

Detroit Free Press / entertainment
freep
MUSIC



MANDI WRIGHT/DFP

The Bass Brothers, Mark, at left, and Jeff, cruise near the Ferndale studio where they have worked with Eminem.

8 Mile style: You've heard their sound, now meet Jeff and Mark Bass, the men behind Eminem's rise to stardom

August 11, 2002

BY BRIAN MCCOLLUM
FREE PRESS POP MUSIC WRITER

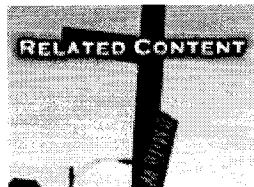
Long before the pizza delivery guys started asking about the Grammy trophies in the living room and the framed snapshots with Eminem, the Bass Brothers had this thing they called 8 Mile Style.

It was part attitude, part hip-hop sound, part life theme and 100 percent Detroit. It was a scrappy notion about making do with what you've got. Breaking the rules.

It has led to some of the most popular, critically acclaimed music of the past decade. The songs it spawned are in millions of CD players across the globe. It put the Grammy Awards on the shelf.

But unless you've been reading the fine print on Eminem's albums, you probably don't know the names of the men who now speak of 8 Mile Style in almost mystic tones: Jeff and Mark Bass.

They're two of the most successful music-makers to emerge from Michigan during the past decade. The Bass Brothers, as they're known professionally, have



It was about to come in handy.

A New Sound for hip-hop

"They thought I was crazy," says Mark.

In 1990, older brother Jeff wasn't sold on hip-hop. In fact, he "thought it was crap." And he certainly wasn't sold on the skinny 15-year-old from the east side whom Mark had been talking up.

And Martin wasn't buying Marshall Mathers, either, and concedes today that "Mark saw this before anybody knew what was going on."

Mark remembers exactly where he was -- driving on 9 Mile near Greenfield -- when he heard the teens rapping on the Friday night open-mike show hosted by radio DJ Lisa Lisa.

"I called her right away and asked her to put me on the phone with these kids," he recalls. "Marshall got on the phone, and I invited him over to the studio. He showed up at 4 that morning."

Mathers and his two buddies staged an impromptu rap audition.

"He was a young kid -- he'd never been to a studio," Mark says. "Not long after that, we started to cut some stuff together." In 1990, "M&M" was still finding his voice. He even experimented for a while with triple-tonguing, an obscure, rapid-fire rapping style. His rhymes weren't particularly special.

"But his rhythm was fantastic. It always reminded me of a drum solo, suddenly going a different direction in the middle of a lick," says Mark. "And you understood what he was saying -- the enunciation was incredible."

Mathers' rough past has been well-chronicled: the unstable home life, the bullies at school, the absent father. He grabbed role models where he could. "Marshall was like a little brother," says Mark. "But it was a mutual respect."

Mathers was still struggling, performing at poorly attended rap showcases in Detroit, but things were picking up for the Bass Brothers, and in 1993, they closed the home studio and

cowritten and produced a majority of the material on the Detroit rapper's three major-label releases. Their fingerprints are all over a host of Slim Shady standards: "97 Bonnie & Clyde," "Kim," "Without Me."

Eminem has been signed for nearly a decade to their company, FBT Productions. In legalese, they furnish his services to Interscope Records. In regular talk, they're all good friends. An artist with Eminem's clout could have negotiated his way out of such an arrangement by now. He hasn't. The roots are deep.

But the limelight has been elusive for the Bass Brothers. Dr. Dre, the L.A. producer with the golden hip-hop credentials, has gotten the bulk of attention as Eminem's chief collaborator. That was by design from the moment Eminem signed to Interscope Records -- a pivotal selling point to help break the unknown Detroit rapper. The Bass Brothers say they're fine with that: They've profited, too, from each smart public relations move and the high-profile Eminem hits produced by Dre.

But what they won't emphasize -- motivated less by acumen than by modesty -- is a key fact: Of the 58 tracks on Eminem's three major releases, the Bass Brothers have produced and performed on more than 30. Dre has 12.

Today, as the brothers settle back into Oakland County with their families after stints in Los Angeles, they're ready to talk. Jeff is 41; Mark is 37. It's been a whirlwind four years behind the scenes with Eminem, the guy they've been calling Marshall since meeting 12 years ago and serving as early mentors. They've been quiet until now.

They're friendly guys, easygoing as they finish each other's sentences in conversation. They seem relaxed these days, hanging out, smoking and laughing in the break room at the Ferndale studio where they've recorded much of Eminem's music. Life had gotten hectic in 1999, when "The Slim Shady LP" busted out of the gate and turned Eminem into a superstar.

"We haven't really had the chance to enjoy all this together, until now," says Mark.

