

INDIE KINGS

Tech N9ne and Travis O'Guin, inside Strange Music's massive warehouse in Lee's Summit, Missouri.



WORDS MATT BARONE /// IMAGES ARI MICHELSON

MOST KNOWN

UNKNOWN

Over the past decade, Kansas City, Missouri's STRANGE MUSIC has built an independent empire under everyone's noses. Now it's time for hip-hop heads to get familiar.

ON A RATHER HOT APRIL AFTER-NOON IN LAWRENCE, KANSAS,

Mother Nature's heat is no match for the small army of eager fans waiting in line to shake hands with their favorite underground MC, Tech N9ne. The iconoclastic, Kansas City, Missouri-born vice president of Strange Music, a hugely successful independent Midwest rap label currently celebrating its 10th anniversary, soon struts in sporting an outfit of his traditional colors of black, red and white, with pitch-black wraparound sunglasses.

Five hours before showtime, the predominantly White group of about 30 Strange Music aficionados, all gripping V.I.P. passes, crowds into the lobby of Lawrence's Liberty Hall, which doubles as a two-screen independent movie theater and a 1,050-capacity concert venue. Tech, the man of the hour, gets ready to pose for a picture with an excited fan. She's just gotten her second Tech tat—it's his name, and it's inked on the back of her neck. Tech strikes a pose, pretending to lick the new art, as her male friend snaps a photo.

If she ever e-mails her new photo to Strange Music's headquarters, in Lee's Summit, Missouri, the pic will join the label's ever-growing collection of over 3,600 snapshots of Strange Music-related body art (SM and Tech logos, Tech's portrait, etc.) sent in by diehard fans.

Tech N9ne and his Strange Music cohorts aren't exactly household names—hell, they aren't even big hip-hop names. But the Kansas City-based company has carved one

hell of a niche for itself out of the independent music market. Rigorous touring (204 shows in 2009, 202 in 2008, 196 in 2007), a steady stream of album releases, incessant self-promotion and merchandising, plus close interaction with SM's dedicated fans have set it apart from other indie outfits.

Onstage, Tecca Nina provides a theatrical balance of showmanship and lyrical wizardry, wearing his signature white face paint during every show, while roaring through 100-plus minutes of high-octane performance alongside his hype men, and fellow Strange Music artists, Krizz Kaliko and Kutt Calhoun. True friends to their fans, Tech and crew hold hour-long V.I.P. meet-and-greets before every show, for 30 to 300 fans, during which, for \$99, prepurchased-pass wearers can take pictures, get autographs and talk with all of the Strange artists, as well as walk away with \$200 worth of merchandise (posters, T-shirts, dog tags, CD samplers).

"I'm trying to be the hip-hop president," says Tech (a.k.a. Aaron Yates), 38. "I'm gathering fans up under everybody's nose... [We] understand that it's a campaign. During a campaign, you have to get out there and touch the people. We're not on TV and radio, so we have to find a way to touch these people, let them know that we're real."

As real as it gets, frankly. While the music industry as a whole continues to sweat bullets over shrinking profits, Strange Music

has watched its finances steadily increase. Touring has generated large dividends. When ticket and merchandise sales are added up, SM's concert intake ranges from \$25,000 to \$125,000 a night. Last year alone, the label pulled in just under \$15 million, showing growth from the \$11 million it earned in 2008. "We're doing all this during the decline of the music business, along with catastrophic financial devastation of the markets and everything else, and we're having a ball," says Strange Music CEO/President Travis O'Guin, 38. "Somehow we're recession-proof, and it freaks me out a little bit sometimes. But I'm confident that we have it figured out."

