

Arts & ENTERTAINMENT

Rapper Wiz Khalifa Surges to Fame

Gets compared to young version of Snoop Dog

(AP) -- With a blond streak running up his uncombed Afro, rapper Wiz Khalifa leans back in his chair seemingly without a care in the world, as the aroma of marijuana rises from his gray sweater.

This is a snapshot of rap's newest sensation.

"Weed is just my thing," says the 23-year-old, whose latest album, "Rolling Papers," debuted last week at No. 2 on the album charts with more than 198,000 copies sold, putting him right behind Britney Spears.

Some say the 6-foot-4 Khalifa, who skyrocketed up the charts with his omnipresent hit "Black and Yellow," reminds them of a younger version of Snoop Dogg, a rapper who he idolizes. They're both tall and lanky; they also have a fondness for marijuana with carefree attitudes. The older rapper has taken Khalifa under his wing, and they've even recorded together.

Khalifa was born in North Dakota and grew up as a military kid, living in different countries from Japan to Germany before laying his roots down in the blue-collar city of Pittsburgh.

"It helped me how to deal with different people, being able to inter-



Wiz Khalifa

act with other kids," he says. "Just having those different walks of life, from living on base then in the city and real world. It gives you a better understanding of how people's minds work."

Pittsburgh is where Khalifa honed his creativity as a songwriter, realizing his ability to soundly mesh rap and singing together.

Khalifa built a strong grass-roots fan base through a series of mixtapes, earning him a deal with Warner Bros. in 2007, with his debut "Say Yeah," which reached No. 20 on Billboard's Hot Rap charts. Two years later he bolstered his name through Twitter. He released his mixtape "Kush & Orange Juice" to download for free, creating a buzz that became the No. 1 trending topic the entire day on the social networking site. That led him into a new deal with Atlantic Records.

With a major label backing him, Khalifa figured it would only be a matter of time before his career would

take off, but he didn't anticipate it would be because of "Black and Yellow," which paid homage to hometown team — the NFL's Pittsburgh Steelers.

The song thrived with its catchy hook, becoming last year's phenomenon that influenced some of rap's elite, from Lil Wayne to Snoop Dogg, to remix the song and salute their favorite team.

For Khalifa, the release of "Black and Yellow" came at a perfect time when the Steelers made a run toward the Super Bowl XLV. Even though his favorite team lost in the championship game

If there's any doubt whether Khalifa can surpass the one-hit wonder status, look no further than his futuristic pop-sounding, "No Sleep." It's has already soared to No. 1 on the iTunes top 10 list. And his single "Roll Up" reached No. 6 on Billboard's Hot Rap Songs.

"From the moment he walks in, you know he's a star," says Erik Hermansen, who also produced "Roll Up." "That's the X-factor you can't really teach somebody. It comes from the artist. He's got that."

Khalifa doesn't expect the hits to stop anytime soon.

"It's like motivation to do more and just like stay level-headed," he says, "stay chillin' ... But at the same time let people know how good I am."

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