It's been a while since they borrowed \$1,500 from their mom to press 500 copies of Eminem's first record, "Infinite," in 1996. They didn't sell a single copy, and they didn't pay back the loan, but they did recently buy her a new car. These two self-described roughnecks from Oak Park are now pulling in "big seven-figure numbers," with new homes, pools, Cadillac convertibles, the works. You don't have to know much about the music industry to understand that landing production and songwriting credits on

opened a bigger one up the road. They called it the Bassment, and finally came up with a name to describe their world: 8 Mile Style not only referenced their studio's new location, it paid homage to the notorious zone where black and white culture symbolically met.

"Infinite" became one of the first albums recorded in the new digs. Mark signed Eminem to FBT Productions and created the WEB Entertainment label. The brothers now had long-term equity in Marshall Mathers. The team pressed 500 copies of the album, got them into local stores, then watched as nothing happened. Dejected, Eminem disappeared. They didn't see him for a few months, until he returned sporting a \$50 tattoo on his right arm. It said "Slim Shady." Eminem had conjured an alter ego, and he'd found his voice.

Within a year they began work on a new project: "The Slim Shady EP." Though Mark oversaw the recording, most of the tracks were built on samples and drum tracks programmed by Eminem's sidekick, DJ Head.

Jeff and Joel Martin were finally onboard, and now things were moving. Joined by Eminem's manager, Paul Rosenberg -- a former rapper and budding attorney -- the FBT team began pushing the music to the big labels. With Slim Shady at the helm, Eminem's underground reputation was starting to boil up. Mark scrounged for money from friends and family, and a trip to L.A. in 1997 earned Mathers second prize in the Rap Olympics.

A year later Eminem -- via FBT and WEB Entertainment -- signed to Interscope Records. That's when life became a blur. "Here we were sitting around with Jimmy Lovine," Jeff says of the legendary record exec. "We pretended we knew everything."

Eminem was to record four new songs with Dr. Dre. The rest of the debut album would be the Bass Brothers' work, some of it culled from "The Slim Shady EP." They had three weeks to get it done. **The brothers and Eminem** camped in a Los Angeles studio for 24-hour stretches. Mark, meanwhile, had bought a home in L.A. and closed the Bassment back on 8 Mile.

With advice from Martin, they made what turned out to be a crucial decision: Not a single recorded sample would appear on their work. Where Dre worked in hip-hop's traditional mode -- building tracks from pieces

tens of millions of albums can translate into a tidy chunk of cash.

Rhythm and melody

The ride with Eminem started in a basement in 1990, but the brothers' musical trip started long before that.

They hail from Oak Park, amid the fertile Oakland County crescent that's produced such musical minds as Don Was, Marshall Crenshaw and Doug Fieger of the Knack. Their father was a podiatrist who loved music. Jeff got his first instrument, a drum kit, when he was 8

"I broke his drum set by banging on it with rulers," Mark says.

"But I didn't care," says Jeff. "I'd discovered the piano."

Dad bought them a pair of Sears guitars a couple of years later and soon discovered that the younger brother preferred beating the back of his guitar to strumming it. The Bass Brothers' division of labor was already clear: Mark was a rhythm guy, and Jeff was about melody.

Within months they were writing songs together in the basement. They got their first pro gig three years later -- at ages 7 and 11 -- recording a local Greyhound Lines radio ad at the Detroit studio of Motown veteran Sylvia Moy. She asked for "an urban feel," and they whipped up what they figured was a soul jam. The two Jewish kids from Oak Park had been introduced to her by a young black friend.

In the 1970s, Oak Park schools were among the most integrated in metro Detroit. Students in adjacent suburbs like Ferndale and Royal Oak were mostly white, but at Oak Park, just north of the Detroit city limit, black and white kids got tastes of both cultures.

Joel Martin was an older white teen who was immersed in black music. He'd already graduated from Oak Park High when he worked as Mark's camp counselor at Camp Tamarack in Ortonville.

"We were all wrapped into this cultural mix," Martin says of growing up in Oak Park. "It wasn't conscious -- it was just a natural hybrid. There wasn't any pretext to it."

By the time they got to high school, the Bases were thoroughly culturally mixed.

"Most white families wouldn't let their kids go near Detroit," says Mark. "But we weren't afraid at 2 in the morning to be at 6 Mile and Livernois."

of existing songs -- the brothers spurned the notion, opting to create their own material.

It wasn't just an artistic move. There was big money at stake. Hip-hop history is cluttered with artists who have little to show for their success; their dollars went to clearing rights to samples, or just as often, settling suits for infringement. Dre himself eventually lost all royalties on Eminem's breakout song, "My Name Is," when a British artist named Labi Siffre realized the producer had pilfered a musical motif.

"They would say, 'How are you going to pull off a hip-hop record?'" Jeff recalls. "Well, we're going to play guitar, drums and bass for 4 1/2 minutes, and we'll see what we've got."

Drawing on the lessons of their 8 Mile Style days, the brothers improvised. They stripped out the samples from "The Slim Shady EP," recasting the parts with live instruments. "It still sounded like a record that could be accepted by the hip-hop crowd," Mark says.