For Tech N9ne, Strange Music began out of necessity. With street records (such as "Let's Get Fucked Up") igniting his buzz in Kansas City in the early 1990s, the then-unknown Tech soon attracted interest from major labels. In 1993, the upstart rhyme slinger inked a deal with the now-defunct Perspective Records, headed by superproducers Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis (known for their hits with Janet Jackson, Usher and Mary J. Blige). Three years of inactivity, however, led to Tech's 1997 exit to Quincy Jones's Qwest imprint, which was under Warner Bros. Tech relocated to L.A. to work with the legendary producer, but his musical output on Qwest was nil.

Looking for an effective outlet to showcase his unique artistry (hip-hop-styled lyricism,

dark beats tinged with rock sensibilities, and provocative content), a frustrated Tech returned to Kansas City. While performing at a local fashion show in 1998, he caught the attention of O'Guin, a young, monetarily strong entrepreneur known for lucrative ventures, including a fashion company (Paradise Apparel Group Inc.) and a furniture repair company (Furniture Works Inc.). A meeting was arranged. "I was thinking, Maybe I can give him some business advice," recalls O'Guin, a lifelong hip-hop fan who became a self-made millionaire at age 22. "It was just a big mess. A lot of people had seen the talent in Tech and tried to attach themselves to it. They didn't really have his best interests in mind; they had their own."

O'Guin believed in Tech's talent enough to devote more than a year to negotiations with Quincy Jones and Warner Bros., dedicated to getting Tech out of his contracts. O'Guin won, and soon he and Tech launched their own record label in a 50/50 partnership, completely out of pocket. A huge fan of seminal rock group The Doors, Tech took one of his favorite Doors songs, 1967's "People Are Strange," and came up with the company moniker, Strange Music. With such an unclassifiable artist as its flagship MC, the company's title was apt. "The mentality was, 'Okay, let's just show these labels that there is a market for clusterfucks,'" says Tech.

By August 2001, Strange Music's first release, and Tech's debut, *Anghellic*, was put out through a distribution deal with JCOR Entertainment, a no-longer-in-existence indie label that also released LPs from Brooklyn MC O.C. and southern legends 8Ball & MJG. The LP sold over 20,000 copies in its first week, an impressive feat for an unknown rapper from an untapped locale. Dipping into their own pockets, Tech and O'Guin promoted the album by wrapping their own vans and

driving city to city in the Midwest to plaster posters everywhere. Says O'Guin, "All those tools that we still use today [on tour]—samplers, flatbeds, flyers, posters—is how we started this whole thing."

While O'Guin and company were hustling, JCOR, they felt, wasn't delivering on dollar-signed promises. In 2002, Strange Music switched distributors for Tech's next album, *Absolute Power*, moving over to M.S.C. Music, a boutique company started by former Priority Records co-founder Mark Cerami. There, in a 50/50 joint venture, the flip side occurred: M.S.C. was overspending. "[Cerami] did things like throwing too much money at radio, to the tune of \$1.6 million, and we're responsible for half of every one of those dollars," says O'Guin. "We thought, We're never gonna make any money if we keep throwing money out the window like this."

Over the next four years, Strange, as a whole, sold over 500,000 albums, between Tech's two solo LPs and three full-lengths (all released in 2004) from Kutt Calhoun (*B.L.E.V.E.*), Project: Deadman (*Self Inflicted*) and Skatterman & Snug Brim (*Urban Legendz*).

In 2006, the final shift came, when Strange Music linked with Universal-backed Fontana for its distribution. To this day, SM has handled all facets of business—everything from the printing of CDs to promotions. "That's when it got fun," says O'Guin, referring to the Fontana connection made four years ago. "That's when we turned the corner. Now we have nobody in between us and our money. We are the decision makers."

