

MIKE WILLIAMS II, THE RECORD PRODUCER WHO GOES BY THE NAME OF MIKE WILL MADE-IT, ARRIVES AT A RECORDING STUDIO IN LOS ANGELES TRAILED BY A GUY HE RECENTLY HIRED TO FOLLOW HIM AROUND WITH A VIDEO CAMERA. WILL IS COLLECTING FOOTAGE FOR A DOCUMENTARY ABOUT HIMSELF. THE AUDIENCE WILL DISCOVER, AMONG OTHER THINGS, THAT HE KEEPS VERY LATE HOURS. "I JUST WOKE UP," WILL SAYS. IT'S 6 P.M.

WILL is 25 years old, 6-foot-2, and bearded. Once he starts talking, speaking quickly and even mumbling at times, he doesn't stop. He punctuates his phrases with "You know what I'm saying?" or a simpler "word." He's wearing a backwards ball cap, a Rolex, a diamond earring, a white All Saints T-shirt, a Christian Dior belt, Balenciaga boots, and jeans. These are brands rappers often boast about wearing in their lyrics. Yet for someone who comes from the gaudy world of hip-hop, WILL doesn't look like he spends a lot of time looking at himself in the mirror. "This T-shirt cost \$65," he says. People in the studio expected WILL half an hour ago, but he's not someone you can rush. In June the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers (ASCAP) named him Rhythm & Soul Songwriter of the Year, lauding him for hits such as Lil Wayne's *Love Me*, Rihanna's *Pour It Up*, and Juicy J's *Bandz a Make Her Dance*, songs that exemplify the kind of Rabelaisian strip-club anthem for which, until recently, he was primarily known. WILL's other hallmark is the personal stamp he puts on every record, so you know right away who produced it. They all start with a female voice proclaiming, "Mike WILL made it," a double-entendre celebrating both his craft and financial success. The practice goes back to the 1990s, when mixtape purveyors such as DJ Clue shamelessly called out their names on their work. But WILL is the first to turn his tag into a mass market brand signifying his self-described "out da box" style and a value proposition, much as Louis Vuitton did by peppering handbags, shoes, and sunglasses with its founder's initials.

In the last year and a half, WILL has become even more famous for being Miley Cyrus's musical Pygmalion and reported paramour. He helped her shed the last vestiges of her image as a Disney Channel icon and become a louche pop star in the tradition of Madonna and others who brag of their excesses to *Rolling Stone*. WILL's successes led Jimmy Iovine—then the chairman of Interscope Geffen A&M and co-founder of Beats, the headphone manufacturer and digital music company—to sign a deal late last year with WILL allowing the producer to start his own label at Interscope. EarDrum Records is WILL's base of operations to carry out his grandiose ambitions. He doesn't want to be just another producer. He wants to create an empire.

One evening in May, WILL is scheduled to record some promotional tracks for Beats to be released during the World Cup. They will feature two Brazilian stars, MC Guime, a rapper,

and Claudia Leitte, a singer who was also a coach on the country's version of the television show *The Voice*. Guime, a short, skinny guy with tattoos on his face and neck, a long gold chain, a baseball cap with "Compton" emblazoned on it, and a shirt that says "University of Make Something Out of Nothing," is already there with his crew. Soon, Leitte arrives with her entourage. She's blond and glamorous in a blue polo shirt and fashionably torn jeans. She insists on kissing almost everybody in the room. Unlike Guime, she speaks English fluently, so she serves as his interpreter.

WILL disappears, saying something about having to conduct another interview, so the session proceeds without him. His engineer uploads a track with a sample of a flamenco guitar. Fortified with Absolut vodka and Red Bull, Guime begins rapping in Portuguese about a Bonnie and Clyde-like couple in Brazil on the run from the authorities. He is tentative at first but becomes more confident and impassioned as he goes on. Leitte cheers him on and joins him in the booth for the chorus.

Just as Guime and Leitte have nailed it, WILL reappears. He's carrying a bottle of Hennessy and red plastic cups. "Let me kiss you," Leitte says. "This s--- is crazy."