"But at the same time it was a new sound," says Jeff. "You can hear the guitar strings screech. Why would we want polish to go with Marshall's rawness?"

"The Slim Shady LP" was set for release in early 1999.

"We figured if it went gold, we were happy," says Mark.

Gold, and then some

A lot has happened in the four years since "Slim Shady" sold nearly 300,000 copies its first week. The album has now sold 4.3 million in the United States, more than eight times gold. Its follow-up, "The Marshall Mathers LP," sold 8.8 million. And "The Eminem Show," released in May, is at 4.5 million and counting. The Bass Brothers recently wrapped up "Lose Yourself," the main title on the upcoming soundtrack for Eminem's film debut, "8 Mile," which hits theaters in November.

Their names may not be in lights, but their impact on hip-hop is clear.

"You're talking about stuff that's going to go in a time capsule," says Hex, a longtime Detroit hip-hop impresario. "There will be a newspaper from 9/11 and a Slim Shady CD. All three of these guys won at life. Not too

They were troublemakers, too. "Street kids," he says. "We got in lots of fights." A few years later, during a particularly rowdy rumble, Mark's right eye would get jammed with a corkscrew, requiring a glass eye.

By now the elder, Jeff, was chest-deep in music. Turning down requests from white classmates to play guitar in their rock bands, he hooked up with four black friends to form the group *Dreamboy*, whose blend of funk and soul got the attention of Quincy Jones' Qwest Records. In 1982 they landed a deal, and two years later they scored a top 20 ballad on Billboard's R&B chart.

"Jeff pulled me out of high school to go out on the road with these guys," says Mark, who learned how to work a drum machine for the band. It was the mid-'80s, and hip-hop had caught his ear.

Dreamboy split up in '85, the same year that Mark ran into Joel Martin at a Detroit concert -- the first time they'd seen each other since camp a decade earlier. Martin was now a full-time studio professional who worked closely with Westbound Records, the Detroit funk label best known as home to George Clinton.

The brothers opened a basement studio in Oak Park, recording local acts on a primitive 8-track machine. In 1988, Martin summoned Mark to his own studio in Ferndale to program drum machines on a Westbound project.

Over time, through Martin's connections, the Basses began helping out on Clinton records, and scored some premier remixing gigs. They reconstructed tracks by the Red Hot Chili Peppers ("Give it Away"), the B-52's ("Love Shack") and New Order ("Round and Round"). But when the brothers started suspecting they were getting shafted -- never taking in more than \$500 for a project -- Martin took on the formal role of career adviser.

Despite, or because of, the sorry financial returns, the Basses had begun developing a distinct style, an approach to life in the studio. It didn't have a name yet, but it was very much a Detroit philosophy: Like their forebears at Motown Records and their contemporaries creating techno, it was about pulling the music together by hook or by crook. The Bass Brothers weren't technically trained recording engineers, and had little regard for standards.

"It was about using what you had to make it work," says Jeff.

"We'd go into other studios and they'd say, 'You can't hit the levels that hard, you can't put that kind of bottom on the bass!' And we'd say, 'Yeah? Why not?'"

many people can do what they want to do for the rest of their lives, and be comfortable. Marky and Jeff are behind the making of the biggest pop star of the century."

Mark moved back to Michigan from California last month, abandoning a hard-partying Hollywood lifestyle. Jeff had never left Detroit for long, and they were getting weary of the cross-country routine, which often involved collaborating over the Internet. They've kept their Burbank studio, and will work there and at Martin's Ferndale studio on upcoming projects, which include a jazz album and tracks with the *Howling Diablos*.

"We're having a lot of fun now, is what we're doing," says Mark. Most important, they recently renegotiated their deal with Interscope. While FBT is still part of the deal -- furnishing Eminem's services to the label -- the brothers' WEB label is now autonomous. They've been in talks with another major label since the spring, and will ink a contract this month that will give WEB's releases national distribution.

There are some treasures in the WEB archives, including unreleased material from Eminem's hit records. And there's the old "Infinite" album, which was never issued beyond the initial 500 copies. Through WEB, the brothers plan to release it all.

Mark and Jeff are still a big part of Eminem's world. Contractually, they don't have to do any more music with him, and in reality, they're not doing as much. At 29, Eminem is far removed from his days as a skinny kid in the basement; he produced most of the songs on his latest album.

"He's developed from watching us, watching Dre, into a record producer. He knows what he wants," says Jeff. "It's not going to be the same as when we first hooked up. He's older now. We're older now."

They're proud of their work with Eminem. They're financially set. And they're ready to kick back and appreciate life.

"We haven't been able to really enjoy it as a whole team over the past four years," Mark says. "Now that I'm back home we're really able to enjoy the fruits of what we've done. We're together again -- Jeffrey, Joel and myself."

"We were getting little credit and little pay," says Mark. "But we were getting lots of experience."

And probably, somewhere in there, a little 8 Mile Style.

Contact BRIAN McCOLLUM at 313-223-4450
or
mccollum@freepress.com.

