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MARS ILL: HIP-HOP MUSIC WITH A FAITH-BASED BEAT

While a degree in business administration from Furman is certainly something to be proud of, it's not exactly news. Putting that degree on the backburner to pursue a career in faith-based hip-hop, however — now that's a story you don't hear every day.

Chances are, you haven't listened to a lot of faith-based hip-hop. But in that small but growing world, there aren't many names bigger than Mars ILL, which probably makes Greg Owens '97 — also known as manCHILD — the most successful Christian rapper in Furman history.

Owens is the voice behind the two-man group. He and his collaborator, DJ Dust (Nathan Corrona), have sold more than 60,000 albums, and their videos have been viewed tens of thousands of times on YouTube.

In a genre that operates on the fringes of even the indie music scene, that's a dizzying amount of success. So much, in fact, that Owens has had a chance to call on his diploma after all.

"It's bigger than I ever thought it could be, to be honest," he says. "[My degree] is something I actually have used. From 1999 to 2005, I managed us and did the whole thing, procured record deals, negotiated with labels."

So time at Furman wasn't wasted, after all. But Owens, who is married to Mary Palmer '98 and is a father of five, laughs when asked if his classmates would have predicted where he is today.

"You might have a few surprised people," he says. "There are a lot of people who know what I do, and it's just second nature. But when you first meet people they're like, 'Oh, get a life.'"

"It's always an interesting thing to see them at first. They don't believe you. I don't usually volunteer the information. I just say I'm in music."

Don't take that to mean that Owens isn't proud of what he does, however. Mars ILL's three albums have been positively received by mainstream music critics, and while Owens doesn't deny that religion plays a prominent role in the lyrics he writes, he insists that it's not all the duo is about.

"We wanted to be a good influence and try to touch some peoples' lives," he says. "Our faith is something that has always been very important to us, but we didn't get out and try to break into the Christian industry. Believe it or not, Christian publications would

question us because we didn't say Jesus enough or use Christian terms enough."

So is Mars ILL Christian music or not? Owens doesn't think the label is even relevant.

"We make hip-hop music. You could describe it any number of ways," he says. "Some people call it true school hip-hop, some people call it underground, but ultimately you have to listen to it yourself and decide what it is."

Owens fell in love with rap in the 1980s, pointing to groups like Run DMC and Public Enemy as influences. Their courage as rappers told him it was OK to express ideas that he felt were important. But it wasn't until he met Joe Brewer '97 at Furman that he really began to think he could create that music himself.

Owens and Brewer shared a love of hip-hop that made them fast friends even though Owens hailed from tiny Ridgeland, S.C., and Brewer was from Baltimore. They formed their own group, The Pride, and released two albums of their own before graduation sent Brewer to law school and Owens to Atlanta to keep pursuing his dream.

Now a lawyer in Greenville, Brewer still counts Owens as one of his best friends. And he's one of Mars ILL's biggest fans.

"There was a big part of me for a long time that wished I could be out there with him," Brewer says. "I've got all of their albums, and I'm obviously not an unbiased source, but I think that both of them are near the genius level in this genre of art. Both of them have found a special voice that's uniquely theirs."

Not to mention a fan base. Brewer admits that once music is labeled "Christian" it often loses the respect of critics, but he thinks Mars ILL successfully shares its message while creating legitimate art.

"There are kids all over this country that, really, their lives were changed because they realized that they could be a person of faith and still be unique to their interests," Brewer says of Mars ILL's influence. "The general perception is that Christian music is corny, and I think that's what most people think, even Christians themselves."

In Brewer's view, what Mars ILL does — and what it represents — is to say, "Look, you can be a person of faith and still be able to pursue and create things that are important to you and what you love. . . . You don't have to compromise on the quality. Those things can co-exist."

Mars ILL performs regularly and plans to continue making music. Or, perhaps more accurately, adding to its legacy.

"People should appreciate how successful Mars ILL is," Brewer says. "They've done some really special things."

To learn more, visit www.marsill.com.

— RON WAGNER '93



Greg Owens (in hat) and Nathan Corrona adapted the group's name from a passage in the Book of Acts.