Guime is similarly pleased. "Oh yeah, I like it," he says. "It's dope. It's very dope."

"You're like a new version of Tupac," WILL tells a beaming Guime.

WILL is eager to have his guests hear his new material, such as *Buy the World*, featuring rappers Kendrick Lamar and Lil Wayne. His engineer puts the song on, and everybody dances. It's an infectious song with one of WILL's driving electronic beats. WILL nods his head blissfully, silently mouthing the words, jabbing his index fingers at the floor in time to the music.

His work is often darker and more menacing than that of Timbaland or Pharrell Williams, two older producers who emerged from the hip-hop world and crossed over into pop to work on hit records with Justin Timberlake and Gwen Stefani, respectively. WILL names them both as influences. But he says his primary role model is Iovine, the 61-year-old who started out in the 1970s producing Patti Smith and Tom Petty and went on to co-found Interscope Records in 1990.

WILL admires Iovine even more for his business acumen. He's most impressed by the deal Iovine and his Beats co-founder, Dr. Dre, struck in late May to sell their six-year-old company to Apple for \$3 billion. "We've had plenty of talks," WILL says of his mentor. "I told him, he and Dre are the OGs [original gangsters].

They're opening up doors for people like me." He boasts that he made his first million at 23: "Now I know I'm going to make \$3 billion by the time I'm 40. You know what I'm saying?" Iovine doesn't doubt him: "He can do it. He's a clever, clever guy."

WILL grew up in suburban Marietta, just outside Atlanta, in a musical family. His father, also Michael Williams, is a former IBM executive. He worked as a club DJ in the '70s at the dawn of the rap era. He jokes that he may have invented scratching, the now familiar hip-hop technique, when somebody bumped into his turntable and sent the tone arm skittering across one of the records. WILL's mother, Shirley Williams, a former bank loan officer, performed on weekends as a gospel singer and took her young son along when she went out of town for concerts.

Shirley says her son had long fingers, so she assumed he'd end up playing piano in church. But WILL had other plans. He was always tapping rhythms on the kitchen table with two pencils. When he was 14, he persuaded his dad to buy him a \$500 Korg drum machine for Christmas.

By the time he was 16, WILL was hanging out at recording studios in Atlanta, trying to get established rappers to use his material. If he'd been an aspiring movie director, this would have been equivalent to coming of age in Hollywood. During the past 20 years, Atlanta has become a hip-hop hub arguably overshadowing New York and Los Angeles. From its humid streets and air-conditioned recording studios have emerged stars such as André 3000 and Big Boi, the Grammy Award-winning duo that goes by the name of Outkast. If a rap song is a hit in Atlanta, it's likely to be embraced by record buyers, radio listeners, and YouTube watchers all around the country.

At first, older hip-hoppers ignored WILL. Finally, one night, he thrust one of his mix CDs into the hands of Radric Davis, nicknamed Gucci Mane. As WILL tells it, Mane listened to the CD and then summoned the teenager to a recording studio. He kept him there most of the night, rapping over WILL's tracks and recording the results. The two became pioneers of trap music, a now ubiquitous subgenre known for

its Hitchcock-inspired string samples, pounding mechanized drums, and apocalyptic chimes. "It's hypnotic, mesmerizing—some of my most challenging workouts have come from listening to trap," says Mahbod Moghadam, one of the founders of Rap Genius, a website which provides crowdsourced deconstructions of song lyrics.

After graduating from high school, WILL started at Chattahoochee Technical College in Marietta and then transferred to Georgia Institute of Technology in Atlanta. Soon he told his dad he wanted to take a break from school. "Now hold on a minute," his dad said. "You have to explain yourself to me. You're making beats? How much are you charging for these beats?"

