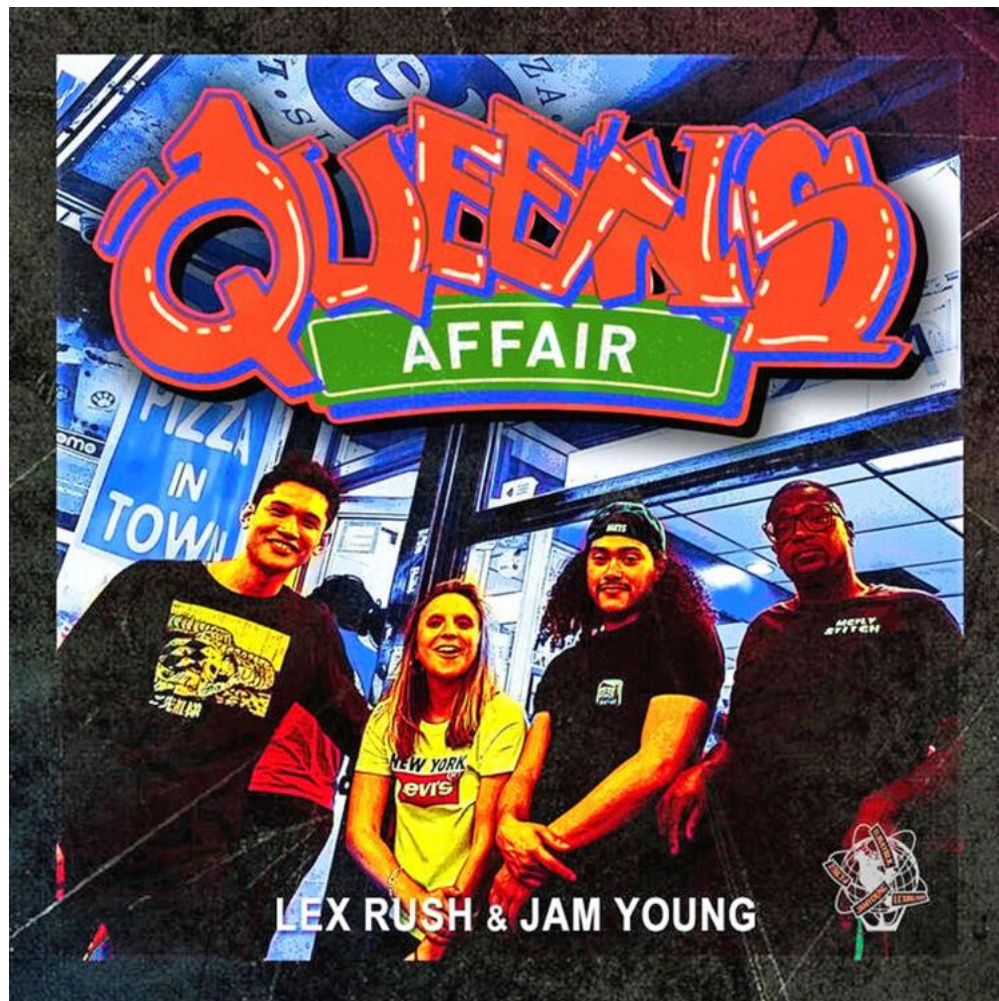


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## Queens Affair: A love letter to World's Borough

by Naeisha Rose, associate editor

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Rappers Lex Rush and Jam Young, center, and producers Paul Cruz, left, and RayVaughn Levi will have an album drop on Spotify on May 21.

PHOTO BY MATT OGILVIE

In late 2018, two rappers from the World's Borough collided at an underground hip-hop event, and nearly three years later they have a 14-track album and a mixtape with original music, spoken word interludes and lyrics over classic rap beats.

“A friend of mine approached me at an underground event and told me she was a fan of my music,” said Jonathan Martinez, also known as Jam Young, 31. “She wanted to collaborate and had been working with a producer from College Point.”

Alex Rush, who goes by Lex Rush, then presented Martinez with three fresh instrumentals for the two rap artists to work on.

“We were both in the New York underground hip-hop scene doing shows around the city and I remember seeing Jonathan perform,” said Rush. “Not only could he spit bars, but he makes great songs. He is a songwriter and can perform with killer stage performance. You don’t always see that, especially in the freestyle rap scene.”

Rush, 32, was so impressed by Martinez that she asked to do a musical set with him.

“I don’t think I’ve heard of instrumentals like the ones she gave me,” said Martinez. “It was a mixture of rock, pop and hip-hop infused in one. We wrote bits on each and she liked all three of them, so we did the collaboration project.”

While collaborating on their music, Martinez discovered Rush was a Queens kid too.

“We were both learning about each other while writing these songs,” said Martinez. “She’s from Bayside and I grew up in College Point. We are basically like a town over from each other and never met.”

Martinez learned that Rush attended Townsend Harris High School in Flushing and she learned that he went to Robert F. Kennedy Community High School a little over a mile away also in Flushing. They were surprised to learn they both hung out at one point or another at spots like Cherry Valley in Whitestone and VIP Pizza in Bayside.

“Things just happened organically when we realized that we grew up like 10-minutes from each other in Queens,” said Rush. “We decided to make the EP about that.”

The borough’s multiculturalism was something that the two artists also bonded over. Martinez is Ecuadorian and Dominican, while Rush is Italian and Jewish.

“One of our other Queens producers is Filipino and the other is African American and Caribbean,” said Martinez. “Queens is the most diverse borough in the world.”

College Point producer Paul Cruz is Filipino and Queensbridge producer RayVaughn Levi is Montserratian and Black, according to Martinez.

“Queens is a great place to grow up,” said Rush. “There is so much diversity — it’s close to the city, but it’s still its own thing. There’s everything. There are tons of restaurants, shops, parks and lots of character.”

A large part of Queens’ character is the people who make the borough what it is, according to Martinez, so the artists decided to include their friends and loved ones on the album in spoken word skits.

Mark Lord, the musical theater director at Martinez’s high school (and a Queens Chronicle writer), was one. “Jonathan asked me to contribute something and I said, ‘Sure, but I’m not a rapper,’” said Lord. “He mentioned that he had an album that was Queens-themed and that he wanted me to talk about my experience as a teacher here in Queens.”

Lord’s interlude includes a snippet about his first day teaching at August Martin High School in Springfield Gardens in 1980, before directing Martinez in musicals at RFK High School, according to the retired English teacher who lives in Forest Hills.

Listeners who buy their album, titled “Queens Affair,” on Bandcamp, a platform for independent artists, can also get a hold of a mixtape with beats from Queens rappers like Nicki Minaj (South Jamaica), Nas (Queensbridge), LL Cool J (Hollis) and more, with freestyle raps from Rush and Martinez.

“The platform really helps independent artists,” said Martinez. “We get a higher percentage from our music sales than from other music platforms like iTunes.”

The album was released on April 30, the 82nd anniversary of the first World’s Fair in Flushing Meadows Corona Park. It streams on Spotify May 21.

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