After 10 years, 20 LPs (including five Tech solos and two Tech collabo LPs) and nearly 1.5 million records sold by Tecca Nina alone, Strange Music is in a strong spot, despite the lack of mainstream hip-hop support from the industry or the fans, or much radio or video play. It doesn't hurt, though, that what the label pushes is a roster of diverse entities. The most recognizable faces, other than Tech, are fellow Kansas City natives Krizz Kaliko and Kutt Calhoun. The former, a plus-size live wire with slick raps and a singing voice steeped in opera and gospel influences, makes the brand's most commercially viable music. Calhoun's been with Strange since its start and reps the streets with his lyrics, along with Big Scoob, a rhyme partner of Tech's from the pre-Strange days. And in May 2009, O'Guin introduced a Los Angeles-based division, Strange Music West, which signed Cali horrorcore veteran Brotha Lynch Hung as its first act. Only nine acts have signed to Strange since 2000, a self-imposed limitation that has allowed O'Guin to devote maximum energy to projects and ensure fan satisfaction.

Violet Brown, director of urban music for the record-store chain Trans World Entertainment,



Left to right: O'Guin, Tech, Big Scoob, Krizz Kaliko, Kutt Calhoun



Strange Music merchandise, stored at their warehouse.



Tech live onstage



Signed copies of the Strange Music discography.



Soda machine covered in Strange logos.



SM's back parking lot.



Warehouse

I'M TRYING TO BRIGHTEN MY MUSIC UP NOW, BECAUSE [THE DARK SOUND IS] WHY A LOT OF BLACK MUTHAFUCKAS STOPPED LISTENING.

—TECH N9NE

has long appreciated the label's consistency. "Strange Music is quietly selling millions of units without compromising who they are and what they stand for," says Brown. "I have said this thousands of times: There are no casual Tech fans."

In addition to being fanatical, most of his followers are also a bit one-dimensional—meaning heavily White. "I'm trying to brighten my music up now, because [the dark sound is] why a lot of Black muthafuckas stopped listening," says Tech. "For one, my imagery, a Black dude with a painted face—over here, they don't do that shit. You gotta go to Africa for that. But, to them, the red spiked hair I used to have threw everybody off, and I've yet to fully get them back."

The music speaks for itself. Beyond his face paint and unconventional tastes, Tech is a pure lyricist, deft in double-time flows and multisyllabic rhyme schemes. Contentwise, his verses run the gamut from painfully

honest introspection to indictments against his music-industry peers (see "Crybaby," on his 2008 double-LP *Killer*), with dashes of political commentary and demonic possession thrown in. For many, though, looking past Tech's presentation is a task. "It seems to me that every other race—Whites, Asians, Latinos—is more accepting of weird-looking imagery, where Black folks seem to want to see the same type of dude all the time," says Kaliko. "If you think about the general Black population coming from the hood, they're used to seeing the hood stars that have the cars and money... They want to see these entertainers that they can identify with."

Even if his fan base never changes, Tecca Nina and his Strange Music team have little reason to complain. Humility has been the label's best asset. Realizing the limits of underground prestige, O'Guin and Tech aren't opposed to booking shows with low guarantees, of, say, \$10,000. The rationale is simple: Take a small payment, kill it onstage and then anticipate bigger offers the next time around. The capacities of their venues have ranged from as low as 800 to as many as 18,000. In May, the label released its second concert DVD, *K.O.D. Tour: Live in Kansas City*, taped last November and serving as a visual testament to the raucous energy at a Tech N9ne show. Not to mention an example of SM's dedication to quality—it's shot with seven cameras, in high-definition, and is offered on Blu-ray.

In 2008, Tech was one of only three rappers to place within Pollstar's top 50 highest-grossing artists in terms of concert-ticket sales (the other two were Jay-Z and Kanye West). That Strange Music exceeds 200

shows a year is staggering. Yet what's baffling is that their tours—including their most-recent, 36-venues-in-37-days Strange Days Tour (tagline: "A Decade of Excellence"), which began in early May—have yet to reach the key Southern markets of Atlanta and New Orleans. Considering how dominant ATL, specifically, is these days, that's a problem. "I keep telling Travis, 'Put me on tour with Ludacris or somebody from the South,'" says Tech. "It's easier said than done, but bottom line is, I can't infect the world if people are alienated."

