

MUSIC REVIEWS

FROM STAFF AND WIRE SERVICES

Hip hop

BEANIE SIGEL: "The Solution"
(Roc-A-Fella/Island Def Jam)

★★★

When the Philadelphia rapper Beanie Sigel first emerged in the late 1990s some listeners might have mistaken him for a run-of-the-mill goon, one more tough-talking member of Jay-Z's motley Roc-A-Fella crew. But beneath that surly exterior lurked a hard-core formalist, and also, maybe more surprising, a sensitive soul. His 2000 debut album, "The Truth," included "Die," a mesmerizing song in which he turned his vivid death threats against himself.

His rhymes made him a big deal in the hip-hop world, but not outside it. He released a strong 2001 follow-up, "The Reason," then spent the next few years consolidating his crew, State Property, and fighting legal charges. By 2005, when he released a grim and pungent album called "The B. Coming," he was in jail, having pleaded guilty to a federal weapons charge; he was also facing an attempted-murder charge.

The good news: He was acquitted of attempted murder and was released from prison in August 2005. The bad news: Since then, his stepfather was murdered, he was shot, his crew disintegrated and the hip-hop boom went bust. No wonder he was planning to call his fourth album "The Return of the Bad Guy."

After all that, it is something of a shock to hear "All the Above," the strutting lead single from the album, now called "The Solution." As R. Kelly delivers a triumphal refrain, Beanie Sigel crows about his newfound success: "I pull seven digits, clean, soon as I grace the stage/I done caught up with the paper — y'all chasin' change." It sounds good, but what on earth is he talking

about? "Seven digits"? For a concert? A Beanie Sigel concert? In 2007?

Listeners expecting a gloomy sequel to "The B. Coming" will probably be startled — and maybe, gradually, won over — by "The Solution," a cunning, hybrid album that isn't quite as mixed up as it first seems. Boasts give way to complaints, and moments of sweetness underscore the pervasive saltiness. He still uses just about every epithet anyone has ever asked a rapper to stop using. And he knows how to explain his temperament using nothing more than a few well-chosen syllables:

"Short fuse, no wick on it/Broad shoulder with a chip on it."

That temperament — that temper — is always there, even when Beanie Sigel tries to lighten up. "I'm In," his attempt to play the flirt, has a backbeat with a menacing snap, and lyrics that go from gallant to contemptuous. "Gutted," with Jay-Z, was probably conceived as a cheerful rebuke to small spenders. But there's something ugly about the way Beanie Sigel lays into a broke man and then, in the second verse, a broke woman: "You rock Gucci this and that, but your kids bummy/You lettin' strangers claim 'em for income-tax money." You can hear familiarity in his contempt.

In a sense Beanie Sigel has outlived his era. He is clearly devoted to 1990s rap, and in nearly every song he quotes or invokes or samples an old hero: Tupac Shakur, the Notorious B.I.G., Jay-Z, Scarface. And one hot-tempered track, "U Ain't Ready 4 Me," features Styles P, a midcareer rapper and former foe. Only a few years ago Styles P was threatening (in verse) to kill Beanie Sigel's whole family. Now they're intimate, not just trading verses but trading lines, finishing each other's thoughts. It's an unexpectedly joyful track, and it may help explain this album's exuberant streak: Could it be that Beanie Sigel is having fun?

R&B and soul

THE-DREAM: "Love/Hate"
(Island Def Jam)

★★★

There are still two weeks of it left, but if you're already itching to reminisce about 2007, you could do worse — much worse — than to buy the new album from the singer-songwriter known as The-Dream. He helped create two of the year's biggest hits: Rihanna's "Umbrella," arguably 2007's signature pop song, and J. Holiday's "Bed," arguably 2007's signature slow jam. And on his debut album, "Love/Hate" — which is short for, "Love me all summer, hate me all winter" — he makes sure you don't forget it.

In nearly every song he reprises the "eh, eh, eh" from "Umbrella" or the "Ooh-ooh, ooh-ooh" from "Bed," or some other element from one or both. (Perhaps you have already noticed that on his breakthrough hit, "Shawty Is a 10.") He's not afraid to use 2007's signature production gimmick, either, electronically modifying his voice to make it sound downright T-Pain-ish.

Add appearances from Fabolous

and Rihanna, and electro-soul beats from Christopher (Tricky) Stewart, and the result is a 12-song album that often sounds like a 2007 megamix.

World

VARIOUS ARTISTS: "Bachata Roja — Acoustic Bachata from the Cabaret Era" (IASO)

★★★★

Merengue may be the musical style most associated with the Dominican Republic, but its bad-boy brother bachata should not be ignored — and the newly created IASO label is doing its best to make sure it isn't.

The New York-based label has issued "Bachata Roja," a compilation of 14 classic bachata tracks spanning from 1960 to 1990, showcasing such legends of the genre as Augusto Santos, Eladio Romero Santos and Julio Angel. (Connoisseurs may question the omission of bachata innovator Josemanuel Calderon, but it's



still a strong lineup.)

Whereas the pulsating rhythm of merengue generally is accordion-driven, bachata (roughly translated, "backyard party") pulls back the tempo a little and brings the guitar to the forefront. It taps into such Latin idioms as the bolero, ranchera, guaracha and jibaro, while often adding West African vibes and — to spice things up — saucy lyrics.

The selections on this disc come from the period when bachata was still considered a crude music, played mostly in rough-and-tumble bars in the poorest neighborhoods of Santiago, but you couldn't tell by the sound of it: sweet melodic vocals (all male) weaving between crisp, soaring guitar lines. Highlights include the mellow-voiced Marino Perez's "O la pago yo o la paga ella (Either I pay or she does)" and Felix Quintana's slowed-down "La-drona," which features an aching guitar-solo introduction by Augusto Santo.

And yes, there even are a couple of merengue tracks Eladio Romero Santos' "La Muneca" and Blas Duran's "Equivocada" — albeit, with guitar instead of accordion.

Since these are archival recordings, the sound quality varies wildly, but the performances — as well as the packaging and CD liner notes — are uniformly stellar.

★★★★★ Exceptional
★★★★ Very Good
★★★ Good
★★ Fair
★ Poor



