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The Insider // PROFILE

Deaf Jam

A loss of hearing hasn't stopped Sean Forbes from launching a rap career

BY JIM MCFARLIN
// PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOSHUA KRISTAL

Sean Forbes is sitting at a curvy table inside an RV parked in front of New York City's landmark Webster Hall. The vehicle serves as the rapper's tour bus. Five hours from now, after delivering an energetic, uplifting performance in the venue's intimate Studio space, Forbes, his two sidemen, his roadies, and every piece of equipment they're carrying will squeeze into the back of the motor home as they hop on I-81 to Rochester.

Detroit-born, Farmington Hills-raised, Forbes is on a nationwide concert tour in support of his debut LP, *Perfect Imperfection*, released last month. He's living his childhood dream — dropping rhymes, recording tracks, amassing more than 1 million music video hits on YouTube, performing his own songs to the adulation of fans, even though he'll never hear their cheers.

You see, Forbes is deaf. Not *def*, as in cool or amazing (although he is that). *Deaf*, as in he cannot hear. Anything. *Deaf rapper*: Yes, some might think they all are, but the two words had never met in the same sentence until the emergence of Forbes. If he had 50 cents for everyone who said he couldn't possibly become a musician, he could've financed his recording career years ago.

Impossible? Sean Forbes is the impresario of the impossible.

"I feel like what I've been doing is finally paying off," says Forbes, 31, reading his interviewer's lips for questions and articulating his responses with ease. "I'm being recognized for my own music, being recognized as part of this [deaf] community. People are embracing what I'm doing because I'm sending the right message, sharing the right things. All this hard work — it's really for the community. Yes, I benefit from it, but so do a lot of other people."

Students, for instance, as Forbes makes it a point to appear at a local school to share his story every day on tour, rest be damned.

"One of the most powerful things happened to me today," he says. "This kid came up and asked, 'How do I deal with bullying? Kids make fun of me all the time because I'm Spanish.' I said, 'You need to embrace who you are. They say Spanish people are great lovers.' I was trying to give him a sense of 'You are who you are, and nobody can change that.'"

"I felt that way once. 'Why me? Why am I the one who's deaf?' In a family full of hearing people, I was the only deaf [one]. It wasn't until I was 16 or 17



"If somebody tells you that you can't do something and you're truly passionate about it — you really want it — do it." — SEAN FORBES

[that] I woke up and realized, 'Hey, I'm going to be like this the rest of my life.' The kid started crying, and I gave him a bro-hug and said, 'Just remember: Once you accept who you are, it's not going to matter anymore.'

"Teachers came up to me afterward and told me the kid once tried to kill himself. I feel what I'm really doing here is — when you look at me, a deaf kid, playing music — the two don't even go together! I'm like this oxymoron. I just feel like I was put here to give something."

Forbes lost his hearing as an infant, possibly from a case of spinal meningitis. Ironically, he was born into a musical family. His father, Scott, and late uncle, Dennis, whom Forbes cites as his role models, formed Detroit's award-winning country band the Forbes

Brothers. "People don't understand — he is profoundly deaf," explains Scott, who owns Mr. B's bar in Shelby Township. "He's not just hard of hearing. You see things like this, and it makes you [think], 'Wow there definitely are miracles.'"

"I would have never expected this, but I think he soaked up so much. Mitch Ryder used to come to our house, [guitarist] Jimmy McCarty, [drummer] Johnny 'Bee' Badanjek, and he was exposed to all of that. Bee used to come over and teach him how to play drums. He always wanted to be a rock star, and he's doing pretty well right now."

Well, not rock, exactly. "Rap was the first music that spoke to me," says Forbes, who feels the beats he can't hear. "I remember when I first started with rap my parents were like, 'What the f--- is that? That isn't



music! But they were into the Who and the Beatles. This was the first music I discovered on my own."

His breakthrough came when he met Joel Martin, the world-famous producer whose 54 Sound Studios in Ferndale became Eminem's playfield, at the Detroit Music Awards. "I was persistent, kept writing him, because I knew he was one of the few people who would get it," Forbes recalls.

Eventually, Martin hired Forbes as an intern. "He was a pain," remembers Martin, who flew in to New York to view the performance. "He killed me for about six months. I knew he had talent, but I didn't know he could write songs. It took me years to figure that out."

Forbes soon paired with Jake Bass, son of Eminem producer Jeff Bass. They've collaborated on more than 50 recordings and six videos, including the tune "Let's Mambo" featuring Forbes in a white suit and hat dancing with the deaf community's most famous icon, Oscar-winning actress Marlee Matlin, who flew to Detroit for the shoot. "There was no ounce of doubt in my bones that would have kept me from accepting this," says Bass, who produced *Perfect Imperfection* and performs with Forbes on tour. "Everything happens for a reason, and I truly believe Sean and I getting together was meant to be. We had no control over it."

In 2006, Martin and Forbes co-founded D-PAN, the nonprofit Deaf Professional Arts Network, to make music more accessible to the deaf and hard of hearing. In February, Forbes and D-PAN hosted a video music camp for kids in Brooklyn, Mich. Perhaps those youngsters aspire to create the kind of dazzling multimedia extravaganza Forbes exhibited at Webster Hall.

Flanked by his band and two sports-bar-sized



video screens, Forbes is a mesmerizing showman. Each of his tracks, with titles like "Def Deaf Girls," "Bob Dylan Was the First Rapper," and "I'm Deaf" ("I got def tones/But I'm not tone-deaf"), is accompanied by a music video with lyrics superimposed or just the lyrics themselves, appearing to leap off the screens like rapid-fire 3-D cartoons.

Forbes is rapping in time to every word, and simultaneously duplicating his words in sign language. What's more, a rectangular pad called a ButtKicker (the technology that allows seats to rumble with sound effects in IMAX theaters) is laid in front of the

stage. Fans can stand or dance on the pad and feel the beats. It's a sensory tour de force.

It could explain why Forbes hates the phrase *hearing-impaired*. "Impaired sounds like there's something wrong with you," he says. "Then people tell you that you can't do something. When somebody tells me that, [I have to] prove them wrong."

"That's what I try to tell these kids in these presentations. If somebody tells you that you can't do something and you're truly passionate about it — you really want it — do it. Wanting to do it is one thing. Showing up and doing it is another." ■

