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December 9, 2017

## How Warner Bros., Tha Lights Global & a Gang of Influencers Catapulted Lil Pump to Stardom

<https://www.billboard.com/articles/business/8054683/lil-pump-tha-lights-global-warner-bros-influencers>



Matt Herring

Lil Pump

[Lil Pump](#) had just turned 16 when he first came to the attention of **Dooney Battle**, co-founder of digital-first entertainment company Tha Lights Global. Hailing from the South Florida "SoundCloud rap" scene along with contemporaries like [Smokepurpp](#), XXXTentacion and Ski Mask the Slump God, the pink-haired teenager born Gazzy Garcia had already amassed over 100,000 followers on Instagram, despite having released only a handful of songs at the time.

"He was the youngest in the wave actually really doing it," says Battle, "and his look was different than everybody else."

Battle, himself a South Florida native, knew what to do: tap his company's 60 social media "influencers" to spread the music. Tha Lights Global was in the midst of a social-media-driven meme campaign that helped Zay Hilfigerrr & Zayion McCall's "Juju on That Beat" reach No. 5 on the Billboard Hot 100 in December 2016. The company is helmed by a tight-knit seven-person team whose members' average age is in the mid-20s: Battle; co-founder **Tim Lowery**; head of touring and marketing **Troy Heidtmann**; A&R chief **Miguel Solano**; head of management and media **Jordan Tugrul**; head of talent relations **Carliely Veras** and head of digital **Paula Batson**. But the label, - management and marketing group's secret sauce is its network of influencers that reaches a combined 160 million followers across nine different platforms. Pushing Lil Pump's songs through SoundCloud and Instagram, these influencers boosted the rapper's followers on the latter platform from 1 million in June to 5.7 million in November. Earlier in 2017, Tha Lights Global signed a joint venture deal with Warner Bros. Records, which began marketing Lil Pump's music during the summer.

"We, as a company and as a label, needed to build and establish more of a presence in the urban space," says WBR executive vp commerce and marketing **Larry Mattera**.

"They clearly had insights and relationships on the urban side of the business in the network landscape, where we're always trying to look for influencers and how to utilize social networks in a meaningful way."

"They're innovative spirits, and they don't take no for an answer," says Warner Bros. chairman/CEO **Cameron Strang**. "Pump is an incredible artist; he's got fantastic charisma and a huge personality, with lots of talent and no fear."

Warner Bros. and Tha Lights Global limited Lil Pump's access to the media in order to push fans to the music to learn more about him; in a recent 2,770-word *Complex* cover story, Pump's quotes totaled fewer than 20 words. But his fans have shown a tendency to latch on to the words he does say and take action: The now-17-year-old artist only follows @Harvard on Instagram, and after the rapper tweeted in August that he "really did drop out of Harvard to save the rap game," his followers flooded the school's Instagram page, which, says Battle, caused Harvard to temporarily disable comments. (A rep for Harvard did not respond to a request for comment.) "He's growing [his career] organically, he's not forcing it or telling people to go do [things]," Battle says. "He's just putting it out, they get the notification and they go do it."

The groundwork paid off: In October, Lil Pump's self-titled debut album launched at No. 3 on the Billboard 200, moving 46,000 equivalent album units in its first week,

according to Nielsen Music -- 83 percent of which came from streaming. On the Dec. 9 Hot 100, his lead single, "Gucci Gang," spends its second week at No. 3, with 49.8 million streams -- up 11 percent in its 11th week on the chart. And Pump's success isn't the only example of unorthodox, social media campaigns; now, influencers have become an essential part of the marketing plan for breaking new artists.

"As influencers are growing by the thousands because of technology, I think we would be late if we didn't feel that influencer marketing wasn't something we needed to staff and strategize," says 300 Entertainment CEO **Kevin Liles**, who used influencer-driven campaigns on Musically and YouTube to boost artists [Maggie Lindemann](#) and [Dae Dae](#), respectively. "Anybody who can help us reach that target audience, we want to build infrastructure around."

YouTube star and author **Connor Franta**, who built a following of 8.8 million on Twitter and more than 5 million on YouTube, founded the record label Heard Well in 2015, tapping fellow influencers like **Tyler Oakley** and U.S. Olympian **Gabby Douglas** to curate compilations that the label licenses and releases digitally. In July, Heard Well signed a deal with Sony/ATV that came with an infusion of funding, with an eye towards turning their compilation business into a full-service record label and sign its first artist within the next year. "We're partnering with people who are marketing geniuses on their own," Franta says, noting the company spends no money on advertising their releases. "We're working with influencers with big followings: they *are* the ads."

With Pump, Tha Lights Global and Warner Bros. are now leveraging relationships with streaming services and distributors around the world to spread the music globally. But as "Gucci Gang" keeps growing, the label is riding the wave. "I think he's found and touched a nerve in that culture, given his music, given his interaction with his fans," Mattera says. "It's hard to pinpoint it. But these moments where you find something like that, you just let it lead the way and don't ask a lot of questions and just try to keep it moving."