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**"Didn't Buy the Beat":
Ownership, Labor, and the Meme-ified Producer Tag**

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A capstone project submitted to
The UCLA Department of Musicology

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Introduction

This project investigates the history, sonic function, and authorial significance of producer tags in hip-hop. Over the past two decades, producer tags have become a ubiquitous component of rap production as a means of signaling authorship, branding, and aesthetic identity. Industry titans, such as Metro Boomin and Tay Keith, have created famous tags that rile up audiences and resonate within rap communities. Underground rap producers—especially those making “type beats” and beat tutorials on SoundCloud and YouTube—require producer tags to maintain ownership and increase visibility of their work. In these digital spaces, however, tags have transcended simple utility to undergo a process of meme-ification, where producers employ absurdist humor and ironic performances to stake their claim in the industry. Despite their prominence, producer tags remain relatively understudied within musicological scholarship. This paper seeks to examine producer tags at the intersection of authorship, authenticity, intellectual property, and musicality. Through a combination of theoretical, historical, and sonic analysis, the paper will argue that producer tags constitute a vital authorial gesture that both reflects and reconfigures the unique producer-rapper relationship in contemporary hip-hop.

Literature review / Methodology

Journalists and scholars such as Steven J. Horowitz, Tim Ziemer, Yuri Havrylenko, and Zachary Diaz expand the discussion by examining the power dynamics, sonic branding practices, and Afrodiasporic production lineages of the producer-rapper relationship. Horowitz raises skepticism about whether tags are genuine markers of quality or simply branding noise, while Ziemer’s study demonstrates how producers increasingly dominate the sonic identity of rap songs.¹ Havrylenko and Diaz illustrate the cultural and stylistic logics that make certain tags particularly effective or historically relevant.² While the literature on the subject does provide some insight into the legal, sonic, and authorial authenticity of producer tags in hip-hop, this paper seeks to probe further into the interrelatedness of these frameworks while filling in the gaps around identity creation, visibility of labor, and meta-irony within rap scenes. Ziemer’s findings that producers dominate the sonic identity of rap more than rappers themselves, combined with Williams’ writings on sonic quotations, provide a strong foundation for analyzing how producer tags contribute more to the overall quality of a rap song than they are typically

¹ Tim Ziemer, Nikita Kudakov, and Christoph Reuter, "Producer vs. Rapper: Who Dominates the Hip Hop Sound? A Case Study," *arXiv preprint* (2024): 2410.21297, <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2410.21297>.

² Yurii Havrylenko, “The Best Producer Tags (and Why They Work),” *Pibox Resources*, 2025, <https://pibox.com/resources/best-producer-tags/>.

given credit for.³ Kyle Adams points out that music in rap is often composed before the text, further justifying how the producer tag carries so much weight as a musical element.⁴

Importantly, the concepts of “rap” and “hip-hop” are not identical. Hip-hop typically refers to a broader category of multiple cultural practices, including DJing, MCing/rapping, graffiti, and other similar acts. Rap is usually perceived as the dominant subcategory of hip-hop, with the emphasis being on adding vocals to an existing instrumental. In this sense, “hip-hop instrumentals” and “rap instrumentals” can refer to the same thing in contemporary discussions, barring specific examples. For the sake of clarity in this paper, “hip-hop” and “rap” will be used rather interchangeably, although it should be noted that “hip-hop” will primarily refer to the musical subcategory of the broader cultural classification, while “rap” carries the connotation of the vocal practice of MCing. For this reason, when either of these terms are followed by the word “instrumental,” they are referring to the same phenomenon.

The methods of analysis in this paper can be grouped into three main categories. First, a historical genealogy of producer tags must be taken into account. This will consist of tracing the evolution from the live MC/DJ shout-out within early hip-hop live shows to the present-day “digital watermark” that displays contemporary attitudes towards the legal necessities and sonic underpinnings of producer tags.⁵ Second, a sonic analysis of particular cases must be conducted, with a formalist analysis being used to examine the placement and frequency of these tags within a work. A few particular cases of producer tags have been selected due to their popularity and noteworthy prominence within their respective tracks, while the more underground cases were selected for their unique utilization of producer tags as rhythmic percussive elements in glitchier underground styles of rap. Finally, a digital ethnography must be conducted to observe how producer tags function as social currency within online communities to protect labor and build clout.⁶

While many scholars focus on the “professional” producer tag, much of the cultural attitude towards producer tags is driven by underground hip-hop circles. This paper helps to fill in the gaps around this area of research by examining the absurdist aesthetics and “meme-ification” of tags in underground scenes, while also exploring the implications of the legal literature to define producer tags more around the producer’s invisible labor rather than the property ownership angle. By synthesizing the existing literature with interviews of underground producers, this paper will develop the frameworks for analyzing tags as musical elements within hip-hop music. These subtle differences will help expand discussions around producer tags by

³ Justin A. Williams, “Theoretical Approaches to Quotation in Hip-Hop Recordings,” *Contemporary Music Review* 33, no. 2 (2014): 188–209, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07494467.2014.959276>.

