

MUSIC

1-on-1 with Drake: 'I'm going for the \$200-million play'

[Josh O'Kane](#)

The Globe and Mail

Published Friday, Sep. 27 2013, 5:00 PM EDT

Last updated Friday, Sep. 27 2013, 5:15 PM EDT

For Aubrey Drake Graham, starting from the bottom is subjective; it's where ambitions start percolating. His bottom might have been at Toronto's Yorkdale Mall, probably more than a decade ago, when he saw Kardinal Offishall walking around in – if he remembers correctly – a furry Kangol hat.

“He was the man,” the 26-year-old says of Kardinal, who was long the city's biggest hip-hop export. “I was like, ‘I wanna be bigger than that one day.’” Over the phone, in a rare interview with hometown media, his voice perks up when he speaks about Toronto: “I was just like, “That's crazy what he's done for the city, and I want to do even more than that.”

More Related to this Story

- [The man behind the eye-catching cover art of Drake's new album](#)
- [Drizzy on top: The Globe's track-by-track review of Drake's Nothing Was the Same](#)
- [What does Drake do at 5 a.m. in Toronto? His new video reveals all](#)

Drake is now, without question, the biggest hip-hop star ever to come from Toronto, or anywhere else in Canada, less than five years after being signed to a major label. When he says he *Started from the Bottom* – the name of his first single this year – it's less about escaping the traps of the cycle of poverty (like many of his rap contemporaries) and more about illustrating the success and attention he's earned in a few short years.

It's a different take on the traditional formula, but that's exactly what Drake excels at. His blend of singing and rapping to pour his heart out over spacious, atmospheric beats has taken the industry by storm: He's earned 10 No. 1 singles on the Billboard Hot R&B/Hip Hop chart, more than any other artist, ever. He's sold nearly five million albums in North America and earned two Junos and a Grammy.

Even before his third album, *Nothing Was The Same*, arrived last Tuesday, Drake had already cemented himself as a central figure in the world of hip hop – and one of Canada's biggest cultural ambassadors. This record is his moment to earn a place in hip-hop history.

He's playing in a tough field. It's been a year of major rap releases, with kingpins Kanye West and Jay Z each offering albums alongside newcomers such as 2 Chainz and J. Cole. Critics rarely gush over Drake's rapping per se or singing per se; that kind of praise is usually saved for rhymers such as Kendrick Lamar and R&B crooners like Usher. But Drake's sound, the whole package, has earned the world's attention.

He knows that. And he knows fans will grow tired if he keeps trying the same old thing. So to stay ahead of the game, he's been evolving his sound. "When you start winning, people start wanting someone else to win, because it's just refreshing," he says. He likens himself to NBA forward LeBron James, who's taken endless flak for his success since joining the Miami Heat – he's won two championships since joining the team. "I compare this album to LeBron coming to Toronto and winning his third ring," he says. "Same guy, same talent, but a refreshing perspective on the win."

You can hear Drake's brand of airy, introspective R&B take a new step on this record. *NWTS* is framed around the time in his life when he left *Degrassi: The Next Generation*; it blends braggadocio with the pang of regret you feel in your stomach when you leave friends and family behind. Sonically, the border between rapping and singing sometimes dissolves, and the beats are more spare and sluggish, paying homage to Houston hip hop.

One thing about Drake that hasn't changed is his "money over everything" attitude. He made \$25-million before he was 25, thanks in part to campaigns with Sprite and Kodak, and most recently the soccer video game FIFA 14. His next goal? Making \$250-million before 30.

"For me, it's not about the quick million-dollar, two-million-dollar cheque," he says. "I'm going for the \$200-million play, whatever that's going to be."

The headlines he makes with that money have been mixed. He was widely assailed, for instance, when he dropped \$50,000 in one-dollar bills at a Charlotte, N.C., strip club earlier this year. But with everything Drake does, he finds a unique balance: He also just reportedly gave \$10,000 to an Ohio woman whose husband and five children died in a fire this month.

In other words, don't expect his hijinks to tarnish his image. "Compared to the antics of many other rappers and pop singers, he's tame," says radio personality and music historian Alan Cross. Randy Lennox, head of Universal Music Canada, calls him "a tremendously Canadian and wonderful guy."

"I may as well be in charge of the tourism board in Canada," Drake says. But Toronto comes first. "They should really put me on payroll, because I feel like I bring a lot of people to this city, and a lot of attention to this city."

Toronto, its people and culture are strung throughout *NWTS*. And Drake's homages aren't always spoken; Canadian hip-hop archivist Mark V. Campbell points out that they range from as obvious a gesture as putting the Rogers Centre in the *Headlines* music video to quietly referencing a 2001 Kardinal track in the original release of *All Me*.

Drake's also been building more infrastructure to get Toronto on the map. His new vanity label, OVO Sound, already has two Toronto-area signees: R&B artist Partynextdoor and soul-pop duo Majid Jordan, both of which appear on *NWTS*. (OVO stands for October's Very Own, in honour of Drake's birthday.) He also helped launch a basketball tournament under the OVO moniker, and says he has more Toronto projects in the pipeline that he can't speak about.

And then there's OVOFest, Drake's annual concert at the Molson Amphitheatre. Throughout the years, he's brought legends from Jay Z to Stevie Wonder to the summer spectacle. Its fourth instalment this year saw nineties stars Diddy, Ma\$e and TLC reunite alongside rap heavyweights like Kanye West and Lil Wayne.

Even at the height of his fame, Drake didn't take the confluence of celebrity lightly. He remembers seeing West putting his ear monitors in backstage: "I was like, 'I can't believe this is really about to happen.' ... It was so surreal, man." But it was real, and the artists who took the stage had taken note of Drake's work ethic. "There's been a lot of rappers that came in the game that wasn't able to do something like this for they city," West told the crowd. And Lil Wayne? "I stand before you and say I am proud to tell you I'm a piece of this puzzle."

More Related to this Story

- [Rapper Drake issues apology over controversial autism lyric](#)
- [Kanye, Diddy and more: Hip-hop heavyweights surprise crowd at Drake's OVO Fest](#)
- [Cocky Kendrick Lamar trash-talks Drake and other rappers in new song](#)

Topics:

- [Kardinal Offishial](#)
- [Toronto, Ontario](#)
- [Jay Z](#)
- [Aubrey Drake Graham](#)
- [LeBron James](#)
- [Canada](#)