




PETER ROSENBERG '02:

SORRY, NOT SORRY



HOW AN NYC DJ
BECAME RAP'S
BIGGEST FAN—AND
SHARPEST CRITIC

PETER ROSENBERG '02 DOESN'T MEAN TO BE A POT STIRRER (THOUGH HE USES A LESS-PRINTABLE TERM THAN "POT").

As co-host of the morning show on famed New York City rap station Hot 97, then on the afternoon talkfest at 98.7 ESPN, he typically interviews rising rap stars, cracks jokes about hip-hop rumors and grumbles about the Knicks.

But occasionally, he can't help himself. He's suggested that Jay Z is "hanging on to his little brother's coattails"—the little brother being Kanye West. He's accused hip-hop elder Chuck D of doing nothing to support current rap culture. He's tweeted that megarapper Drake "wouldn't have been the toughest kid in my Hebrew school."

He might apologize later, like when he said on air that he was "truly sorry" for his comments about Chuck D. "But," he says now, "I can't guarantee I wouldn't do it again."

Rosenberg's outspokenness has made him one of the most-high-profile hip-hop deejays of his generation. Not only does he banter about rap's biggest news and newsmakers, he's quick to defend what he considers authentic hip-hop and black culture against diluting forces. He's also earned a reputation as a champion of a classic style of rap, one that prizes complicated lyrical technique and stripped-down beats.

The rapper Busta Rhymes once described Rosenberg as the only DJ "that's still trying to implement that filthy-under-the-nail, holy, sacred and pure, unmixed, undiluted, un-tampered-with, real hip-hop s---."

With 330,000 Twitter followers, 236,000 Instagram followers, hundreds of thousands of radio listeners and upwards of 50,000 for each episode of "Juan Epstein," the hip-hop podcast that he co-hosts, Rosenberg has a remarkable amount of clout in rap. A few plays from him can help send an up-and-coming artist toward stardom.

Sometimes, though, the flock does not respond well to his preaching. Sometimes, the flock points out that he occupies an awkward position for a white man.

"I understand people not wanting to receive my message because of what I look like," he says. "But I also understand that that's on them."

Rosenberg has taken an unlikely journey to become the boisterous radio host who hobnobs with hip-hop's elite. His childhood in Chevy Chase, Md., was a placid suburban one. His parents—Mindy, a retired school counselor, and M.J., a Capitol Hill staffer-turned-liberal blogger—sent their kids to Hebrew school and mostly listened to pop music: Billy Joel, Paul Simon, James Taylor.

But Peter's older brother, Nick, loved rap. On trips to visit their grandparents in New York, Nick "would record the radio, and that was my first real foray, the time I first really started paying attention to hip-hop music," says Rosenberg.

At first, the younger Rosenberg was captivated by songs like "Parents Just Don't Understand" by DJ Jazzy Jeff & The Fresh Prince. Soon, he branched out to artists like Run-D.M.C., LL Cool J, EPMD, Slick Rick and N.W.A.

When it came time to apply to college, "I started doing research about what the scene was like at Maryland to see if it was a place that I could really be interested in," says Rosenberg.

He discovered that the UMD radio station, WMUC, was home to a group of DJs called the Soul

Controllers, who were "really underground legends in the area," he says. On Friday nights, the Soul Controllers played hip-hop. Rosenberg wanted in. He reached out to one of the Soul Controllers, DJ Stylus, a.k.a. Rhyme Anderson '97. Eventually, Rosenberg got his own show, going by the name PMD, short for "Peter from Maryland."

Anderson recalls him as driven and serious, but also quick-witted, someone who wouldn't back down from a rhetorical or conceptual challenge—which makes for good radio.

Rosenberg had already developed his trademark obsession with his version of authenticity, in which rap artists deliver complex, substantively weighty lyrics—using literary devices like metaphors and symbolism—over rhythmic beats, a style epitomized by rappers like Nas and KRS-One.

"When you're a part of something that means a lot to you and you're young, you really believe in stuff deeply," says Anderson. "Peter definitely had those personality traits at the time, wanting to be a part of keeping hip-hop real and true."

After graduating from UMD, where he studied journalism, Rosenberg worked at a number of D.C.-area radio stations until 2007, when he got a call from Hot 97. "It was my No. 1 ultimate goal from probably age 16," he says. He started on a Sunday night show, but soon landed the coveted morning slot, bringing his vision of hip-hop realness to the rush-hour masses.

"He always feels he's right, and he wants to talk a lot," says Cipha Sounds, Rosenberg's former partner on the Hot 97 morning show and now his co-host on the hip-hop podcast "Juan Epstein." "As a listener, it's great to have this guy in the morning that has opinions, and either you love it or hate it. But my position was being the quarterback, and Pete was always like, 'Pass the ball to me, pass it to me.' Sometimes you don't get the ball. But he'd intercept it anyway."