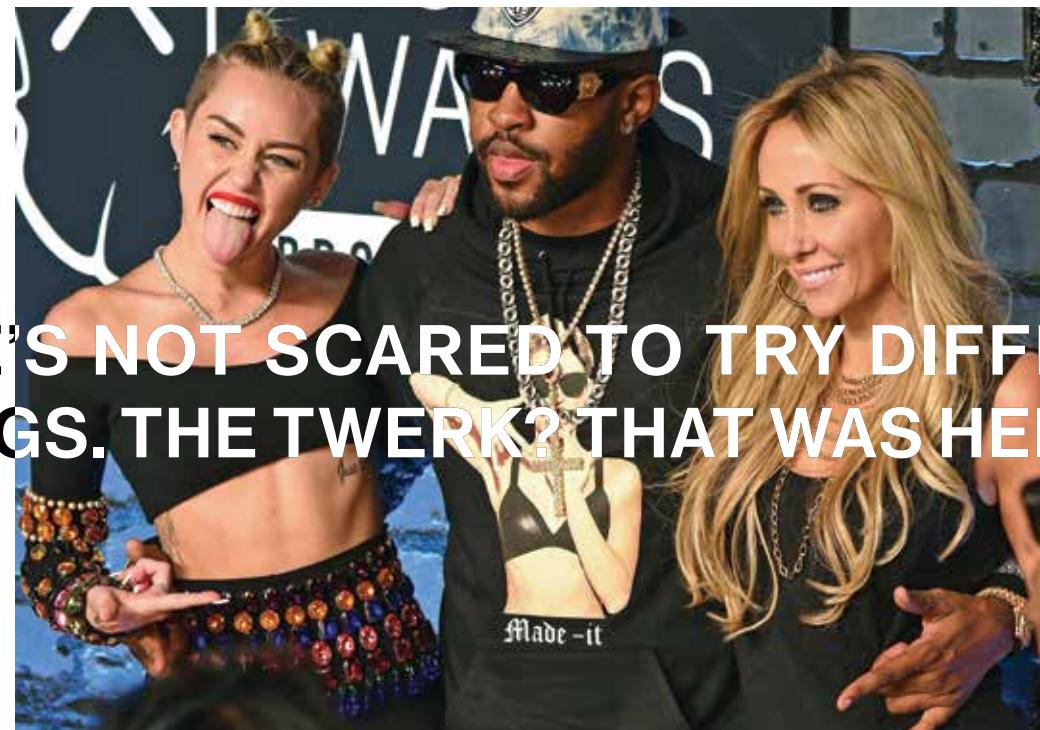
WILL said he usually received \$1,000 for each. His father thought it over. If his son sold one beat a week, he'd make \$52,000 a year. Not bad. "You take a break," his father told him, "and we'll revisit it in six months."

It was during WILL's hiatus from college that he produced his first hit, *Tupac Back*, a paean to the late Tupac Shakur, performed by rappers Meek Mill and Rick Ross. Released in April 2011, it went to No. 22 on Billboard's Hot Rap Songs chart. "That song really opened a lot of doors for Mike," says Rob Stone, co-founder of the *Fader*, a music magazine that took notice of WILL early on.

There was no need to go back to college now. He was producing songs for big names: Kanye West, Young Jeezy, and Lil Wayne. WILL also showed that trap music could have a softer side by concocting romantic ballads for Atlanta rapper Nayvadius Wilburn, aka Future, to croon with the help of Auto-Tune, a technology that pitch-corrects people's voices so they sing on key. One of their many collaborations, *Turn on the Lights*, climbed to No. 2 on the Hot R&B/Hip-Hop Songs chart after it was released in April 2012. "Mike's beats helped me develop my [singing] style," says Future.

Hip-hop producers are paid more like songwriters than performers. They make money for crafting the beats and back-grounds of songs. Usually, it's the rappers who get paid to make records. So it was important for WILL to get a good

MAKING FACES WITH MILEY AND TISH CYRUS AT MTV'S VIDEO MUSIC AWARDS IN BROOKLYN LAST AUGUST



"SHE'S NOT SCARED TO TRY DIFFERENT THINGS. THE TWERK? THAT WAS HER IDEA"

JAMES DEVANEY/WIREIMAGE/GETTY IMAGES

“I KNOW I’M GOING TO MAKE \$3 BILLION BY THE TIME I’M 40. YOU KNOW WHAT I’M SAYING?”



