas, he negotiated for the inclusion of tracks by Snoop Dog, Queen Latifah and Cypress Hill - a soundtrack that jibed with the music his subjects, and much of his audience, was listening to at the time.

Because he was navigating a world in which one could literally live and die by his street credibility, Levin and his product needed the presence of respected hip-hop artists - certainly more than they needed the attachment to his movie - in order to gain acceptance.

But, a decade later, as Levin is again preparing to release a Little Rock-based gang documentary, *Bangin'* in Little Rock has become a household term in the hip-hop community. And Levin finds himself in the position of being able to confer credibility-by-way-of-hip-hop, rather than having to seek it.

As a result, for the new film, *Gang War II: Back in the Hood*, he has foregone the presence of Snoop Dog, Queen Latifah or their more contemporary hip-hop counterparts, and instead scored the new film with a largely Little Rock-produced soundtrack.

"It was a decision of how can you creatively help a community, without people running to you," said Levin, who flatly refused to film

any interview subject who requested payment. Levin's search for Little Rock sound led him to the doorstep of Dameon Thompson, who is known professionally as Dameon 1. Working from a studio in his home near 20th and South Martin streets, Thompson operates Official 1 Records, home of Arkansas artists such as Solo, Ricky D, Indo, Tha SupaFrenz and Ball Jones, who is Thompson's brother.

"Officials, as you know, regulate the games," said Thompson, explaining his label's name. "They don't participate in the games. We call the shots."

Thompson, who graduated from Central High School and studied art in college, has focused exclusively on music and production since 1998. For a time, he lived in Los Angeles, where he did production work for the band Smashmouth.

The living room of Thompson's home has been subdivided into a sound board and enclosed recording studio, with massive subwoofers standing like sentries just inside the entryway. At a computer station across the room, Thompson edits music videos he choreographs, directs, shoots himself and makes available through downloads. The videos at once evoke the high-living, bump-and-grind flash of BET, but also offer Arkansans a thrilling travelogue of Little Rock, complete with flashes of familiar street signs, the Clinton presidential library and the ringside melee at Jermain Taylor fights in Alltel Arena. Taylor makes a cameo in the video for "Krushin'," which the boxer has adopted as something of a personal anthem.

The Official 1 sound - slow, candlelight grooves on one track, a buoyant, ostentatious beat on the next - snakes through the HBO film, often used to underscore a character's connection to the streets. As a result, Thompson's music is most synchronized with appearances by Moran Ellis, the only truly active gang member profiled in the new film.

Though *Bangin'* in Little Rock was maligned by city officials for damaging the city's reputation, Thompson didn't question the content of the new film before allowing his music to be featured.

"All I needed to know is it's about Little Rock," Thompson said. "I

really don't care about the gangbangin'. That's never been an issue with me. I do care about the music. They're just coming here to show our town off. They're not going to be the only ones to make money off it." As for the themes in his music to which Levin responded, "everything we do is street, gangsta," he said. "Not gangsta as in killing and shooting, but real. None of that flip-flop, jump-around goofy stuff. We write about partying and cars. But we also write about - not so much struggling - but maintaining on the streets."

Thompson distributes Official 1 albums, such as Official, a cross-label sampler, and the solo albums of his labelmates, such as I'm Is Ball Jones, through outlets such as Best Buy and CD Warehouse. This week, he will drop Bangin' to Ballin', a collection of the songs featured in the HBO film, in conjunction with the film's Thursday premiere, although the CD is not an official HBO release.

In a corner of his studio, Thompson displays a framed check for \$4,200 - the licensing fee HBO paid for use of the Official tracks. He reinvested the money in his business: He said he sees about \$10 for each Official CD sold; top sellers often finance the purchase of new equipment, such as a better camera on which to film his music videos.

In the long term, Thompson hopes his affiliation with the HBO film, which lists each song by name in the closing credits, will earn him the notice of a larger label. Despite reconciliatory efforts, he has never recovered after an early ban from Power 92.3, central Arkansas' leading hip-hop station, who refused to play tracks from Official due to their graphic content. "That's part of the problem," said Mike Spradlin, a high school friend and investment banker who serves as Thompson's manager. "It's 92.3 or 92.3. If they're not playing you, you don't exist."

Thompson has also given up on gaining large-label notice through "multiples," the proportional predictors of mass appeal a record company uses when translating local sales to the national market. Internet piracy has watered down industry trust in multiples, but, at times, Thompson said, Official artists have ranked among the city's top five sellers, just behind artists such as 50 Cent.

But he hopes Bangin' to Ballin' will be a breakout and persuade a larger label to make Official 1, well, official.

"I'm sitting on a gold mine here," Thompson said.

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