

Home-grown Hip Hop: Little Rock collective Young Gods of America takes risks for fame and fortune

By CHEREE FRANCO

ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

March 15, 2016

In a tidier-than-expected Oak Forest neighborhood living room, three members of the Little Rock rap collective Young Gods of America (YGOA) and two supporting cast members - producers and rappers in their own right - lounge on mismatched sofas and an '80s easy chair. Muted music videos, mostly their own, play on a pull-down screen, and Chris Williams (Cool Chris) collects money for pizza.

Everyone is recovering from a strange and busy weekend. Brandon Burris, aka Goon des Garçons (a riff on the fashion label Comme des Garçons), returned from Los Angeles just in time for the fourth Fireroom event, hosted monthly by YGOA and another rap crew, Vile Pack, at Vino's Brewpub. The next day, 23-year-old Burris DJ'd a party at a clothing store that "ended with the owner's girlfriend punching me in the face twice," he says. He reports the details, his raspy voice rising as his story gains momentum. ("There were a lot of Black kids there ... I just think she came into it wrong ... all I see is her taking her little body, and she just cocked back and hit me.")

A rapper and the brainchild behind YGOA, Burris is, above all, a myth-maker. As a child he wrote poems and stories. Now he spins hype (*Young boss to be/With the whole city waiting on me*) and in the process, contextualizes and localizes rap, dropping an average of a track or two a month. His lyrics are often autobiographical, dishing on the day to day (*We hit the party taking selfies*) and the life-altering (*Daddy lied/ He committed homicide/His biggest crime/He left his son/With no one he could idolize*). As a writer he is in turns clever (*People playing cops/Cops playing soldiers*), disturbing and poignant (*We was all born poets/What that mean before you know it?*).

Burris is also a risk-taker. In February 2015, he quit his job as a receptionist at the Courtyard Marriott and took out a \$7,000 personal loan to hire the same sound

engineer that Kanye West uses. *(Tell me what you know about cash/I spend it just to make it right back.)*

He's compact and excitable, with a Cheshire cat grin, chin-length, kinetic braids and a collection of oversize '70s rock T-shirts. The other men in the room slouch and sprawl, melding with furniture. Burriss perches, literally on the edge of his seat, his words rapid and commanding, his gestures flamboyant. The accumulated crew - YGOA members Jordan Rowe (Fresco Gray), Williams and Burriss, and the two non-affiliates, Ishmael Perez (Ish/ Hector \$lash) and Andre Patrick Jr. (Idle Kid) - range in age from 21 to 24. They do a little of everything: writing, rapping, making beats, mixing tracks, designing merchandise, editing video, booking tours and managing social media.

When he's in town, Burriss camps out in this living room. It's the temporary headquarters of YGOA, even though Perez, the one who pays rent, is part of Vile Pack. Only Patrick has a day job, running food at Sonic. As Burriss tells it, YGOA came to him in October 2012, at the end of a month of partying. Its future members were playing Kanye in a bedroom when Burriss leapt to his feet shouting, "Yo, I know what we gotta do!"

"I had the whole blueprint right then," he says, now. He describes it almost metaphysically - YGOA as Athena, sprung from his forehead fully formed. The Wu Tang-esque collective-cum-branding agency would create content, merchandise and media for its members and corporate clients. Eventually, Burriss envisioned it handling ad campaigns for Boxed Water and Mountain Dew. YGOA ended up doing the Arkansas college-town tour that Burriss dreamt that day (in Fayetteville, they crammed almost 300 kids in a house), but it hasn't made much progress in terms of corporate branding. Instead, Burriss went to Los Angeles, hired Anthony Kilhoffer (colloquially known as "Kanye's engineer") and checked out the ocean for the first time.

SHOW ME TO THE OCEAN/WE CAN WATCH THE WAVES COME AND GO/ WE SET THESE PLANS IN MOTION/WE WON'T WATCH FROM THE WINDOW - "COME N GO"

In early 2016, Burris' music video for "Back on the Road" premiered on Vice Media's Noisey blog. The track is part of a recently released five song EP, For the Time Being. In 2017, Burris plans to release the album that he's working on with Kilhoffer, AINTNOWAYINHELL.

Patrick, 21, and not officially part of YGOA, creates the beats and, as Idle Kid, he'll receive a producer credit on AINTNOWAY. "Idle went from his first beat ever sent out, to being in the studio with a producer. ... This man taught Anthony Kilhoffer, six-time Grammy Award-winning producer, how to do a sliding 808," says Burris (in laymen's terms, how to manipulate samples created on an 808 drum machine for a particular effect).

Kilhoffer paired Burris with a manager - Rob Smith, a 19-year-old New Zealander and Kilhoffer's assistant - who is planning an Australian tour for Goon des Garçons this summer. The past year has been potent. In April, Burris traveled with Williams and another YGOA rapper, Reggie Golden (Reggie Gold) to New York, to meet with a representative from ASCAP, a musicians' group that polices royalty payments. The ASCAP rep arranged a face to face with an RCA Records agent and, on that same trip, they were interviewed by FACT at BBOX (Brooklyn Community Radio) show.

RCA "didn't get it," according to Burris, but afterward, he started spending lots of time on the East and West coasts. "On our own money, in a span of two months ... we went from New York, to L.A., to Austin City Limits, back to San Diego, back to L.A., then came back here for a show," Burris says.

WE WERE THOSE DIRTYGHETTO KIDS/ LOOKAT WHAT WE DID -"L.A.W.W.D."

