

COACH K  
MASTER-  
MINDS OF  
QUALITY  
CONTROL



## “MY SKILLS. HIS CREDIBILITY.”

It all came together,” Kevin “Coach K” Lee told the *New Yorker* in 2017, recalling the genesis of Quality Control Music, which he’d founded four years earlier with Pierre “P” Thomas.

Indeed, QC COO Coach K is the business-savvy executive, mild-mannered and cool; CEO P brings the street cred. “I’m not sitting in no office just looking at analytics; I’m out here on the ground,” he confirmed.

Teaming with **Motown** and **Capitol Music Group**, the QC bosses have used their divergent strengths to turn an Atlanta recording studio into the hottest hip-hop label in the game, a designation buttressed in 2020 by the ascent of **Lil Baby**.

The man who would become Coach K grew up in Indianapolis but made his bones in Atlanta. He managed rappers **Jeezy** and **Gucci Mane** during the ATL’s transition from the crossover explosion of **OutKast**, **Ludacris** and **T.I.** to the established hip-hop stronghold of today; his clients were acknowledged as foundational figures in the city’s rising trap scene.

Having met Jeezy in a studio while managing underground rap sensation **Pastor Troy**, Lee was mesmerized by the aspiring rapper. His charisma was obvious, but Lee suspected radio would be hesitant to play Jeezy’s gritty tales of the street. So he enlisted his then-neighbor, underground-compilation master **DJ Drama**, to release a pair of unofficial albums to be sold as mixtapes. He even took out radio ads to declare one of them, *Trap or Die*, cause for a national holiday—“All traps closed today,” the promotion announced.

The mixtapes were hailed as street classics, with hundreds of

P, Steve Barnett, Migos, Ethiopia Habtemariam and Coach K.

thousands said to have been distributed. Recognizing Lee's stellar guidance, Jeezy gave him the nickname "Coach K," after Duke hoops coach and NCAA Hall of Famer Mike Krzyzewski.

Though Jeezy and Coach K parted ways in 2008, the rapper's elevation led the latter to Gucci Mane, then emerging as the South's hottest rhymesmith. Coach K kept Gucci's music flowing and his brand afloat even as the artist served several terms in prison.

As he told *The Fader*: "[Gucci] was signed to Warner Bros. Records. Todd Moscovitz was running Asylum/Warner, and Todd brought me on as a consultant to help put Gucci's album together ... I started managing him after that."

Gucci's remarkable productivity afforded his creative team flexibility; Coach K would finish the projects Gucci recorded behind bars and deliver them to the label. The mixtape run continued, and Warner/Asylum released *The Burrprint 2*.

Following its success, Coach K told *The Fader*, "They were like, 'Let's just get his music out there to his following.' On *Mr. Zone 6*, we did 100k ... After that, we set the trends. I went into Warner and restructured ... negotiated a whole deal for three mixtapes—outside of [Gucci's] album deal. It hadn't been done. After we did that, you



start seeing artists ... put these mixtapes out commercially."

Moscovitz elaborates: "I realized, not just from my experience with Gucci but also with Dipset and Cam'Ron, that the mixtapes were the albums. The majors were too caught up in the distinction between what's a mixtape and what's an album. Especially with the Internet, the kids were past that. Sometimes we'd give them away; sometimes we'd sell them. We'd say, 'It's a mixtape, but fuck it; it's 17 songs that you can love—why *wouldn't* you buy it?'"

The mixtape strategy would, in fact, become standard practice. Jeezy and Gucci's instinctive ethos of releasing a constant stream of music influenced nearly every subsequent hip-hop

act and proved critical from a development and marketing standpoint.

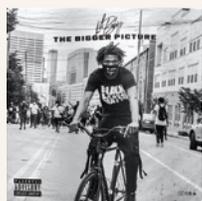
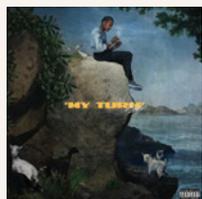
As for QC's other half, Pierre Thomas grew up on Atlanta's rough West Side, hustling his way out of a drug-ridden environment by any means necessary. Though P served time for gun possession and drug offenses as a youth, he managed to thrive. "Do you know what I had to do to get my first half a million dollars?" he asked the *New Yorker*. "I can't even tell you, but it wasn't easy." Thomas made "safe" investments in real estate once he had the funds to do so.

P knew Gucci from the local

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Ethiopia Habtemariam, Lil Baby, P, Sir Lucian Grainge and Steve Barnett



strip-club scene, which brought him into Coach K's orbit. In 2013 he approached Coach about cofounding a label and signing a hot young rap trio called **Migos**.

Toting a duffle of cash, P secured Migos: hookmeister **Quavo**, his fast-rapping nephew **Takeoff** and his magnetic cousin **Offset**. Quality Control was born.

