

Many hip-hop albums are inspired by fame, but indie rapper P.O.S turns that concept on its head with his latest offering *Never Better*.

Minnesota-born Stefan Alexander, whose stage name can stand for anything from "Product of Society" to "Piece of Shit" depending on his mood, has been watching his star rise steadily since he was signed by Rhymesayers in 2004. However, he caught a glimpse of what true notoriety looked like - the good, the bad and the ugly - during a recent tour with MTV punk-pop darlings Gym Class Heroes. "Cupid's Chokehold" was blowing up and P.O.S got an up-close and personal look at what a band goes through when they finally "make it." Although he has no beef with any of the guys from Heroes, he wasn't sure he liked everything he saw. "A lot of people were coming in there to hear the one song," P.O.S recalls. "I'm not at the stage of my life where I want to make songs like that."

While the Gym Class Heroes were breaking through, P.O.S was just trying to keep his momentum going. He spent every spare moment on the road penning lyrics and laying down beats for *Never Better*, the follow-up to 2006's critically acclaimed *Audition*. He would jokingly say that the new album was written entirely in a moving car. However, the tour experience was forcing him to rethink the direction of his next record. Then in Ohio, his van was broken into, his hard drive with all his music was stolen - and that was it.

From the beginning, P.O.S had not followed the traditional path to hip-hop success. He was a reluctant rapper at first,

preferring instead the manic energy of the punk music scene he experienced during countless nights at all-ages hardcore clubs in Minneapolis. "I originally got deep into music because I was going to punk shows where people were flipping out," he says. "The excitement was grabbing me."

P.O.S would sing, drum and play guitar in a number of bands including Cadillac Blindside and Building Better Bombs. He had a lot to say - and eventually he realized that hip-hop might be a better vehicle to express it all. So he founded a rap collective called Doomtree and eventually put out his debut *Ipecac Neat*.

The initial results were rough and rugged but P.O.S' music got more polished by the time he got to Rhymesayers. *Audition* built on *Ipecac's* punk ethos, keeping the shouted vocals and the brooding, angry lyrics but adding a layer of sheen that made P.O.S a bit more accessible to the masses. It was a tricky turn for an artist who openly defied genre conventions - which is perhaps why halfway through the biggest tour of his career P.O.S took a creative turn back towards his roots.

"As soon as I decided to make the kind of record that was coming - it poured out really fast," P.O.S says. "Perhaps it wasn't the smartest thing to do, but overall I'm more proud of this record than any of the others I've put out."

It's hard to argue with P.O.S that his

sound has, appropriately enough, never been better. The new album is aggressive and uncompromising, both in terms of its rock-inspired beats and also its lyrics, which move beyond the personal and predictable and into intriguing new directions, touching on politics and life. "This next record feels like my writing style has spun outward. It's not really about me, more about us."

To the untrained ear, P.O.S' noisy and messy vibe can seem dark, but he insists the overall message is hopeful. "The theme is one that insists on you keeping your eyes open and paying attention," he says. "Do something, stay out of the jobs where you sit in an office all day. Achieve something you want."

What P.O.S has finally decided he wants is something a bit different than what he saw his former tourmates Gym Class Heroes attain - a goal a bit more in tune with his own musical style. "I don't think I make songs that are so damn catchy," he insists. "If you listen enough to my stuff that it gets stuck in your head, I feel like you will like other tracks on the album."

Which is not to say P.O.S doesn't aspire to some level of notoriety. He would just prefer to follow in the footsteps of Minor Threat, Devon the Dude or Aesop Rock, artists he says have built solid careers by being themselves. "They never stopped doing what they want to do, but they have a following that trusts them to make really artistic records."

being himself
Words: Travis Altman

P.O.S

GHETTOBLASTER

UNDERGROUND
SOUNDS