⁴ Kyle Adams, “Aspects of the Music/Text Relationship in Rap,” *Music Theory Online* 14, no. 2 (2008), <https://mtosmt.org/issues/mto.08.14.2/mto.08.14.2.adams.html>.

⁵ Christopher B. Greene, “‘Metro Boomin Want Some More’ Intellectual Property Rights: Why Producer Tags Can & Should Be Protected by Trademark Law,” *Creighton Law Review* 53, no. 3 (2020): 403–428, <http://hdl.handle.net/10504/127629>.

⁶ Greene, “‘Metro Boomin Want Some More’ Intellectual Property Rights.”

painting a more accurate picture of the attitudes that go into their production and consumption throughout the rap industry, rather than focusing solely on the most popular producers.

The historical background and cultural analysis sections will provide a foundation for understanding the relationship between rappers and producers, establishing claims to authorship and demonstrating the high performance nature of producer tags. Labor practices/legal precedent shows how producer tags function to preserve intellectual property rights and promote the visibility of producers' labor. How producer tags function from a musical perspective will be analyzed in the sonic function/form section, with a further digital ethnography being conducted on the humor of underground producer tags in the irony and meta-performance section. Furthermore, an analysis of my own experience creating producer tags will constitute an autoethnography, providing more insight into the thought process behind the creation of producer tags. Finally, the authenticity section will emphasize how producer tags further the legitimacy of producers and their claims to clout, with the irony and meta-performance section also contributing to this discussion. Together, these sections demonstrate the methodology and justify the need for intervention into the discourse on producer tags in hip-hop, mapping out current frameworks while proposing fresh avenues for analysis.

Historical Background

Over the past three decades, rap/hip-hop has grown from an edgy subculture to a global mainstream phenomenon, rapidly becoming one of the most influential and widely consumed genres of music. Since its humble beginnings in intimate live shows, there was always an emphasis on the relationship between the rapper and the producer; or, in the early days of rap, the emcee and the disc jockey. DJs would spin the records on stage while announcing the presence of the rapper over the microphone, providing an early example of what producer tags would eventually become. At the turn of the century, as shifts in sampling, beat-making, and music distribution restructured authorship in hip-hop, the emboldening of this rapper-producer dynamic emphasizes how the producer's creative identity increasingly shapes a rap track's sonic quality and perceived authenticity.⁷ Producers in other commercial genres, such as pop music, are typically required to heavily edit existing song structures to create a perfect formulaic arrangement. In contrast, hip-hop producers are usually seen as the architects creating a whole beat for a rapper to later add their own vocals to, giving the producers more influence over the sound of the final track.⁸ When contrasted to the relationship between producers and artists in other contemporary genres, it becomes clear how much creative control producers have within the rap industry.

⁷ Elvin M. Castellanos, "'Every Beat You Make Has a Time of Day or Color': How Producers and Rappers Changed the Course of Sampling Music," Master thesis, City University of New York, 2022. https://academicworks.cuny.edu/le_etds/29.

⁸ Corey Wallis, "Hip Hop vs Pop Music: A Producer's Perspective," *Sounds Like Corey*, October 10, 2024, <https://soundslikecorey.com/hip-hop-vs-pop/>.

Producer tags found their origins in the early 1990s, where it was commonplace for rappers to introduce themselves over the instrumental in a practice known as adlibbing.⁹ The practice began as a way to hype up a live audience, only later being adopted by producers as a way to maintain ownership over a certain beat. When a producer sends out a beat to be rapped over, rappers will bounce the instrumental around between artists until it finally finds a home. Amidst this uncertainty, producers attempt to maintain control over where their beat will eventually end up. Keeping a tagline on the instrumental indicating who produced the beat is a way of ensuring that nobody else can use it or lay claim to it without properly crediting the original producer. In this way, producer tags function similarly to the signature of an artist of a painting, as some paintings travel around different exhibits or auctions and the signature serves as a way for artists to ensure nobody can ignore the original creator.

