

# Dallas Got Next: Why the Next Hip-Hop Mecca Never Got Its Due

Rap duo The Outfit, TX aims to drag Dallas out of Houston and Atlanta’s shadows — and get the national attention the city deserves



Taylor Crumpton Follow

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Photo: Jessica Taylor

“In Texas, our OGs put us in a precarious division, because they was so autonomous,” rapper Mel says on the phone from Maryland. Half of Dallas duo The Outfit, TX (TOTX), he’s fresh off stage after performing an opening set for YelaWolf’s national tour. “They didn’t even need to fuck with the industry because we had our *own* industry.”


For decades, Houston has been the default capital of Texas rap. Built on the foundation of homegrown labels like Rap-A-Lot Records and Trill Entertainment, the city produced artists who garnered Billboard and Grammy success, helping the city emerge into national prominence. But the success of its independent ecosystem ultimately cut off oxygen to the rest of the state; major labels have largely ignored hip-hop outside of Houston and its surroundings. Dallas, in particular, has languished in Houston's shadow — despite long producing music and dances that have influenced the country at large.

Mel and his partner Jayhawk are bent on changing that. Since meeting as undergraduates at the University of Houston, TOTX has spent a decade making music and receiving coverage in several national publications like NPR and *Pitchfork*. Yet, the group has repeatedly run up against non-Southern journalists who aren't steeped in the city's hip-hop history. "How the fuck you going to write about Dallas and don't know who Big Tuck is?" Mel says, name-checking the hometown hero who signed to Universal back in the 2000s. "You can't write about Dallas rap unless you've been here. It ain't like Houston. It ain't like Atlanta."

That doesn't mean Dallas' unique culture hasn't popped up in those places, and others. Los Angeles group Cali Swag District might have achieved platinum success with 2010's "Teach Me How to Dougie," but not before coopting the dance from Dallas, where Lil Wil rapped about it two years previous. (To be fair, the L.A. kids paid homage with lines like "I ain't from Dallas but I D-Town boogie" and "Down South dance that we learned a lil' too fast / And brought it to the hood and got the whole crew cash." Doesn't ease the sting of the theft, though.)

Lil Wil - My Dougie (video)





The cycle repeated itself years later when Dallas-based rapper 10k.Caash filmed himself and Lil Uzi Vert hitting the woah to the strains of Splurge’s “Intro Part 2” and created one of Generation Z’s most beloved dances. Once again, Dallas made it and the culture at large took it — yet, the city’s creative energy has yet to sustainably translate into mainstream hip-hop success. “Our whole culture has just been stolen and borrowed by people that have more of a solid infrastructure,” says Mel.

There’s no single answer to why that is, though the lack of a well-defined foundation is a large part. Houston-area rappers, for example, “have the freedom to stand on the shoulders of their predecessors and explore new sounds and evolve with a rich and historic legacy to support them,” says Rodney Blu, a Dallas-based journalist and Wells’ podcast partner. “Because Dallas never had a single mainstream moment, there’s nothing to build from.”

“I signed the GS Boys, so I got to spend some time in Dallas,” says Jeff Sledge, who before becoming vice president of A&R at Atlantic Records worked closely with UGK for years. “It was apparent to me that local support wasn’t there. There were a lot of people trying to figure it out, but there was no place for them to go and have their music promoted properly.”

Despite the increased relevance of the same streaming services that catapulted 2010s’ Atlanta mixtape culture into the mainstream, the lack of an established industry presence in Dallas like the ones found in Atlanta and Houston has created a secondary problem as well. “There are tons of people who are musically inclined, but move to Los Angeles or New York where there is an infrastructure and pipeline to network and gain mainstream distribution,” says Bryanna Wells, a co-host of *DTXSelects*, a podcast about

Dallas arts and culture. (The exodus dates back as far as 1988 when The D.O.C. left Dallas for L.A. and signed with Eazy-E.)

