

Aspiring Norwalk rapper looks to put the blues back in R&B

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NORWALK -- Omar Rahsaan Wilson is headed for the West Coast, where he'll be looking for some "California Love" from Dr. Dre.

A Norwalk musician hoping to sign with a major label, Wilson will likely visit Los Angeles next month to record a couple more tracks for his demo album with multiplatinum producer Mike City.

Omar plans to then meet with executives from Dre's Aftermath Records, including the hip-hop superproducer himself. (For the uninitiated, Dre performed the 1995 smash "California Love" with 2Pac).

Though Wilson is still up-and-coming, he has already achieved single-name status, performing simply as "Omar." Labeling his music style is a bit more complicated.

"He's a street poet -- that's what he is," said Raimund Engel, who grew up in Norwalk with Omar and is helping to get his career off the ground.

Omar is an R&B singer, but prefers the self-invented term "B&R." The inversion is meant to differentiate his often gritty lyrics from those of other R&B singers, who seem to have forgotten the second half of the phrase "rhythm and blues," he said.

During an interview at Fat Cat Pie Co., Omar said his contemporaries don't seem to know any emotion but love. To illustrate his point, he spontaneously belted out the titular line from Mario Winans' recent heartache hit "I Don't Wanna Know."

After the mocking rendition, Omar declared dismissively: "Naw, cuz."

He prefers to tackle a broader spectrum of issues instead of focusing solely on romantic fervor.

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Omar Rahssen Wilson of Norwalk sings in a studio in Stamford before heading to New York City to perform a few songs at Soul Cafe. (Chris Prevolos/Staff photo)
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On "Walkin' Through the Ghetto" – one of five tracks on a demo CD titled "From Da Soul" – he describes an urban streetscape and sings "So many souls, they're livin' in the ghetto/ Workin' hard to stay alive." His song "Find a Way" includes the lyrics "I took to the streets way too young, y'all/ There's no one I can trust."

"I do life music, man," Omar said, sitting across the table from Engel.

Stark realism aside, Omar wants it known that he also has an eye for the ladies and enjoys partying. Some of Omar's music deals with love – such as "Meant to Be," a valentine on which he croons "Starin' out my window, only one star in the sky/ That's how I feel about my girl." But he is adamant there is more than one emotion worth singing about.

Given his varied subject matter, perhaps it should come as no surprise that Omar compares himself to musical acts as disparate as 2Pac; Nate Dogg, the dean of gangsta R&B singers; the rock/rap group Linkin Park; and 1970s soulster Curtis Mayfield.

Omar, whose official entertainment industry age is 25, lived on St. Paul's Terrace while growing up in Norwalk. His mother was a model in the 1970s, while his father emceed at nightclubs in Stamford and New Rochelle, N.Y., and had a band called the Soul Messengers. His parents remain Norwalk residents, as do Omar's girlfriend and their two young children.

Omar said he first recognized his talent while singing as a youth in the choir at Norwalk's Calvary Baptist Church, where the congregation would react to his voice with strong emotion. He used to rap on the streets of Norwalk, Stamford and Bridgeport, performing for whomever was around and getting into informal competitions with other amateur hip-hoppers.

After attending Norwalk High School for 1 1/2 years, he jokes he was "extradited" to J.M. Wright Regional Vocational-Technical School in Stamford. He had a daughter by age 17 and dropped out after two years.

"Then came the school of hard knocks – bumps, bruises and scrapes and struggle," he said with a laugh.

Omar said he was getting into trouble locally and lacked direction. Meanwhile, he said people around him were being jailed or shot, or becoming strung out. He felt the only way to give his daughter the life she deserved was to move to North Carolina and start a rap career.

"O-Dog," as he was then known, joined his cousins' Tar Heel state rap group, Lost Souls, returning to Norwalk for visits when he had money. Lost Souls recorded an album with Mike City, "Soul Talk," which Ichiban Records released in 1997. A little-known R&B singer named Sunshine Anderson sang some of the hooks.

Lost Souls made a second album but disbanded before it was released when one of the cousins experienced a health problem. Around 2000, Omar returned to Norwalk, where he and another Lost Souls member formed an offshoot group called The Souls.

Meanwhile, Mike City – who has since relocated to Los Angeles – began producing major acts such as Brandy and Usher. Anderson became a star with "Heard It All Before," which received heavy radio play in 2001. Omar hopes to

collaborate with her again soon.

Though he still raps, Omar -- who sang hooks with The Souls -- began focusing on R&B about a year ago, a move he and Engel said has been well received. Sometimes Omar even raps and sings on the same track. He has also sung hooks for other artists, including rapper Grand Puba of Brand Nubian fame.

Omar and Engel -- a fitness consultant and amateur rapper -- formed a company with Stamford resident Jeff Chacua called Souls Enterprises, which promotes Omar's career and deals with other facets of the entertainment industry.

Engel said he feels things are starting to happen for Omar, who performs in New York City regularly and last month won a Manhattan R&B competition judged by influential music industry players. After pounding the pavement, Engel said people interested in Omar are now approaching them; incoming cell phone calls frequently interrupted them at Fat Cat.

"Now we can't stop the phone calls," Engel said. "So to see the tables turn, it's a sign of progression."

Eyeing stardom, Omar said he wants to inspire pride among Connecticut residents in the same way rappers Jay-Z and Nas represent Brooklyn and Queensbridge, N.Y., respectively.

"They've never had someone that they could be like, 'Yo -- that's Connecticut!'" Omar said.

Engel is on a mission to introduce the world to Omar's unique brand of "B&R." Music these days is too gimmicky, not sincere, Engel said, and image seems more important than substance. He feels people need to hear Omar's message.

"I am bringing music . . . that's going to begin a movement," Omar said. "And the movement is survival, man -- that's the movement."

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