Chicago's Closed Sessions opens hip-hop doors

By Dan Hyman
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It's a Friday afternoon in February and the six friends — business partners in the hip-hop label Closed Sessions sit in a Humboldt Park house discussing the merits of olive pizza and Kanye West's new album, "The Life of Pablo." The vibe is more college dorm than place of business. In fact, if not for four of those present being recording artists, two music-industry game changers and a blaring tropical house beat on constant loop you'd never know you were in the office-cum-studio of one of Chicago's leading hip-hop labels.

"Good music comes from comfort," says Mike Kolar, co-founder of the independent rap label consistently releasing music from some of the city's most promising young artists as well as helping bring a more concrete music industry presence to Chicago. Adds co-founder Alex Fruchter, "We're trying to build something from the ground up."
Since joining forces in 2008, Kolar and Fruchter — the former a longtime recording engineer and owner of Soundscape Studios, the latter a hip-hop tastemaker, DJ and website editor — have made it their mission to put the Chicago hip-hop scene on the map. What started with sponsored parties and private, video-documented sessions pairing established national artists with local talent, has evolved into a full-fledged record label and management company with five signed artists and a distribution deal with INGrooves. They've worked with everyone from local talent-done-good like Chance the Rapper and Vic Mensa to national acts like Action Bronson and Currency. At its core, however, Closed Sessions remains a Chicago affair.

"Our goal in starting was to be a premier hip-hop label for Chicago," Fruchter says. "The community has to be central in that goal. The labels we fell in love with as kids," he says, citing everything from blues outfits like Chess to hip-hop mainstays like Rawkus Records and Def Jam, "they didn't just put out music. They had an anchor community they served to define for a specific time period and location."

"We wouldn't be able to do this anywhere else but Chicago," Kolar contends. "New York, a building like ours would be a million dollars. LA is an import-consumer town. Chicago being the third-biggest city, the quality of producers, the venues, all that stuff comes together."

This grass-roots approach and strong emphasis on community extends to Closed Sessions' small albeit highly dedicated roster of artists. In recent years, local talent such as Chief Keef and Lil Durk have turned viral followings into major-label deals and big-ticket signing bonuses. Closed Sessions instead prides itself in homing in on Chicago artists aiming to get in on the ground floor of a tight-knit, forward-thinking artistic collective. "They're seeking people that want to build something," Andrew Barber, founder of Chicago hip-hop blog Fake Shore Drive and an early champion of artists like Keef and Chance the Rapper, says of Closed Sessions. "You have to find the right artists who aren't chasing immediate fame."

"All of our artists feel a certain ownership of Closed Sessions as well," says Fruchter. "We're all going to succeed or fail together." In addition, where major labels routinely strong-arm artists into taking their music in a specific direction, Closed Sessions prides itself on letting the artists chart their own course. "In Chicago there's not a lot of places like this where you're trying to provide artists spaces to just worry about the music and have a team around them," says poet and singer Jamila Woods, a recent signee to Closed Sessions who has been featured on Chance the Rapper's "Sunday Candy" and Macklemore's controversial "White Privilege II."

"It's way different than what people might expect from a label," adds Closed Sessions artist-producer, OddCouple. "We're all friends. We all hang out. We all talk about life. They're very invested in the people. The music takes care of itself.'
Ask Fruchter and he'll say his will "always be a hip-hop label." But whereas certain segments of the city's hip-hop scene are defined by a particular sound or style — drill, backpack rap, gospel-infused soul — Closed Sessions makes a point of pushing the sonic boundaries of the genre. Boathouse's recent "Hibernation" EP delves into acid house and trip-hop; OddCouple recently worked on a club-banger track with Chance's younger brother, Taylor Bennett; rapper Kweku Collins' forthcoming "Nat Love" project is a showcase for dense, intricate lyrics. "Our releases have always tried to show a very diverse range within the genre," says Fruchter. Kolar interjects: "But it's still hip-hop at the core."

Local rapper ShowYouSuck, whose 2013 "Dude Bro" mixtape was the first commercial release on Closed Sessions, remembers the label being nothing if not encouraging of his wildest ideas. "To be a rap label and to have your first release on it have a song called '80's Boobs' on it," he says with a laugh, "that's pretty daring."

Closed Sessions' steady growth has spread beyond city limits: Collins grew up in Evanston but began hearing chatter among friends about Closed Sessions being a prime place for young hip-hop artists to thrive. "I just had a feeling that I would fit here," says the rapper, who after sending over his EP inked a deal last year with the label, which also includes Cleveland-born emcee Kipp Stone. "I'd dealt with other people in the music industry before and there was such a lack of personal connection. When I came here we became friends as well as co-workers." Artist-producer Boathouse, in fact, has became such good friends with Fruchter since signing with Closed Sessions he recalls being charged with watching the label boss' dog, a beagle named Charlie Brown, on Fruchter's wedding day. "He was the ring bearer," the producer says of the pooch with a laugh. "I had to!"

For Fruchter and Kolar, running a record label has not been without its challenges. The contemporary music industry, they both agree, is in fluctuation. "We're working in a field that's constantly changing," Fruchter says. "We've changed our relationships with artists, the way we work with people so many times to fit an ever-changing music industry. We've had to learn the ins and outs of the music business beyond what you hear on TV or the buzzwords thrown around."

Furthermore, the idea of being a label executive still feels at odds with the founders' grass-roots mindset. "When we first started I didn't like saying 'I own a record label,' " Fruchter says. "Because I didn't feel like I was record label owner. I felt like a DJ, a writer and just a dude who grew up in Chicago's hip-hop scene and loves it. But now I don't feel like I'm trying to start a record label. We have started a record label and run a record label."

With all their artists working on new material, there's little time to breathe at Closed Sessions. Ultimately, Fruchter and Kolar believe label success comes down to how hard they and their artists are willing to grind.
"There's no one behind the curtain, nothing propping us up," Fruchter says. "There's no crazy funding. It's as blue collar as it gets. The results people are seeing are not smoke and mirrors. There's no secret. It's just hard work."

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