

Hand picked

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*On March 22, 2011, third-year social work student Jordan Heywood released his first mixtape as the rapper Orijin. One year later, he performed at Canadian Music Week on a showcase curated and MC'd by Shad. **Imran Khan** reports*

Every undergraduate lives a double life. Besides the dominant identity of 'university student' we all aspire and moonlight as something on the side — actor, photographer, musician, writer, entrepreneur, athlete.

But only a few of us are ever able to turn a passion and interest into something extraordinary.

When Jordan Heywood (AKA Orijin), a third-year Ryerson social work student, got the invite to open for an event curated by Canadian rapper and Juno winner Shad for Canadian Music Week, his friends and family were ecstatic, but not surprised.

"This guy has infinite potential, his passion and drive for the art ... I love it," says Gavin Thomas, a grade-school friend of Heywood. "Jordan is selfdriven, especially when it comes to his music."

Often the template for rap success (especially with male MCs) is a tough bravado, an agro response to social and political issues, a sprinkling of misogyny and maybe a dash of namedropping the latest acquisitions in high-end fashion or cars. Of course, there are rappers that go against the grain, but for the most part this tried, tested and true model is the quickest path to relevancy and fame.

Just looking at the newest crop of rappers reaching the mainstream, it's easy to see this formula is pushing the likes of Tyler the Creator, Meek Mill, Mac Miller and ASAP Rocky. The current Canadian rap prince Drake, whose latest album *Take Care* went certified platinum in the United States, provides a softer approach, but still relies on the tropes that were established before him. Heywood, on the other hand, couldn't be farther away from these standards. A self-professed goody-two-shoes that weighs no more than a buck-30 soaking wet, his demeanor and Rivers Cuomo glasses don't exactly convey a hyper-masculine persona. But then again, that's never been his intention when it comes to performing.

"My faith definitely is the most integral and central part of my life. Everything that I do, every message and word I convey through music and poetry comes from my life experience and my life experience is based around my relationship with God," says Heywood. "It affects the way I see things and the things I value."

Growing up as the youngest of three siblings in a Christian upbringing, Heywood was raised with a high moral standard and would often get support from family and friends to pursue spoken word and rap. But it wasn't until high school that Heywood started to gravitate towards underground hip hop. The track that sold him on it was Talib Kweli's "Get By," which became his unofficial anthem.

“It was something that really resonated with me — it was poetic, it was soulful, it was meaningful, it was talking about society and things that I thought about,” says Heywood.

With the reassurance of family and a writer’s craft program where teachers encouraged Heywood to perform his poetry, Heywood became “Orijin” as he entered his first year at Ryerson. Heywood chose the stage-name Orijin to show the importance of hip hop and spoken word in its purest form, and raps with uptempo flow.

“MCing through hip hop is a blend of storytelling, poetry, and music and all these art forms are ancient and have purpose, that’s why they have lasted so long,” says Heywood. “That, in essence, is what I try to bring forth in what I do in poetry and hip hop — trying to get back to that original purpose.”

Spelling it with a ‘J’ to add a little personalization and originality, Heywood started looking for gigs and exposure to share his talents. But like any starving artist, one must pay their dues before reaping any rewards.

Playing at talent shows for a friend only to realize the competition consists of several eight-year-olds, one of which rapped a squeaky clean version of an Eminem song was just one humble episode Orijin faced when trying to make an impact. Then there was the time Orijin travelled to a poetry jam in Guelph, only to realize the venue was a Booster Juice where blenders went off unapologetically as Orijin spit his set to a standing ovation of 12 people to win a novelty prize of a Twinkie.

“The worst part of that gig was I had to pay three bucks cover to get in,” says Heywood, laughing and putting a palm to his face, still thankful for the experience. It would be an understatement to say Heywood is a fan of Toronto-based rapper Shad. His favourite rap lyric comes from Shad’s song “Call Waiting”: “Waiting on the world to change, when we should wait on the world like a waiter, Serve the world man this world is strange.”