When Rowe (Fresco Gray) was a baby, he was soothed to sleep by Dr. Dre's The Chronic. Meanwhile, Patrick's father had multifarious tastes, exposing his son in equal parts to Public Enemy, Queen and Ozzy Osbourne. Williams heard Delta blues and Memphis soul from his grandmother and neo soul, such as Sade and Erykah Badu, from his mother. Lyrically Burris references the freak-folk act CocoRosie and eclectic

songstress Amy Winehouse, among others (*We at the wine house/So I guess we're "Back in Black"*).

"People cannot predict us. They look at me, from John Barrow [Road], a Blood neighborhood, they think I'm just trap [a form of Southern rap]. But then I throw on some Japanese jazz or some Paul Hardcastle [British synth-pop]," Rowe says.

Rowe has worked as a creative for hire, directing videos for peers and older rappers like Pepperboy. As such, he's one of the few points of intersection between central Arkansas' rap legacy and the new kids on the scene. Little Rock has been churning out rappers for decades, but no one has risen to national prominence in the same way that other small-city Southern artists have: Nappy Roots from Bowling Green, Ky.; Grammy-winners Three 6 Mafia from Memphis; Def Jam artist Big K.R.I.T from Meridian, Miss.; Eminem protegee Yelawolf from Gadsden, Ala.; or Baton Rouge-bred troublemaker Lil Boosie (now Boosie Badazz).

"I feel like rap is getting really saturated with a bunch of people trying to portray the same sound, but with Arkansas, we have no mold to go by. So it's just this open canvas," Perez says.

In some ways, Burriss has found it harder to work within, rather than beyond, Arkansas. "People were automatically discrediting you, like, you're not going to do anything ... you're in Little Rock," he says. He has had difficulty booking shows here. Outside the state, fans are surprised to learn that Burriss is from Little Rock: "People are like, 'This is the first new thing I've heard in five years, since Odd Future kind of happened'... No one knows anything about Arkansas. We don't have any artists or celebrities. Arkansas doesn't get media publicity for anything good."

Growing up, Burriss spent a lot of time with his grandmother, whom he describes as "a traditional black church lady." She wasn't impressed with his career trajectory until the Noisey feature got 11,000 hits in one day.

"My parents don't get [it]," Rowe says. "They're like, get a 9-to-5, you aren't doing nothing."

"The thing is, we all understand that they just can't understand," Burris says.

"At the end of the day, we're going to do what we want," Williams says.

At the moment, what they want is to watch a video made by Aussie psych-rockers. Someone fiddles with the Xbox controller and the phrase "The less I know the better" fills the screen in rainbow letters. As a disco synthbeat cuts in, Burris claps his hands dramatically. "I'm so mad he [Kevin Parker of Tame Impala] didn't get that Grammy!"

GOTTA BE THE ONE TO SHOW THESE [PEOPLE]HOW IT'S DONE - "S*** ON YOU"

Burris is the common link between the YGOA members. He graduated from Pine Bluff's Watson Chapel High School with Williams and Golden and found Rowe on Facebook while searching for other local clothing designers. Rowe knew Taylor Walker, aka Taylor Moon - the only female, a soulful siren usually set against sparse trip-hop beats - from Little Rock's Parkview Arts and Science Magnet High School. Burris met the other YGOA members during brief stints in college - Kaylan Marks (Mach Soul) at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock and Sean Clark (El Sean) at Arkansas State University in Jonesboro.

YGOA has a Tumblr site, a Soundcloud page and a You-Tube channel. Its individual artists also have Twitter accounts, Soundcloud pages and Instagram feeds. None of them have Facebook pages because "Facebook is for old people," according to Burris. *(She on Tumblr typin' text posts that she hope I see/She on Facebook typing messages she hope I read/When I'm on Twitter all they want to do is subtweet me.)*

But currently Burris works the closest with a non-YGOA member. Patrick, a high school loner, spent free time in his bedroom making beats. The first beat he was proud of, he emailed to Burris - at the time, a stranger. That heavy bass roll, coupled with an ominous, clanging melody, became "S*** on You," Goon des Garton's first release to attract Internet attention.

For Burris, rap culture isn't about a single collective, and it's not entirely about making music. It's about collaboration and creating a platform. "A lot of our friends, they never leave Little Rock. ... So we'll go to L.A. to a crazy show. We'll be like OK, we like how they have their projector set up, and we'll bring it back here." About 150 kids attended the most recent Fireroom, which showcased Vile Pack and YGOA, alongside Patrick's brother Solo Jaxon, and rappers Tan the Terrible and Lo Thraxx (who has been rapping publicly longer than anyone else on the bill) and two teenage rap crews, DMP and Pearl Gangg/Young Kiri, from Little Rock and Jacksonville, respectively. Every performer gets paid, which is a point of pride for Burris.

He believes there's a huge "generation gap between people who had access to the Internet and people who didn't" and, while local scenes are crucial, regional rap is dead. "There used to be the New York sound, the Houston sound, because that's all you knew. But we grew up on the Internet, so ... we had the chance to be whatever we want to be." He admits that "whatever we want" can be overwhelming. Burris is "all about aesthetics, almost to the point where it's debilitating. ... [Rapping's] like the most judgmental profession because, when you're an artist, from the time you wake up in the morning, the way you walk, everything is being viewed."

Rowe agrees: "It's a competitive sport."

"We almost backed ourselves into a wall, where it's this or nothing, so we take this [stuff] all the way. I'm not trying to go back to college. I don't want to work a job," Burris says. "We are definitely on the trajectory to make a lot of money." (*I'm a villain/Stacking money to the ceiling.*)