As hip-hop ballooned in popularity at the turn of the century, and as niche subgenres of the form found new homes on the internet with dedicated fanbases in the 2010s, the market for new styles of rap instrumentals expanded widely. Teenage producers in the United States during the mid-to-late 2010s took up FL Studio and other introductory DAWs—digital audio workstations designed for beginner producers—to learn skills to produce hip-hop instrumentals. SoundCloud and YouTube became avenues for producers to demonstrate their skills and showcase their instrumentals to up-and-coming solo artists, where they would often provide these beats for free. Producer tags became widespread, with every new producer needing to put their own tagline in a beat to preserve their ownership with an audio watermark.

Rappers also perform “ad-libs” over their main vocal lines, producing somewhat indeterminate sounds that add to the rhythmic, call-and-response nature of their verses. This has also been developed over decades in the rap industry, evolving throughout the early days of live performances and carrying into the contemporary digital rap scene today. As Zachary Wallmark describes in his case study of Megan Thee Stallion’s vocables, “In the hip-hop context, non-verbal expression and interplay of this sort has been common since the earliest days of collective MCing in the late 1970s, where each rapper’s turn at the mic was supported by the background vocable ad libs of their peers.”¹⁰ In many cases, producer tags serve as another method for ad-libbing, performed by the producer instead of the rapper.

Cultural Analysis

As opposed to most other popular music genres, the concept of the “artist” is applied as a duality between the MC and the DJ, and as they later became labeled as producers and rappers.

⁹ Steven J. Horowitz, “Are Producer Tags on Hip-Hop Songs a Trademark of Quality, or Just Noise?” *Variety*, January 23, 2020, <https://variety.com/2020/music/news/are-producer-tags-on-hip-hop-songs-a-trademark-of-quality-or-just-noise-1234845887/>.

¹⁰ Zachary Wallmark, “Analyzing Vocables in Rap: A Case Study of Megan Thee Stallion,” *Music Theory Online* 28, no. 2 (2022), <https://mtosmt.org/issues/mto.22.28.2/mto.22.28.2.wallmark.pdf>.

As hip-hop expanded in popularity throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the role of producers grew alongside the celebrity status of the rappers. With the popularity of producers such as Dr. Dre and RZA carrying the torch of producers during the 1990s, their significance throughout the genre continued at the turn of the century.¹¹ This unique producer-rapper dynamic demonstrates the significance of producer tags beyond being just digital watermark or obnoxious noise. Rather, they serve an important role in promoting the artistry of producers, building upon decades of cultural practices and signifiers.

The foundation for producer tags was already being established at hip-hop's inception. The distinct relationship between the binary forces of MCs and DJs propelled the importance of the cultural identity of rap producers down the line. During the early days of hip-hop, around the late 1970s and early 1980s, the attitude of bravado around live performances such as rap battles and freestyling created a need for MCs and DJs to announce the next performing artist. These introductions act as a way of planting a flag in the ground before a verse even begins, with DJs acting as a hype man to the upcoming MC. Either the MC or the DJ would grab the mic and build a sense of impending doom or excitement using aggressive and rhythmic shouting to simultaneously rattle their opponent while letting the audience know who's about to dominate the stage.

Aesthetically, this resembles the later high performance of WWE-style entrances and baseball walk-up songs. Just as a WWE wrestler or a baseball player has a menacing theme song, a specific walk, and even pyrotechnics to help establish their character, hip-hop artists used these announcements as a way to craft an indestructible persona. This meta level of artistry continues to this day, with many hip-hop artists still using specific language and stylistic tendencies to elevate their persona. While the nature of this introduction has evolved throughout the years, producer tags still serve the same essential function: priming the listener for the performance ahead and warning off potential opponents.

Demonstrating this parallel between hip-hop producer tags and WWE is the rapper and producer JPEGMAFIA, who uses a section from WWE wrestler Edge's walkup theme as one of his producer tags. The words "You think you know me" repeat over and over in the wrestler's main theme, with added reverb and distortion muddying its sound. But JPEGMAFIA repurposed this vocal by isolating it from the rest of the music and began using it as one of his primary tags. While this tag does not serve the function of maintaining ownership over the producer's beats, it contributes to the overall persona being developed by JPEGMAFIA and flows well into most of his beats in a way that fits the musical quality of these tracks.