COMBS, WILL, T.I., AND WILLIAMS AT THE COACHELLA FESTIVAL IN APRIL

music-publishing deal. He hired Dominick James Mormile, a fast-talking Interscope executive based in Los Angeles, to be his manager. Mormile negotiated a deal for him in November 2012 with Warner/Chappell Music, the publishing division of the Warner Music Group, “He had the ‘it’ factor,” says Jon Platt, Warner/Chappell’s North America president. Will says the deal made him a millionaire at 23.

Warner/Chappell helped Will shop around his newer material, setting up a meeting with Peter Edge, chief executive officer of RCA Records, in New York. Will almost didn’t go. It was freezing outside. He had the flu. Will managed to get there anyway and started playing some of the songs he’d been working on. One was *We Can’t Stop*, a party-starter filled with sex and drug references that he’d composed with his producer associate P-Nazty and Rock City, a team of songwriters from the U.S. Virgin Islands. Will had been planning to offer the song to Rihanna. But he kept thinking it would be perfect for Miley Cyrus. “It’s like a mature version of *Party in the U.S.A.*,” Will says, referring to her 2009 hit.

Will didn’t know Cyrus, but Edge did. She was signed to RCA. Will talked her into recording *We Can’t Stop*, coaching her through it. “I was like, ‘Yo, use that country twang,’” Will recalls. “I hear it, but you are trying to hide it.’ So she started using her country twang. That made it all-the-way dope.”

Released in June 2013, *We Can’t Stop* broadcast to the world that the former *Hannah Montana* starlet had matured into a naughty young woman with a penchant for public self-abasement.

The song celebrates “dancing with Molly” and revelers “trying to get a line” in the bathroom. Cyrus appeared in the video for the song doing a booty-shaking dance called twerking. “She’s not scared to try different things,” Will says admiringly. “The twerk? That was her idea.”

The song was a success and shot to No. 2 on the Billboard Hot 100. Cyrus attracted further interest—and horror—when she reprised the song in August for the MTV Video Music Awards, miming a canine sexual act with singer Robin Thicke. Although it grossed out many parents, the performance was a tabloid

sensation. Will shrewdly capitalized on the outrage, choosing the following month to release 23, his first single under his own name. It featured Cyrus rapping along with the more seasoned Wiz Khalifa. “She killed it,” Will says. “That song was, like, No. 2 on the urban charts. Eminem was No. 3. So she was, like, the hottest white rapper for a second.” Cyrus could not be reached for comment.

Although Will’s spokesman denies that they are romantically involved, the producer and the pop star clearly have a mutually beneficial relationship. Will helped his protégé evolve post-Disney. And by associating himself with Cyrus, he gained the kind of mainstream legitimacy he hadn’t previously enjoyed. Before the year was over, *Billboard* magazine, the industry’s chief trade publication, put Will on its cover and called him “the hottest producer in the game.”

“He went from the hot strip-club rap producer to producer of the year in the music industry in, like, six months,” Mormile says. “It was like lightning.”

In December, Will tweeted a picture of himself sitting at Iovine’s kitchen table. He’s eating a takeout breakfast and signing the contract to create EarDruma Records. “Jimmy was just, like, ‘Look, you are 24,’” Will recalls. “‘The end of the day, bro, nobody knows what’s hotter than you, because you understand both genres. You know how to make hip-hop records go pop. You know how to make pop records go hip-hop.’”

Will has big dreams for EarDruma. He wants to use both his brand and his producing talents to break new acts rather than simply craft material for established artists. He’s doing this at a time when both physical and digital record sales are falling and music streaming is making it all but impossible for most artists to make a fortune as they once did—or even a modest living. “The way the business is changing, who knows what it’s going to look like three to five years from now?” says John Janick, who will replace Iovine as Interscope’s chairman. “Who knows what it’s going to look like tomorrow?” Will says there are plenty of other distribution channels to be exploited. He’s focused on making hit

FROM LEFT: JEFF KRANTZ/FILMMAGIC/GETTY IMAGES; NATHANIEL TURNER FOR BLOOMBERG BUSINESSWEEK

videos with his hit songs. He’s provided music for a Nike commercial. He’s talking to film producers about scoring their movies. He’d also like to build entirely new technology businesses within EarDruma, as Iovine did with Beats.