P and K relied on the strip-club circuit to develop the Migos brand locally. After they caught fire with "Versace," QC issued a handful of mixtapes to build buzz on the streets. Coach K then reconnected with Moscovitz, who'd moved to **300 Entertainment**, to partner with QC for the release of Migos' first proper album.

That record, *Yung Rich Nation*, failed to meet expectations. But thanks to the dance that emerged alongside it, off-cycle single "Look at My Dab" swept the nation, with athletes, influencers and even presidential candidate **Hillary Clinton** busting out the "Dab." QC and Migos were ready to seize the viral moment, but by then the deal with 300 had gone south.

"We got a company saying, 'Y'all can't put no music out. We ain't letting y'all sell nothing,'" P explained to **Complex**. "It was one

of the biggest songs of that year. You had the kids—everybody was doing it. But we couldn't sell it. We couldn't stream it. Because we was in a battle."

Somehow, QC effectively extricated itself from 300 before Migos had a chance to cool off. A bad deal was followed by a good one, courtesy of Motown President **Ethiopia Habtemariam**, via **Capitol Music Group/Motown**. "I give it all up to Ethiopia, man," Coach K told **HITS**. "We were in a place where we were looking for a partner that would see our vision and let us do our thing but also watch our back." Habtemariam had initially approached them about a publishing deal, then pitched the idea of a label joint venture—and a meeting with CMG boss **Steve Barnett**. "One conversation, and we shook on the deal," Coach related. "We haven't looked back."

In 2016 QC signed oddball rapper **Lil Yachty** to a record deal. The new-school Internet sensation soon thereafter scored a platinum single with "One Night" and 750m streams with his first two mixtapes.

QC and Migos subsequently leaked "Bad and Boujee" f/Lil

**Uzi Vert**. The trap anthem reached a mass audience when it achieved prominence via meme, then a relatively new phenomenon—user-generated content before the advent of **TikTok**. The meme went full-blown nuclear in 2017 when **Donald Glover** worked Migos into his acceptance speech after his show, *Atlanta*, took the Golden Globe for Best TV Series, hailing "Bad and Boujee" as "the best song ever." Within weeks, it became the group's first #1 single. The album *Culture* then debuted at #1, amassing 131k units and solidifying Migos' stature.

Disinclined to rest on these laurels, Coach K and P got to work developing new acts. "Our main thing from day one has been flooding the market," P reflected in **HITS**. That would certainly hold true with their next signing: Lil Baby.

Baby wasn't even a rapper when Team QC began cultivating him. "I was like, 'OK, I see a lot of star in him,'" Coach K told **HITS** of the prospect, who was then mostly hustling dice. "His voice was unique, and he just had style."

Beyond Baby's "it" factor, QC capitalized on his work ethic, harking back to Coach K's days with Jeezy and Gucci; in the first 15 months of the rapper's career, the label released five projects.

By 2018 Quality Control had become the dominant hip-hop shop. Migos' *Culture II*—home to multiplatinum hits "Motorsport," "Walk It, Talk It" f/**Drake** and "Stir Fry"—debuted at #1, with 199k in total activity. It was certified double platinum before the year was out.

As Migos became superstars, Lil Baby built up enough traction for his debut album, *Harder Than Ever*, to bow at #3. A Drake co-sign and guest feature on the smash "Yes Indeed" transmitted

Baby's status as the hottest young MC in the game. A few months later, he and **Gunna** dropped their collaborative mixtape *Drip Harder*, which would result in a **Grammy** nomination for the streaming giant "Drip Too Hard."

**Solid Foundation**, the management arm of Quality Control Music, was likewise making waves, overseeing breakouts **Trippie Redd**, QC's **City Girls** and reality TV personality-turned-superstar **Cardi B**, who broke streaming records for a female artist with her 2018 debut album *Invasion of Privacy*, which picked up five Grammy noms and won the Grammy Award for Rap Album of the Year.

Asked about the secret of their success, Coach K told *HITS*, "We take our time developing the talent, honing it to make sure the artist can have a career instead of just a song of the summer—we make sure they become a brand."

Lil Baby's career would enter



the stratosphere with his sophomore album, 2020's #1 *My Turn*, the deluxe edition of which cemented the project as the year's biggest—and the only album to cross 2.5m in total activity in 2020. "The Bigger Picture," meanwhile, captured the unrest and anguish following the death of **George Floyd**. The one-off single became a protest anthem for a new generation, who donned masks and **Black Lives Matter** T-shirts as they hit the streets, conferring on Baby a rare measure of cultural significance.

Quality Control Music is one of the few Black-owned companies operating in the biz, made all the more exceptional for its ownership of the charts. It's nonetheless fair to assume that as long as hip-hop remains influenced by the talent coming out of Atlanta, QC will continue—per the title of a Migos mixtape—to "control the streets." ■

*Steve Barnett, Sir Lucian Grainge, Coach K, Ethiopia Habbemariam, Lil Yachty, Ezekiel Lewis, P and Ashley Newton*



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