

## Entrepreneurs have designs on being the local name for hip-hop clothing

Chris Riemenschneider, Star Tribune

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If somebody who's into hip-hop tells you they have "B.O.," that might actually be a good thing.

At least it would be positive in the eyes of five young Twin Cities entrepreneurs who've started a new clothing line called Blame It On Hip-Hop.

With the acronym BIOHH -- properly pronounced "B.O." -- emblazoned on all of its T-shirts, hoodies and knit caps, Blame It On Hip-Hop aims to be Minnesota's answer to FUBU and Sean Jean. It's already generating a small buzz in the local hip-hop club scene without much marketing.

Some of the fascination comes from saying BIOHH's odorously suggestive name.

"It's meant to be sort of an attention-grabbing thing," co-creator Marcus Manning explained. "Just like the term 'hip-hop,' some might see it as a negative thing. But we're all about spreading the positive aspects of hip-hop."

Hanging out at his apartment in Minneapolis' Warehouse District, which doubles as headquarters for the year-old company, Manning, 32, and his partners talked confidently about their financial outlook.

"We're barely getting started, and already the response has been huge," said co-founder Richard Strong, who used to perform as DJ Spank.

However, BIOHH's founders say that their goal isn't just to strike it rich. They plan to donate some of their profits to inner-city schools and youth programs. (So far, the few thousands they've grossed have gone back into the company.)



Marcus Manning and Richard Strong of Blame It On Hip-Hop

Joey Mcleister  
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More uniquely, they hope to spread a positive message -- "that hip-hop is respectable and nothing to be ashamed of," Manning said.

The "Blame" in the name, said co-founder James Cheatham, "has to do with expressing your individuality. It's saying, 'I am who I am because of hip-hop.'"

### Under the hoodies

All five of BIOHH's founders "led the street life: drinking 40-ouncers, acting tough, all that stuff," according to Manning. "And we're all serious hip-hop lovers."

But beyond their street-level authenticity, they have developed professional experience that they now apply toward the business side of BIOHH.

Manning is a voice actor in radio commercials, such as Marshall Field's. Cheatham used to be a social worker with youths. Strong has a job as a computer engineer.

So far, all their items are made out-of-house, with the tops and hats bought wholesale from certain companies and the logos printed at others. They've sold almost everything that's been manufactured, though: about 400 items, they guessed, most of it from their Web site and toll-free number (<http://www.blameitonhiphop.com/> and 866-99-BLAME).

Instead of sales, their focus has been conceptualizing and behind-the-scenes promoting. One of their marketing schemes has been handing off shirts and caps to celebrities, including, they say, Kevin



Items of Blame It On Hip-Hop apparel

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Garnett of the Timberwolves and Jack Brewer of the Vikings, plus performers such as West Coast rappers Too \$hort and Spice 1.

Their line also includes women's products, such as three-quarter-sleeve T-shirts and hoodies in colors such as pink or baby blue. The menswear products are in bolder shades of orange, yellow, red and blue. Most of it is eye-catching, as is the logo, with the "I" in BIOHH a microphone and the "O" a turntable.

Among the local hip-hop scenesters impressed by BIOHH is writer Kandis Knight, who said she started seeing the hoodies around town in the fall.

"I thought it was a brand from out east," said Knight, who added to the buzz with an article on BIOHH in the alternative weekly Pulse of the Twin Cities.

"In New York and other cities there are many different hip-hop-inspired clothing lines, and this type of industry creates an economic environment for hip-hop culture locally. This is something we have all been waiting for since the early '80s."

BIOHH isn't the first hip-hop-styled clothing line in the Twin Cities. Most notably, the Minneapolis company UManDF (Underground Music and Fashion, online at <http://www.umandf.com/>) started in 2001 and makes urban-styled shirts for Richfield High School's basketball team and other schools.

However, BIOHH seems to be clicking with the local hip-hop community better than any line before it has -- which may have more to do with timing than anything.

"It's amazing how much the scene has grown in just the last couple years," said Mike (Mad Son) Madison, a rapper in the Unknown Prophets.

Madison believes BIOHH offers more proof of hip-hop's burgeoning presence in the Twin Cities.

"It just adds great value to the scene here," he said. "If BIOHH can establish a good relationship with the artists from here and they continue to be serious I don't see how they couldn't be [successful]."

There seems to be little doubt in the minds of the BIOHH proprietors, either, which seems fitting: Hip-hop has never been about thinking small or being humble.

"Wherever there's hip-hop, there's going to be BIOHH," Strong said emphatically.

*Chris Riemenschneider is at [chriss@startribune.com](mailto:chriss@startribune.com).*