Nevertheless, thanks to constant touring, in January 2009, O'Guin and Tech were able to drop \$2.1 million into the renovation of an open 18,000-square-foot space in Lee's Summit (located 20 minutes south of Kansas City), turning it into an immaculate, all-purpose SM facility. The Strange logo (a snake and a bat crisscrossed) can be seen on everything from stairs, to floor tiles, to the soda machine, to the thermostat frame. There's a filing cabinet containing video footage of every show throughout the label's existence, ordered chronologically. One office is bursting with high-quality film equipment; another holds the social-networking team. There is also an office where a man works on building SM's new online store, O'Guin's comfy digs, a sleek conference room, four different kitchens, and quite a few more cubes and offices filled with happily working SM employees.

The building's main attraction, however, is the meticulously organized warehouse in its back section, where Strange merchandise (such as \$100 football jerseys, \$25 drinking flasks and \$20 ladies panties), tour stage sets and promotional items are housed, and

where a mirrored wall dubs as a rehearsal corner. Plus, there's a large back parking lot, which houses 23 fully wrapped vehicles used for touring and promotional purposes. Nearly all of SM's business is taken care of under one roof, except for O'Guin's screen-printing and bus-wrapping companies, which are housed elsewhere in Kansas City. While many independent labels rely on their distributor to manufacture their physical CDs, Strange Music bypasses Fontana and outsources the task to an independent manufacturer, who they have a TK partnership with. "We believe in cutting out the middleman," says O'Guin.

It's that airtight business sense that has enabled O'Guin to earn the respect of all those around him. There's something to be said about a CEO who enforces a nine-page tour rule book, which includes fines for a variety of offenses (quiet time on buses, starting at 3 a.m.; no drugs onboard; no stealing hotel pillows). After three offenses, the wrongdoer is off the tour. Everyone on the bill, including the non-Strange acts (such as Murs and Slaughterhouse, who have accompanied the label on tours in the past), is held accountable. Amounts vary from \$250 to \$1,000 and fines increase per infraction. If the same rule is violated three times, the artist is removed from the tour. At the end of the tour, the money raised from fines is donated to a charity of the artist's choice. "If [Travis] wasn't like that, we'd be a lot sloppier," says Calhoun. "If not for him, we could easily not be where we're at right now."

As the packed crowd inside Liberty Hall grows impatient, chants of "K.C., Mo! Ohhhh, ohhh!" (that's for Kansas City, Missouri) erupt.

Minutes later, the headliner makes his grand entrance, bursting through the graveyard stage set's brick wall and immediately breaking out in a rapid-fire flow that'd leave Twista in amazement. After a few quick-tongued bars, Tech abruptly stops and freezes, arms stretched outward, taking in the thunderous applause.

A packed Liberty Hall is officially under his control.

During the entire show, the energy never dies, nor does the level of performance. Tech, Krizz and Kutt engage in some Michael Jackson-esque choreography and Bloodwalk dances (Tech makes no qualms about growing up in a Blood-gang environment). A mosh pit full of bombastic White kids breaks out to the sounds of "Ghetto Love." "Areola," the crew's Miami-bass-inspired joke song, recorded under the guise of "816 Boys" (in honor of the Kansas City, Missouri, area code), inspires some ladies to flash their breasts while hoisted atop friends' shoulders. One particular female, partially naked from the waist up, receives a hug from Tecca Nina, which sends her into near convulsions.

It's business as usual for Strange Music. Today, Lawrence, Kansas; next stop, maybe worldwide domination, albeit one venue at a time. "This music game is a popularity contest," says Tech. "While everybody is doing their popularity thing, I'm gaining all these people in all these towns. So when we do reach that higher level, where I'm doing the Grammy Awards, they're gonna wonder why everybody knows all the music already."

"All I can say is, don't let us get on radio or television," he adds. "If we do, the industry is going to have some problems."

Y'all have been warned. ♠



Diehard Strange Music fans show their tats.