

CASH MONEY RECORDS: STILL BLINGING IT AFTER ALL THESE YEARS

Started by brothers Ronald “Slim” Williams and Bryan “Baby” Williams in the early ‘90s out of the New Orleans housing projects, Cash Money Records has gone on to become a true American success story, selling more than 45 million albums, and wracking up more than two dozen multiplatinum and gold awards from artists such as Lil Wayne, Juvenile, B.G., Turk, Big Tymers, Mannie Fresh, Hot Boys and Baby/Birdman, two of Bryan’s hip-hop alter egos.

That’s a lot of bling, a term now in the Oxford dictionary that actually originates from Cash Money rapper B.G., who used it in a song title, and Lil Wayne, who raps on the track “Millionaire Dream,” from the Big Tymers’ 1998 album *How U Love That?*: “I got ten around my neck, and baguettes on my wrist, bling!”

“Our goal from the beginning was to grow from a small independent label into a successful major entertainment company,” explains Slim, who originally modeled the label after Jay Prince’s Houston rap company Rap-a-Lot, fellow New Orleans entrepreneur Master P’s No Limit and Puffy Combs’ Bad Boy, as well as Berry Gordy’s legendary Motown.

Cash Money Records are celebrating the 10th anniversary of the groundbreaking Universal Music Group distribution deal with one of the biggest albums in their history, Lil Wayne’s *Tha Carter III*, 2008’s best-selling album, which debuted at #1 with 1 million albums sold its first week, and is now at 2.4 million. Lil Wayne has been associated with Cash Money since he was a young teenager and part of the legendary hip-hop group Hot Boys with B.G., Juvenile and Turk.

“We were introduced to him when he was just a little, little kid,” recalls Slim. “He told us he wanted to be a rapper. He was so small back then. He just called us every day, and he even came to live with us. He just outworked everybody. He had that drive to succeed.”

The same drive that motivated Slim and his brother Bryan to start Cash Money Records.

“Wherever you come from it’s important to be true to your roots,” says Slim, who has continued to be active in the New Orleans area with the label’s philanthropic work in the wake of Hurricane Katrina’s devastation. “There was no hip-hop legacy here when we began. At that time, ‘bounce music’ was happening, but we started to change that to what it is right now. We took that swing and put it to a different style.”

Teaming up with producer Mannie Fresh to form Cash Money Records, the label’s first artist, Kilo-G, released *The Sleepwalker* album in 1992, which turned out to be a disaster, selling less than 2,000 copies.

“That taught us how to handle failure,” says Slim. “We weren’t discouraged. We knew, in order to win, you have to lose, and each loss was a learning experience.”

Local rap act UNLV's *Sixth and Barrone* album was next, which turned out to be an underground classic in southern hip-hop, selling more than 20,000, and clearing the way for the follow-up *Uptown for Life*, which sold twice as much. A young MC from the area named B.G. was next with *Chopper City*, selling 100,000 and putting Cash Money Records on the map. Despite several major label entreaties, the Williams brothers decided to stay independent and wait for the right distribution deal.

From the mid-to-late '90s, Cash Money experienced success with two more albums from B.G., *It's All On U Vol. 1* and *2*, each of which sold close to 200,000, but it was veteran New Orleans rap artist Juvenile which proved the label's biggest success. Juvenile's *Soulja Rags* came out in 1996, selling more than 200,000, while Hot Boys' *Get It How U Live!* cracked the 300,000 mark, leading directly to the label signing a historic deal with Universal Music Group worth a reported \$30 million. The groundbreaking arrangement allowed the label to retain full ownership of all master recordings and earn all monies generated from sales, publishing and performance rights except for a nominal fee to cover manufacturing and distribution.

"It's been a blessing for both of us," says Slim about the arrangement. "We've done great business with one another. I appreciate how hard everybody there has worked to make us successful."

Between 1998 and 2001, Cash Money produced 19 Top Five singles and 11 platinum and multi-platinum albums, including Juvenile's *400 Degreez*, which has sold more than 4 million in the U.S. to date. Other million-sellers during this period include B.G.'s *Chopper City in the Ghetto*, Hot Boys' *Guerilla Warfare*, Lil Wayne's *Tha Block Is Hot*, Juvenile's *G-Code* and Big Tymers' *I Got That Work*, all in '99 and 2000. In 2000, the label got involved in film production with the straight-to-DVD release, *Baller Blockin'*, which went double-platinum and produced a gold soundtrack.

Despite the exit of B.G. and Juvenile, two of Cash Money's biggest artists, the label remained white-hot. Between 2001 and 2003, the label sold 7 million albums, earning two Grammy nominations for Big Tymers' "Still Fly," a collaboration between Fresh and Bryan Williams. The group scored yet another Grammy nomination for the single, "Oh Yeah," featured on the platinum album *Hood Rich*. Cash Money Millionaires, a group which included Juvenile, Lil Wayne, B.G., Turk, Mannie Fresh and Birdman, recorded *Undisputed*, the soundtrack to the Miramax film starring Wesley Snipes and Ving Rhames as a pair of boxers behind bars.

With all their success, the brothers Williams have never forgotten where they came from, and have been a philanthropic force in the New Orleans community. The Johnny and Gladys Williams Foundation, in memory of their deceased family, donates food, offers academic scholarships and provides housing opportunities for the less fortunate. Cash Money for Kids buys and donates basketball tickets for every New Orleans Hornets home game to underprivileged kids to reward excellent academics, while the Annual Turkey-Give-Away hands out more than 2,000 birds with all the trimmings every Thanksgiving.

“We do as much as we can to help the people,” says Slim. “People look forward to Thanksgiving every year. It’s something special for them. We’re just blessed to have enough that we can give back. For one day, at least they know they have something to enjoy.”

The success of Lil Wayne’s *Tha Carter III* has Cash Money Records looking to the future. The label recently signed its first-ever rock act in New Jersey’s Kevin Rudolf, a former guitarist with Nelly Furtado, Justin Timberlake and Timbaland, whose first single, “Let It Rock,” featuring labelmate Lil Wayne, was #1 Most Added at Top 40 and has been steadily climbing the iTunes and ringtones charts, while getting top phones at major stations such as New York’s Z100 and L.A.’s KIIS. His debut album, *In the City*, is being released in October.

“I like to do things people aren’t expecting,” explains Slim about his latest crossover move. “We prefer being underdogs. It’s all music to me. If it’s good, I like it.”

As for the future, the Williams brothers still have their eyes on the prize.

“I want to make this a full-fledged entertainment and music company for all genres of music, from pop and rock to country and gospel,” says Slim. “I also want to make the film company just as big, if not bigger, than the record label. I want it all...music, publishing, film, videogames, DVD.

“You just need to be patient. Juvenile started out fast, and I always told him, ‘It’s not how you start, but how you finish.’ That’s how I look at it. Companies that started out fast at the same time we did aren’t even around any more. We’re still going strong... but we’re not finished yet. We’re moving up and up.”

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