The work of Gena Caponi outlines how overlapping cries and hollers in hip-hop music constitutes the concept of signifyin(g) that ties back into Afrodiasporic roots.¹² Signifyin(g) is the

¹¹ Garreth Chan, "If Young Metro Don't Trust You, It's Not Nice: Producer Tags, Ego, & Excellence," *Postscript Magazine*, November 2020, <https://postscriptmagazine.org/content/producer-tags-ego-excellence-garreth-chan>.

¹² Gena D. Caponi, *Signifyin(G), Sanctifyin', & Slam Dunking: A Reader in African American Expressive Culture* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 141.

practice in African-American culture to subvert the denotative and figurative meanings of a word or phrase. Joseph Schloss ties this into sampling in hip-hop, stating that looping samples allows producers to “[obscure] the nature and extent of their agency.”¹³ Zachary Diaz furthers this connection between signifyin(g) and hip-hop production practices through his analysis of the works of producer J Dilla, demonstrating the many ways in which rhythmic patterns, digital sampling, and J Dilla’s “signature sound” builds upon Afrodiasporic practices. Producer tags in hip-hop could further be analyzed within this cultural context as yet another way in which the techniques utilized in the production of rap music are inherently rooted in African-American culture.

Authenticity

Questions of authenticity are central to hip-hop’s cultural logic, and several scholars complicate this discourse. The ability for producers in hip-hop to dominate the sonic quality of a rap track bolsters the producer’s claim to authenticity. Back in 2008, Kyle Adams was already arguing that music in rap is composed before the text is written, indicating that scholars of Western music should reshape how they perform theoretical analyses on rap music.¹⁴ Offering analytical tools for understanding textual interruptions and intertextual motifs, Adams frames producer tags as a structural and rhetorical device. Justin Williams contributes to this theme by highlighting how producers in hip-hop go beyond merely generating percussive elements for a rapper, contributing significantly to the sonic quality of a rap song in a way that differs greatly from other main genres of music.¹⁵

Furthermore, Williams provides a methodology for treating producer tags as short, repeatable soundbites that reference a persona, catalogue, or brand. These micro-quotations can extend a theoretical bridge into thinking about producer tags as sonic logos, branding, and cohesion.¹⁶ P.M.A. Kruijs offers a counter-perspective, arguing that authenticity in hip-hop is both essential and over-determined, with claims and desires for the appearance of authenticity necessarily reflecting its own absence.¹⁷ This tension helps clarify how producer tags can be simultaneously earnest claims to identity and self-aware performances of authorship. The explicit representation of producer tags and their authorial stakes in underground hip-hop also illuminates

¹³ Joseph G. Schloss, *Making Beats: The Art of Sample-Based Hip-Hop* (Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 138.

¹⁴ Adams, “Aspects of the Music/Text Relationship in Rap.”

¹⁵ Williams, “Theoretical Approaches to Quotation in Hip-Hop Recordings.”

¹⁶ Williams, “Theoretical Approaches to Quotation in Hip-Hop Recordings.”

¹⁷ P.M.A. Kruijs, “The (Un)importance of Authenticity in Hip-Hop: Why Authenticity Does and Does Not Matter in Hip-Hop,” Master thesis, Erasmus University, 2021, <https://thesis.eur.nl/pub/57159/Kruijs-Paul.-Masterscriptie-Juli-2021.pdf>.

a meta-ironic component as to how producer tags are treated in niche, online communities of rap producers, especially on SoundCloud and YouTube beat tutorials.

With DAWs and home studios becoming so widely available, many social media content creators began creating tutorials on YouTube to teach the new generation of young producers how to make music. Much of the content was directed at the widely acceptable nature of rap production, which centers around fast hi-hat patterns and a DIY-approach that lends well to the digital nature of the new production landscape. A simple search on YouTube reveals thousands of tutorials, not only directed at teaching production techniques but also demonstrating how producers can make their own producer tags. Producer tags became a way to make one stand apart from the rest of the producers following similar tutorials, typically utilizing audio clips from phone calls or videos shared between friends. Many producers deliberately have somebody say something into a microphone in their home studios with the direct intention of creating a producer tag, and these tags vary widely in their sound. While most of them will contain the producer's alias, there are tons of examples where they either say something completely different or don't contain words at all.

