

“The South Got Something To Say” - A feature story by Lexie Edwards

If there is a conversation about rap music, Atlanta is guaranteed to be mentioned at least once. Atlanta has been known as the mecca for rap music since rap's inception.

Atlanta has always been known as the capital of black business, black academia, and civil rights. Recently, Atlanta is seen as the mecca for all things hip hop. This began in the 1980s. 90's record executives Clive Davis, Babyface, and LA Reid were searching for new talent from the South. They were already responsible for the careers of Toni Braxton, Whitney Houston, and Bobby Brown. They searched far and wide and eventually landed in Georgia. The trio decided to make Atlanta the headquarters of their new record label: LaFace Records. The first two artists that they signed were TLC and Kris Kross. They went on to eventually sign Usher, Toni Braxton, Outkast, and Goodie Mob. Those initial artists who were initiated to the record label went on to set the foundation for Hip-Hop in Atlanta. Without them there would be no Atlanta legends like Lil John, Ludacris, Future, T.I., or even the Migos.

Hailing all the way from the suburbs of McDonough, Georgia; Aaron “Aaronic” Dorsey is the textbook example of what put Atlanta on the map as the mecca of hip-hop in the first place. Driven by the loss of his father, he began his music career in 2012. Aaron has released several projects, but has recently debuted his album title, “What Summer Was.” “What Summer Was” is a coming of age story that touches on the stillness and brevity of summer vacation.

Aaron started making music 19 years ago. “I remember my first time rapping was in elementary school. I would go to my friend Malcolm's house and he had a Mac computer in his basement. We were both no older than 8 or 9, but believe me we were serious about our craft,” Aaron laughed and said.

“This was during the time that LimeWire was super popular. We would find beats on there and listen to them like we were in the studio and he was my producer.” He chuckled and said, “I would also like to mention that we were illegally downloading these beats! But that's all we knew how to do at the time.”

“After we would find the ‘perfect’ beat I would get my pad and paper and just start writing down any and every idea. It's really crazy because that is pretty much how my writing process is today. I walk into the studio, hear a beat, and just start writing on the spot. It's crazy that those days in my friend's basement really set the foundation for things that I still do years and years later.”

Aaron looked like he was a mix between a skateboarder and a college professor. He stood no more than five foot five and smelled like mahogany and lavender.

Aaron was dressed in a beanie rolled to just above his ears, a Sade t shirt, and plaid dress pants. He had a scruffy beard and when he smiled he flashed the small gap between his teeth.

Aaron invited me to his actual studio which he nicknamed “Whole Grain Studio.”

The music studio reeked of Old Atlanta. The building was nestled right in the heart of West Atlanta, spitting distance from the West End. It was surrounded by lounges, mom and pop shops, and abandoned buildings.

The place oozed of lavender and Satavia, an unlikely mix. Standing in the studio, I began to appreciate Atlanta that much more. I could feel the bass from the trap beats shaking my body from my feet up to my chest, ultimately making my heart start to flutter to the rhythm. The lighting was yellow and low but not dark enough to where you couldn't see. There was a three bulb, mid-century modern light fixture hanging from the ceiling, ultimately collecting dust. Outside of the sound booth, the walls were lined with what looked like cherry wood. In a large frame hung Andre 3000 and Big Boi posing for their iconic “Stankonia” album cover. Next to that is a slightly ripped and crumpled poster of Spike Lee and Micheal Jordan. Jordan was palming Lee's head like a basketball and holding him high in the air. Beneath my feet were tile floors that I could almost see my reflection in. It looked like they installed yesterday, cleaned 30 minutes ago ,and that no one had been allowed to walk on them since.

“A few of my homies and I came up on this place a little over a year ago. Somebody heard that we were up and coming artists and gave us the keys to this studio. We don't own it ,but being able to come and record whenever we please is such a big deal ,man. If I ever have an idea in my head, a beat that I need to produce right then, I can just make a trip down here and record it on the spot for free. We nicknamed it Whole Grain Studio because that's kind of our motto around here. We want to all remain true to our roots and the people that our parents raised us to be. Wholegrain. No fillers. No GMO's.”

The decision to remain true to his authentic self meant something different to Aaron. Aaron decided to pursue his career, but also remain a straight edge rapper. For Aaron this meant that he would refrain from using tobacco, alcohol,and recreational drugs.

The term straight edge originated in 1981. A rock group named Minor Threat released a single titled “Straight Edge” where they talked about the abstinent lifestyle. In those days, those that chose to live the straight edge lifestyle were most commonly identified by

having black Xs on the backs of their hands. This lifestyle is very rarely translated across bounds into the rap community.

“I think most people that are straight edge have their own specific reasons why they do it. For me it's just my attempt to remain true to who I am. I was raised in the church and that's still very much a huge part of my life. I don't consider myself a Christian rapper ,but I am still reminded of whose I am every time I produce and record a song. My parents raised me to be a certain way and I'm not about to change that to fit in in this industry. I don't do this for man. At the end of the day, as long as my parents and God are pleased with me that's all that matters.”

If you take a listen through Aaron's discography, his father's influence is extremely prevalent.