“James Prince creating Rap A Lot gave Houston a space for artists to come and get their music out properly,” says Sledge. “Dallas has never had that, so there’s no pressure for radio stations to play the locals—except for Bay Bay, who tries to support. There aren’t a lot of clubs for locals to perform. The only thing I remember that folks came to was the car show.”

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In response to a world where the musical impact of Texas’ third-largest city is either ignored or diluted, TOTX created a soundtrack to showcase Dallas culture. Their most recent album, *Little World*, encapsulates a Friday night in Dallas: a Crown V on sticks and poles glides down the street, the driver with a fresh drop shag, congregations of people jiggin’ and foolin’, dances from the city’s Boogie movement. Its cover art depicts Big Tex — the State Fair of Texas icon and “world’s tallest cowboy” — engulfed in flames, a moment from the 2012 blaze that felled the 50-year-old Dallas legend. (Resurrected a year later, Big Tex turned from a White cowboy to a Latinx ranchero, mirroring the city’s own transition from Republican stronghold to purple vanguard.)

*Little World*’s title, a reference to an infamous Dallas corner store situated between two opposing neighborhoods, reflects TOTX’s increasing frustration in trying to push their city to the forefront. For years, the group has incorporated landmarks like Fuel City, the State Fair of Texas, and Rudy’s Chicken into their visuals as an appreciation for the city and county of Dallas. But as Dallas changes due to an influx of out-of-state residents, prompting a city-wide Cultural Plan and Policy to archive and promote the city’s culture, TOTX reminds folks that it’s still Dirty Dirty Dallas. “We’ve just been going through the whole cultural transition, technological evolution, all types of gentrification,” Mel says. “It’s been so many different backings that have impacted our ability to disseminate our culture.”

Despite that, Dallas' particular hip-hop culture continues to define itself through its own complexity. "You can find as many iterations and subgenres of rap music here as there are in hip-hop nationwide," says Dallas-based journalist Rodney Blu. "Hip-hop in Dallas is a whole planet of its own."

Mel agrees. "If Texas had a Bay Area, that would be us," he says. "Not only do we offer a potent cultural alternative for a lot of shit we've already seen, but also different options, and variety within them."

It's not only the Bay's sonic diversity that inspires the comparison, but its fight to be respected in statewide and national hip-hop conversations. "What makes E40 unique is Vallejo," Mel says. "He wouldn't talk like that, walk like that, rap like that, sound like that, if he wasn't from Vallejo. We've *been* them type of niggas." Dallas rappers are tired of being shamed and stereotyped in hip-hop, of being compared unfairly to Houston. Yet, there is one comparison you can make with Dallas, according to Mel: the city's favorite daughter, Erykah Badu. "As cultured and eclectic as it is ratchet and hood," he says.

"We're so much different shit in one fell swoop," he continues. "You run up on a female from Dallas, and she might be as smart and seemingly nerdy and all together as a motherfucker — but you play the right song? She going to throw that ass, she going to jig."

That tension comes out when Mel starts talking about Dallas' influence on its bigger, older sibling. Despite Houston's reign, its emerging rappers show undeniable signs of Dallas-tinged innovation. "Tisakorean, his whole music is super Dallas," Mel says. "We fuck with Tisakorean, and he's cool and shit, but at the same time, his whole goddamn thing is Dallas as fuck."

Embedded within the city's streets is a righteous anger, one sprung from the lives and blood of Allen Brooks, Henry Miller, and John F. Kennedy: It's their time for justice, to be given the flowers they've worked for, for so long. "There's so much more Black culture in the country," Mel says. "Look at what Memphis got going on. If niggas fucking with Memphis like they doing, imagine how they'll fuck with the D."

"If hip-hop was a downtown with a skyline, we're having to build Dallas' skyscraper so people can see that hoe from the highway," he says. "We're trying to put Reunion Tower

in that bitch. It's time.”

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