Concepts of authenticity within any social group, especially within the meta-ironic online discourses of contemporary rap communities, are multilayered and convoluted in ways that cannot be fully explored within this paper. To some rap fans and artists, especially within the gangsta rap and drill scenes, authenticity may come in the form of "street credibility" through ties to specific ethnic and organized crime gangs.¹⁸ Authenticity in hip-hop is sometimes phrased as "keeping it real" through representing one's lived experiences honestly or connecting to authentic perceptions of Blackness.¹⁹ Within the meta-ironic factions of rage rap – a subgenre pioneered by artists such as Playboi Carti, Yeat, and Ken Carson, with a community of independent producers and rappers carrying the torch loaded with meta-ironic humor – the concept of authenticity may revolve more around relatability and connections to inside jokes within specific online groups. Producer tags can contribute to any of these concepts of authenticity within multiple subgenres of rap, serving different purposes based on the context of the genre and community within which the producers are based.

Labor Practices/Legal Precedent

Scholars have begun to conceptualize producer tags as legitimate markers of authorship, debating the legal framework behind their usage. Lawyer and legal scholar Christopher B. Greene's "'Metro Boomin Want Some More' Intellectual Property Rights" provides a foundational perspective on the legal significance of producer tags, especially in underground rap

¹⁸ Nicola Bozzi, "Dramatization of @GANGSTA: Instagram Creed in the Age of Glocalised Gang Culture," in *Theorizing Criminality and Policing in the Digital Media Age*, ed. Julie B. Wiest (Emerald Publishing Limited, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1108/S2050-206020210000020010>.

¹⁹ Diaz, "Signifyin(g) Producers," 26.

circles.²⁰ Greene's work legitimizes tags as authorial indicators, framing them as sonic facsimiles to written signatures or photographic watermarks. Tags can then be seen as a way to ensure that a producer does not have a beat stolen from them and used without their permission. In this way, tags function as a way to make the labor of producers more visible, with many producer tags even using phrases like "[Name of producer] made this beat" that specifically emphasize the work that producers put into their music-making process. "Producer vs. Rapper: Who Dominates the Hip Hop Sound? A Case Study" reveals that producers are more likely to dominate the sonic quality of a rap song, demonstrating how tags can function as a kind of verbal caption for that dominance and furthering the concept that tags make the invisible labor of the producers audibly legible.²¹ Clayton Purdom's "The Golden Age of Rap Producer Tags" complements this by performing case study analyses on contemporary tag practices and emphasizing their cultural visibility.²²

The labor of producers is made explicit through producer tags, where producers claim authenticity and ownership of their music, highlighting this distinct relationship between producers and rappers in contemporary hip-hop. Especially within online, underground hip-hop subcultures, notably the "SoundCloud rap" scene and YouTube beat tutorials, there is a specific emphasis on the notion of beatmaking. On social media platforms, namely YouTube, SoundCloud, TikTok, and Instagram, independent producers create "type beats" – rap instrumentals in the style of a particular rapper or producer provided online for free. In these cases, producer tags are a vital copyright tool, where the tags themselves act like a digital watermark to protect their unauthorized use. Due to the widespread proliferation of "type beats," along with other rap instrumentals that are provided for free online, most hip-hop producers are aware of the necessity for producer tags. Even if they aren't thinking like a lawyer, producers at least like to know that they can maintain some level of control over their beats, despite who ends up rapping over them.

While many producers don't explicitly think of their tags as a way to maintain ownership, they still conceptualize their tags as a way to promote their brand and identity while contributing to the musical elements of a track. In this sense, producer tags take on multiple functions as ways to promote the visibility of their labor without detracting from the overall quality of the song. In the case of many underground hip-hop tracks, however, these tags may subvert this tendency and be extremely distracting in an ironic, humorous sense. Whether used earnestly or as a sarcastic quip, producer tags still prioritize the purpose of asserting ownership over intellectual property and demanding recognition for the producer's labor.

²⁰ Greene, "'Metro Boomin Want Some More' Intellectual Property Rights."

²¹ Ziemer, "Producer vs. Rapper: Who Dominates the Hip Hop Sound? A Case Study."

²² Clayton Purdom, "The Golden Age of Rap Producer Tags," *EX Research*, 2024, <https://www.exresearch.co/the-golden-age-of-rap-producer-tags/>.

Sonic Function/Form

More than merely setting a legal precedent for claiming ownership over an instrumental, producer tags also establish a particular sonic quality within the tracks that they inhabit. Since producers within the rap industry often contribute more to the sonic quality of a track than producers from other genres, their sonic identifiers are given more headroom to contribute to its overall sound and aesthetic. Temporally, their form is usually centered around the introduction of a song, oftentimes with producer tags mentioning directly how a producer made the beat you're listening to. Such is frequently the case with producer Tay Keith, who often drops in a "Tay Keith, fuck these n****s up!" layered beneath the other instrumental elements of the track. While still contributing to the overall sonic quality of the song, this is more of an introductory statement meant to supplement the rapper and instrumental without garnering too much attention.