“He worked so hard just to give me a fighting chance at life. He put his dreams aside for mine and that is something that will always mean so much to me. When I make my music, he is one of the first things I think about. I try to share the knowledge that he instilled in me through my verses. He always had a good ear for music so now I try to emulate that. When I listen to my tracks in post production I always try to think of the critiques that he always gave me. He would always say 'Remember Aaron, everyone is going to hear you but you have to make them listen. Give them something to listen to. Make them pay attention.' I always think about that when I make a track. Like am I giving them something worth listening to?”

Rap music has always placed a certain significance on your home town. Most rappers talk about their inner city neighborhoods plagued with drugs, violence, and poverty. In the rap community, this has become a right of passage. Aaron came on the scene in 2012 and it became very clear that he was cut from a different cloth.

Aaron grew up in the suburbs of Metro Atlanta. McDonough is roughly 25 miles Northwest of Atlanta. “Growing up, the city always felt so far from me. My parents didn't always want to drive me into Atlanta for little things ,so I was virtually stuck in my small town.” Aaron showed me around his childhood home. The neighborhood was a typical upper middle class neighborhood. A picture perfect southern home.

“Trying to break into the rap industry was kind of hard simply because of the neighborhood that I grew up in. If you aren't talking about how you struggled to get it out the mud then most people aren't even remotely trying to hear what you're talking about.”

The mostly brick house sat in the middle of a cul de sac and was accompanied by two family cars sitting in the driveway and a dog sunbathing on the front lawn.

“This is where I grew up. McDonough raised me, this is all I’ve ever really known. I was raised here, my little brother was born here, and this, right here, is what made me, me. I still had my problems in this neighborhood, but since those problems are deemed unprofitable by the record labels they don’t try to hear me out half the time.”

McDonough is a predominately white city and Aaron knew that.

“It’s like, I already know that I’m black I’m reminded of that every day when I wake up and look at myself in the mirror. But knowing that there’s people out there that see me as less than because of the color of my skin is an inevitable truth; I just wish that I didn’t have to learn it so early. I don’t think any black kid should have to grow up with Confederate flags smacking you in the face for your entire life. That was part of my struggle but by the standards of the rap game that does not mean much.”

His family home smelled like cinnamon apples. The house was spacious and open. It had floor to ceiling windows shining warm, bright light through the living room. The living room felt like a picturesque family room; slightly unkempt, but still structured and organized. I sat down on the couch and Aaron began to talk to me about his dad.

“I still remember the day that I lost him. I try to stay away from here as much as possible because even though it happened 9 years ago, sitting where he sat makes everything feel fresh.”

The pictures of what used to be a family of five were placed with precision and calculation on the mantle; hidden behind graduation pictures and sappy shots of him and his siblings. It was almost like they didn’t want to be reminded of what they lost, but they couldn’t bring themselves to forget him completely.

“I still remember the day it happened. The day I lost him.” His foot started shaking and he was looking all around the room like he was going to find the right words to say from the ceiling or the floor molding. “One morning around 3 or 4 I heard running and muffled talking coming from the other room. I walk out with sleep still in my eyes and hear the noise coming out of my parent’s room.” He stopped, readjusted himself, then continued with the story.

“I put my ear to the door and I could hear what sounded like a large body hitting the floor. It felt like the whole upstairs of my house shook.” He paused again, took a deep breath, then continued with a shaky voice. “I threw the door open and saw my dad laying on the bedroom floor. He was clutching his chest and yelling that he couldn’t breathe. At this point, I don’t think that he saw me walk into the room yet.”

“He finally turned his head and looked at me and I’ll never forget the look in his eyes. My dad was a strong man and I’ve never seen him weak before. I’ve never seen him look scared. Looking in his eyes that day, I could tell that he knew it was going to be his last time seeing me.”

Aaron stopped for a second and a few tears fell out of his eyes. He quickly wiped them.

“The rest of that night was a blur for me. Honestly, I think I just tried to forget it after all these years. No one should ever have to see their parents like that. My mom was scrambling around the room, couldn’t even put a coherent thought together and she’s a nurse. She deals with dying people all the time. But this is something that no one should have to experience. You should never have to watch anyone die, much less someone you care about.”

He got up from his seat on the floor and started pacing across the room. “You want to know the worst part about everything? Having to be there when my mom told my younger siblings that they wouldn’t have a dad anymore. That.....that killed me.”

Aaron’s father passed away in the fall of his senior year of highschool due to kidney failure. “If I would have known that I was on borrowed time with him, I would have lived so differently. I would have never argued with him, never taken him for granted. He used to ask me to just ride with him in his little blue pick up truck and as I got older I would start to say no more often. When you are a teenager your friends mean the world to you and it’s hard to see anything beyond that. I wish I went with him every single time. All he wanted to do was talk to me. So many people’s dads do want to be involved in their lives at all and mine did ,but I was too selfish to care.”

Aaron got up and walked me upstairs to his childhood bedroom. He opened the door and it was a shrine to all the things that made him, him. “At the end of the day, as long as Greg Dorsey is proud of me, then nothing else or anyone else matters.” With the weight of the loss of his father looming over him, Aaron continues to pursue his music career full force. His next project will be available in the Spring of 2021