He owes his first exposure to Shad to his family.

“I let Jordan borrow my first Shad CD last year, and he has had it since,” said Nicole Johnson, Heywood’s cousin. “[Going] from listening to Shad’s album to being part of a show that Shad is hosting is crazy. It’s amazing, I’m so proud of him.”

Heywood tries not to follow the trends and patterns people follow to become successful. The obsessive marketing or getting a new track every week is not something Heywood looks to pursue. Despite being green and still an amateur, he tries to stay fluid and organic when it comes to his craft.

“What I do through writing lyrics and expressing myself through rap, it’s very much organic and I don’t even think of it as a project or separate from who I am,” says Heywood. “I don’t like to set deadlines when I am going to write something.”

Where uneventful gigs would have deterred others to end a pursuit, Orijin continued in hopes his words and voice would touch someone. During a frosh week concert on campus in 2010, Heywood performed a spoken word piece that stopped former business student Beau Pinto in his tracks, making him watch intently. Already late for class and having a bad day, Pinto decided to hear out

Heywood.

“Some of the words coming out of his mouth caught my attention,” says Pinto. “It really touched home for me as a young guy who did a lot of stupid stuff and got out of it — it was phenomenal.”

Pinto quickly approached Heywood, introducing him to a friend who helped mix Orijin’s first 10 track mixtape entitled “A Thousand Words.” It was an opportunity Heywood did not seek out, but he says he feels blessed to have attracted it. The mixtape released on March 22, 2011 and was shared amongst friends and family, as well as at some local shows. Heywood sent his work to other rappers that he looked up to, in hopes for words of encouragement, criticism, and as a show of respect to the work that inspires him.

“I like to show appreciation for artists that I like, you know, let me just send a message and let them know I am a fan,” he says. One of those rappers that Heywood sent his work to was Shad. Heywood sent a YouTube video to Shad over Facebook, letting him know that the piece was indirectly inspired by what he does and wanting to thank him for that. Three days later, Heywood got a response from Shad saying the video was “dooope.”

“My roommates will testify that the way I celebrated was like a little school girl,” Heywood recalls, grinning widely. Heywood later attended one of Shad’s shows, and to his surprise Shad recognized him as he waited after the show for an autograph. From then on they have been loosely connected through facebook, on which Shad sent an invitation to perform at the show he curated for Canadian Music Week on March 22 — exactly one year after Orijin’s first mixtape.

The night of Orjin’s first big gig, it’s obvious Heywood is excited. After showing up more than two hours early, Heywood looks at the stage at The Garrison anticipating his role model Shad DJing his set to friends, family, and newcomers alike. As the crowd gathers at 8:30 p.m., Heywood is a little staryeyed as Shad introduces him to the stage.

Like a true professional he goes through his set with few hiccups, even getting a grin from Shad who’s nodding to his verses. His grade-school friend Thomas can’t help but bounce and clap seeing his friend’s hard work come to fruition. Watching Orijin perform behind his DJ set, Shad himself looks impressed and assured in his pick to represent young talent at Canadian Music Week.

“He’s talented, he has a positive vibe and approach, and he’s consistently working hard, and those are three things I look for,” says Shad. Shad, who got his break while attending Wilfrid Laurier University by winning a competition from 91.5 FM The Beat, sees Heywood walking the same road as he did and watches him with admiration. “His rhymes are well-crafted and he delivers them with conviction, if he keeps working there is no reason why he wouldn’t be able to move forward in his career and speak to more people,” says Shad.

Orijin’s set ends and he wipes his forehead that glistens in the lights. He receives hugs, handshakes and words of encouragement from strangers and friends alike. His brother Christian, who is often critical of his work, grabs him in a strong embrace and tells him: “You’ve arrived.”

Jokingly, Heywood says, “Black people can’t blush, but that’s the closest I’ve come.”