On the contrary, some producers are much better known for making their tags extremely legible, to the point where they cut out the music entirely in order to be audibly legible. One famous example of this even treats the producer tag like a suspension right before the drop into the first verse. On "Father Stretch My Hands Pt. 1" by Kanye West, there is a long instrumental intro playing a looped, chopped gospel sample.²³ As the track progresses through the intro and into the breakdown section, a new, shorter section from the same track is sampled and looped to build suspense as the bass builds up in intensity. As the sample finally clicks forward leaning into the drop, the music abruptly cuts out to make room for Metro Boomin's sample to ring out. "If young Metro don't trust you I'm gon' shoot you!" rings out immediately preceding the drop into the first verse, with no other sound getting in the way of this tagline.

In this example, Metro Boomin's producer tag functions as part of the music, serving to emphasize the suspense leading into the drop. This instance of Metro's tagline being used to prolong the eventual beat drop is reminiscent of electronic music, like a dubstep song where a heavy buildup leads into a short (usually one bar) phrase where the music cuts out entirely to allow a single heavy bass synth to fill in the gap between the buildup and the drop. This is commonly referred to as the "pre-drop fill" or a "fake-out" drop. In "Father Stretch My Hands Pt. 1," Metro Boomin's tagline functions exactly the same way, demonstrating how producer tags can serve a purpose beyond mere branding and identity formation.

However, there are plenty of cases in which producer tags are littered throughout the entire track, frequently being employed similarly to rhythmic percussive elements. On the collaborative albums between rapper MIKE and producer Tony Seltzer, *Pinball* and *Pinball II*, each track has producer tags spread throughout the entire song. Most of the time, these aren't introductory statements but rather sparse digital vocoders saying "Tony" and "Seltzer" being chopped up to mimic delay effects. These tags frequently cut out the entire instrumental for a single beat as these digital voices ring out. The track "Money & Power" even begins the outro

²³ Kanye West, "Father Stretch My Hands Pt. 1," track 2 on *The Life of Pablo*, GOOD Music / Def Jam Recordings, 2016, streaming audio, Spotify.

with another tag, a human voice shouting “Hey, Tony!” before the track finally closes on the previously mentioned digital “Tony” soundbite.²⁴ Throughout the album, many of the songs open with one of the verses speeded up and chopped with producer tags glittering throughout the introduction. On the track “#71,” the opening sequence consists of taglines mimicking this glitchy introduction to the song, demonstrating how producer tags often parallel the aesthetic throughlines of a specific song or album’s theme.²⁵

Some producer tags aren’t even an audible phrase, but rather a stylistic technique that points towards a specific producer’s identity. Arguably the most famous example of a production technique that wiggled its way into being a producer tag is Pharell Williams and the Neptunes’ four-count start.²⁶ If you listen closely, a lot of the songs produced by Pharell Williams begin with a looped section of the instrumental repeating on each of the first four beats of the song. According to Pharell, this wasn’t even intentional, but rather just a stylistic tendency that only became evident to him after it was pointed out by someone else.²⁷ This further indicates how producer tags reveal much more about the producer’s aesthetic identity and tendencies than they might even be aware of themselves. For many producers, a tag is not something that they even consciously think about a whole lot; it became standard practice within the industry and just feels like a natural way for producers to express themselves.

In these examples, producer tags elevate their function beyond the copyright and legal precedents that necessitate their employment. They become sonically and formally part of the music, enhancing the track in a Perhaps even subconsciously, the history of the MC-DJ dynamic and its evolution to the present rapper-producer dynamic is the bloodstream that pulses through contemporary producer tags. These foundations are then elevated with a newfound emphasis on the musical contribution that producer tags make to a track.

Creating Identity

With notions of authenticity and clout being central pillars to the perception and success of rap artists, the fact that so much of this sonic quality is determined by the producers is intriguing and illuminating. This tension is resolved by making the producers more visible, and their tags are a way of simultaneously promoting the identity of the producer and highlighting their labor in an audible manner. In turn, the perceived authenticity of a producer is also put under a microscope. This further contributes to the authorial power of producers, who get treated almost like their own artists (of course, they *are* artists, regardless of the genre, but you won’t see

²⁴ MIKE and Tony Seltzer, “Money & Power,” track 6 on *Pinball II*, 10k, 2025, streaming audio, Spotify.