In March, Will released *No Flex Zone*, the first single by two kids from Mississippi who go by the name of Rae Sremmurd. “It’s ‘Ear Drummers’ spelled backward. You should hear them say it. They do it fast as hell.” The pair will remind listeners of a certain age of the ’90s rappers Kris Kross, known for their cartoonish performances and hairstyles.

Will has promoted *No Flex Zone* using the under-the-radar techniques he learned as a mixtape producer in Atlanta. Before officially signing the group, Will released *No Flex Zone* on popular music-sharing site SoundCloud so hip-hop bloggers could pick up on the song and share it with their readers. He took Rae Sremmurd with him to the South by Southwest festival last March in Austin, Texas, and featured them in his DJ sets. He paraded them around the city and filmed their shenanigans. Will trimmed the footage, turning it into an entertaining YouTube video.

At Coachella in April, he escorted Rae Sremmurd through the VIP area, blaring his prized single on Beats speakers, attracting the attention of Sean “Diddy” Combs, the rapper-producer-turned-vodka-salesman. His plan worked. “Diddy called me, and he was, like, ‘Yo, who are these kids? I had to hear this song at least 200 times this weekend,’” Will chuckles.

No Flex Zone made its debut on the Billboard Hot Rap Songs chart in late July at No. 24. The rapper Nicki Minaj has put out a remix of the song, and Will says the superstar Drake plans to do one, too. Recently, Kim Kardashian rode the wave by posting a picture of herself in a bikini with the hashtag #noflexzone. The song is no longer just a catchy amalgam of beats and rhymes. It’s become a meme.

The night after Will was in the studio with MC Guime, he returns with a group of rappers who call themselves Two-9. Will sees them as the next Wu-Tang Clan. In July he will sign them to EarDruma. Two-9’s members are old friends from Atlanta, so

this session is a relaxed affair. Will shows up in a white T-shirt, sweatpants, and red sneakers. He and his collaborators dine on Mexican takeout in the lounge. Then Will pummels Two-9’s Jace in a round of NBA 2K, the basketball video game. Will has his video guy take screen shots of the scores for posterity.

Everybody migrates into the studio where Will and Two-9 will work on a new song. His engineer plays tracks by Two-9 at a wall-shaking volume. Will’s assistant enters with three bottles of Hennessy and some Champagne on ice in a big red tub. Will gestures to his videographer to film this, too, while the group’s members help themselves to the liquor. Two young women arrive with a bottle of Jack Daniel’s and some marijuana. They roll up the weed and pass it around.

Will has a swig of Hennessy, but otherwise he stays conspicuously sober. He retreats into the recording booth to chat with two guys to whom he often turns when he has new music to release: Courtney Lucas, who’s a local record spinner known as DJ Orator, and Joey Kelly of LiveMixtapes.com, a site frequented by hip-hop aficionados in search of the latest sounds. Will talks up his planned releases, sounding frustrated that he can’t put them out faster. “I got a song with Young Thug that needs to be heard now,” Will laments.

It’s almost midnight. Will’s publicist would clearly like me to leave, so his client can get to work, but Will won’t hear of it. He wants to talk about his business. He says people don’t understand how determined he is to turn his record label into a real company. “I tell people, ‘You gotta look at me as a producer and a businessman, like an executive or some CEO-type s---,’” Will says. “It’s like I have three different brains.”

He says it took him a while to figure this out; it involved “growing three heads,” as he puts it. Now he’s just trying to stay focused. “The world is f---ed up,” he says. “You watch all that on the news. But you can go out and get money. Jimmy Iovine just did a good deal. It’s just a different way of thinking.”

▶ For video of Mike Will in action, go to businessweek.com/mike-will

ENGINEERING ANOTHER HIT AT LARRABEE STUDIOS IN LOS ANGELES IN LATE JULY



HE BECAME “PRODUCER OF THE YEAR IN THE MUSIC INDUSTRY IN, LIKE, SIX MONTHS”