A 2003 Diamondback article chronicles Rosenberg's early career, when he was hosting his "From Dusk Till Dawn" hip-hop show on WMUC and nationally on XM and spinning records at Lupo's on Thursday nights.

Rosenberg, pictured interviewing Nicki Minaj in 2013, hustles daily between Hot 97's West Village studios, where he's a morning host, and his afternoon hosting gig on 98.7 ESPN on the Upper West Side.



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Rosenberg's on-air verbosity tends toward jovial taunts at his co-hosts, rappers or even himself—but sometimes he feels compelled to take a more serious stand, occasionally even risking the ire of artists or wading into tricky sociopolitical territory.

His most notable public imbroglia took place in 2012, when rapper Nicki Minaj was scheduled to perform at Hot 97's annual all-day concert, Summer Jam. He'd already labeled "Starships," her pop crossover hit, "one of the most sellout songs in hip-hop history." From one of Summer Jam's stages, Rosenberg admonished the crowd: "I know there are some chicks here waiting to sing 'Starships' later. I'm not talking to y'all right now. F--- that bulls---. I'm here to talk about some real hip-hop s---."

Minaj's fans immediately took to social media to berate him, and Minaj canceled her appearance at the concert.

The bad blood lasted until May 2013, when Minaj came to Hot 97's studios to make an uneasy peace. "I am sorry that things went as left as they did," Rosenberg said. "It's cool, it's water under the bridge," replied Minaj, though she added, "To me, you don't have enough of a resume to make those comments," and that "I took a lot of s--- from men who didn't want me to realize my own worth, who didn't want me to know the truth about who I was and how good I was."

Co-host Ebro Darden chimed in that in addition to being a man, Rosenberg was—he whispered conspiratorially—white, to which Minaj said, "Being white also struck a chord with me . . . I was like, yo, he's on a black station, dissing black people. I just didn't like the feel of it."

Rosenberg says now, "My only regret is that if I played into some sort of storyline of her life of white men who are doubtful or s---y, I don't like that part. But in terms of how I perceived it, which was me defending the music and thinking she could do better, this [song] could be better, I think that part's okay."

Recently, Rosenberg's criticisms have taken on a political tone. He chided Charlamagne tha God, a DJ at rival Power 105.1, for interviewing conservative commentator Tomi Lahren, who has compared the Black Lives Matter movement to the KKK. And in the wake of the death of Alton Sterling at the hands of Baton Rouge police officers last July, Rosenberg

fielded a call on the air from an unrelated cop.

"As an officer yourself, it looks bad, no?" Rosenberg asked. "Can you say the words 'it looks bad'?" The police officer stammered. "This is the problem I have with police officers," Rosenberg said. "Y'all don't ever want to point at someone else and say, 'You can't do your job well.'"

The video clip racked up 30 million views on Facebook, and Rosenberg stands by his stance. "I think it affected our black audience," he says. "They felt like, 'Wow, that was nice.' It made people feel good, because sadly they hadn't seen that."

Rosenberg isn't just a showman; he hosts thoughtful, in-depth interviews with some of rap's biggest names from all eras while hunting for the next big thing.

At the annual South by Southwest festival, he's hosted showcases that have featured non-mainstream and about-to-be-famous acts like Rae Sremmurd before they hit it big in 2016 with their single "Black Beatles."

In 2011, he championed Kendrick Lamar's debut album, playing songs on the radio, commissioning an original verse from Lamar to release on a Rosenberg-compiled mix tape and bringing him in for an extended interview. The lovefest went so far that Lamar once texted him, "We gon have a long ride in this music thing together homie."

Rosenberg cites Lamar as one of the rappers he's excited to see respond to the current political climate, which Rosenberg believes will breed great art. He points to Childish Gambino and the New York rapper Kemba as others whose work he is anticipating.

When he's not spinning rap records, Rosenberg has co-hosted "The Michael Kay Show" on ESPN's New York radio station since 2015 and the wrestling podcast "Cheap Heat" since 2013. He's appeared on WWE shows as a commentator and he's curating a collection of limited-edition WWE-inspired sneakers in a collaboration with the wrestling organization, Puma and Foot Locker.

Rosenberg's public life is also marked by self-deprecating stunts and playful exploits, some of which take him back to his distinctly non-hip-hop beginnings. In 2012, he appeared in a skit on the mix tape "The Black Bar Mitzvah" by Rick Ross—who is not Jewish—as Rabbi Peter Rosenberg. In a vaguely Yiddish accent, he encouraged the rapper and his friends "to celebrate, to have a nosh."

That goofiness keeps fans listening—but so does the punchiness of a riled-up Rosenberg. "Sometimes I wish I wasn't so emo in the moment," he says, "but that's what makes me interesting." **TERP**