²⁵ MIKE and Tony Seltzer, “#71,” track 3 on *Pinball II*, 10k, 2025, streaming audio, Spotify.

²⁶ Julian McKenzie, “Here Are the Top-10 Hip-Hop Producer Tags In the Game,” *Under the Influence of Music*, January 29, 2018, <https://utiom.com/2018/01/29/here-are-the-top-10-hip-hop-producer-tags-in-the-game/>.

²⁷ Craig Jenkins, “Pharrell Interview: Best of 2010s, ‘Letter to My Godfather,’” *Vulture*, December 9, 2019, <https://www.vulture.com/2019/12/pharrell-interview-best-of-2010s-letter-to-my-godfather.html>.

the producers within other mainstream contemporary genres receive the same level of scrutiny or authority as those within the rap industry). Many rap producers even have their own artist profiles on streaming services where they host their collaborative albums, singles, and EPs. When they produce tracks for an artist, they aren't simply listed in the credits as a producer, but are also a featured artist with tracks linked to their artist profiles.

This specific dynamic corresponds with the tendency of producer tags to contribute to the overall identity of a producer. Since tags are typically consistent over years of a producer's discography, the soundbites and audible signifiers that they employ serve as a way for them to develop and maintain a specific aesthetic and cultural identity. In the case of Pharell Williams' four-count start, the "tag" is more of an unintended stylistic technique that remained consistent enough for people to notice, becoming a part of Pharell's production identity. It provides a throughline for Pharell's discography, creating consistency and cohesion throughout his oeuvre and immediately lets the listener know who's operating the production.

Connecting this concept of identity formation with Ziemer's analysis of how producers dominate the hip-hop sound, we can see how the identity created by the producer tags extends beyond the consistency of a certain noise and into repeating musical motifs that occur throughout a producer's discography.²⁸ Rather than just being a monotone phrase that just happens to occur in multiple different songs, these producer tags influence the musical aesthetics of numerous tracks, often varying in their formal application while still maintaining a consistency throughout the oeuvre. Since many producers also have numerous tags, these aesthetic contributions can vary while still contributing to their identity in a way that provides agency and visibility to an often overlooked agent in the music-making process.

In the case of my own identity as a producer, I had to go through multiple variations of tags until I landed on one that properly defined the aesthetic I was attempting to cultivate. I recorded my first producer tag when I was fifteen, a simple vocal announcing, "You are now listening to a Tad Valente beat." I processed it with a rapid tape-stop effect that, at the time, mirrored the fast-paced hip-hop beats I was creating in my room. Already, the desire to promote my own name and brand was seemingly the top priority behind the inclusion of this tag, but it really just felt like something that every producer did, so I followed in their footsteps.

As my sound developed into something a bit more introspective and melancholic, my producer tag shifted alongside it. Now, I use a soundbite from a video of our friends hanging out while snowboarding. One of my buddies was recording a video to send to his mom when he panned the camera over to me and said, "Tad in the cut... We out here." I really liked the sound of it, so I exported the video to an MP3 file and added it to the beginning of one of my songs, and I'll still include it as an intro to some of my beats to this day. Hearing one of my friends joking about me being "in the cut" feels like a much more authentic representation of the vibe I'm trying to cultivate with my music. Producer tags sometimes fall into your lap this way, with

²⁸ Ziemer, "Producer vs. Rapper: Who Dominates the Hip Hop Sound? A Case Study."

some random piece of audio feeling like it just fits your vibe while still being able to function an important musical role.

Irony and Meta-Performance

Across much of the digital wild west of SoundCloud and underground hip-hop scenes, producer tags have evolved from a badge of honor into a playground for meta-humor and irony. While mainstream producer tags are designed to sound sleek and professional, underground rap producers often lean into the unpolished, absurdist aesthetics of low-budget performances. This meta-performance contributes to the “meme-ification” of the producer identity, subverting the seriousness of producer tags on their head. “Meme-ification” can be understood in this context to refer to the practice of satirizing specific production techniques with the intention of virality. While authenticity remains an important aspect of rap music throughout every genre, remaining hyperaware of the frequently absurdist nature of online discourse and contemporary politics allows for listeners to connect to the humor of producers in a way that feels simultaneously silly and genuine.

In niche online communities, producers may use tags that sound intentionally low-quality, mimicking the aesthetic of early 2000s internet audio or low-budget beat tutorials. Building on Kyle Adams’ framework of “textual interruptions,” these ironic tags function as structural and rhetorical devices that signal a producer’s awareness of their own role within a digital-first medium.²⁹ While early hip-hop artists traditionally sought to develop and maintain an indestructible persona of wealth and power, newer underground artists lean into these absurdist aesthetics that contribute to their authentic reception through humor.

The central tension here was defined earlier as simultaneous claims to identity and self-aware performances of authorship. In underground scenes, remaining hyperaware of the absurdist nature of online discourse gives producers a sense of prestige for being “in on the joke” and not taking the aesthetics of hip-hop performances too seriously. However, despite being loaded with humor, these tags still serve the foundational purpose of making the invisible labor of production more audibly present to the listener, sometimes even taking this function to an absurd degree. Although there are tons of examples of this, the best one that I could find is from Instagram producer “@tomas__tt” on a song by SoundCloud rapper “@stunnaboi Jay” titled “Didn’t Buy the Beat.”³⁰ This track contains an ironic producer tag that loudly states in the intro, “If you ain’t buy this beat, you gon’ have to eat this meat.” While the tag is obviously quite absurd and silly on the face, and probably shouldn’t be taken that seriously, it still highlights the importance of paying producers for their work. Most of the comments are filled with listeners either laughing at the audio clip or praising the song despite its humorous quality. One

²⁹ Adams, “Aspects of the Music/Text Relationship in Rap.”

³⁰ Stunnaboi Jay, “Didn’t Buy the Beat,” released as a single, 2025, streaming audio, SoundCloud, <https://soundcloud.com/stunnaboi Jay/didnt-buy-the-beat>.

commenter even jokingly bemoans, “Producers doing anything to stop beat thieves [crying emoji].”

Many of these underground producers deliberately mock the very platforms that they use to promote their work. Specifically, the prevalence of YouTube beat tutorials created an archetype around producer tags that use the phrase, “[Name of producer] made this beat,” which are then ironically subverted by producers delivering this phrase with a robotic or clunky inflection to poke fun at the ubiquity of branding in the digital hip-hop era. While some producers don’t have a choice in making their tags sound “unprofessional,” this glitchy and chopped aesthetic are often created intentionally to demonstrate a unique DIY-approach to their DAW that studio label producers don’t always have the leniency to take.

Producer tags that engage in such humorous performances typically do not contribute as much to the overall sonic form of the tracks they occupy. In these cases, the tags themselves function more similarly to a smaller nod or shoutout to the producer in a way that feels like a wave to the audience rather than a specific musical element itself, such as the ones discussed in previous sections in this paper. This further demonstrates how producer tags can occupy many different forms and serve various purposes, evolving to become a unique element of hip-hop music that can’t be easily replicated in other genres without being borrowed straight from the rap game.

Conclusion

Producer tags serve multiple important purposes in creating and maintaining identities of producers within the rap industry. Building upon a rich cultural history of the unique relationship between MCs and DJs from the early days of hip-hop, producer tags simultaneously provide a method for producers to maintain ownership of their instrumental creations while also building a specific identity that maintains continuity throughout their discographies. They may contribute to the overall sonic aesthetic of a track, frequently serving an important role in a song’s sound, form, and structure. With notions of clout, originality, and authenticity being central themes within the genre, producer tags then also contribute to these overarching themes through their text and quality. Newer underground rap producers frequently occupy portions of the internet soaked in irony and self-referential commentary that creates a new kind of producer tag, loaded with humor and the “meme-ification” of producer identities. As a whole, producer tags reveal a lot more about the contemporary rap scene and a significant portion of the music industry than they have been given credit for.

Ultimately, producer tags act as a definitive bridge between hip-hop’s performance-based, analog past and its hyper-digital present. By tracing the lineage of these soundbites from the rhythmic shouting of the 1970s DJs to the multi-layered audio watermarks of the modern era, it becomes clear that producer tags are the bloodstream of contemporary hip-hop production. It is no longer possible to view the producer as a secondary figure working in the shadows of a rapper, with tags functioning as a vital authorial gesture that demands recognition for the

producer's creative labor. This audible signature ensures that even as beats are tossed around through the digital wild west of SoundCloud and YouTube, the original creator can still be credited for their work with their created identity still intact. In this light, producer tags are not merely a branding tool but a reclamation of the visibility of labor, forcing the listener to acknowledge the producer as a primary architect of the genre's sonic identity.

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