

# 1B ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

## Ruffhouse execs have ear for hot hip-hop

By David Kinney  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

CONSHOHOCKEN, Pa. — The Butcher is clowning around, as usual.

He's tossing out instructions in a tortured foreign accent and aping behind the sound board while he takes a bland song by a guy named Goatboy and turns it into a flashy radio-ready standard. Then he's on the floor, clutching his leg like an injured quarterback.

Goatboy absent-mindedly tries a few bars of a rap by the Fugees, and, suddenly, the president of Ruffhouse Records sits up.

It's as though he's struck serious — finally — by the remarkable success of his independent label's franchise band, in and out of the No. 1 spot for much of the year.

"Ten million records," Joe Nicolo said, staring blankly out the window of his recording studio. "Can you believe that?"

That's how it has been all along for Nicolo, 40, and Chris Schwartz, 35, white, suburban guys getting rich off rap music from a little studio in their blue-collar hometown.

Five years ago, Cypress Hill gave them a No. 1 hit and a platinum record with lyrics about the streets, violence and marijuana. Then two kids wore their athletic jerseys and jeans backward, called themselves Kris Kross and sold more than 10 million singles.

This year, Ruffhouse struck pay dirt again with the cross-cultural hip-hop group Fugees,

which sold 10 million copies in the United States and Europe.

"Nobody here is going to say, 'We have the formula,'" said Phil Nicolo, the co-founder's twin brother. "Ask anybody here whether they thought the Fugees would be an international hit, whether Kris Kross would be the biggest thing since the Hula Hoop. Nobody did."

There's a swagger at Ruffhouse, founded by the longtime friends in 1989. The confidence comes from the financial backing of Columbia Records and three blockbusters on its seven-act roster.

There's no science to their success, they say, only gut feelings.

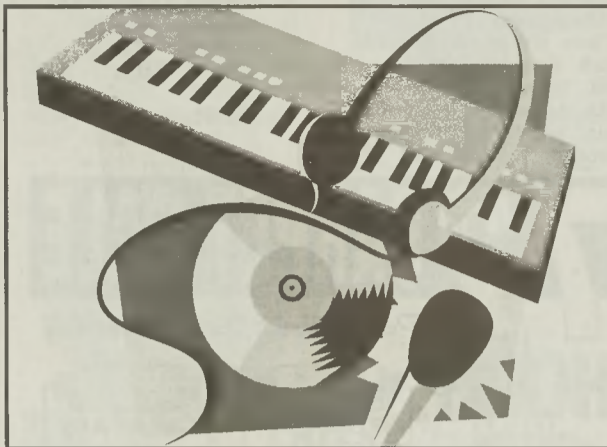
Take the Fugees, who auditioned for record company executives in their manager's Manhattan office. Everyone else passed. Ruffhouse listened.

They "were on to ... totally new things that nobody else was doing," said Joe Nicolo, who got his nickname, "The Butcher," from his father's profession and his work on an early album.

The Fugees showed him that a hip-hop band could reach urban listeners who grew up with turntables, not electric guitars. And just like Cypress Hill, the Fugees showed Nicolo a rap band could reach a cross-section.

Nicolo said they look for a specific effect when they listen to new bands.

"When it comes on and you're in the middle of a conversation, you stop, look at the speaker and say 'What,'" Nicolo paused for effect, "is that?"



It's not science, but it's paying off well.

The proof litters the studio — platinum and gold records, Ruffhouse talent side-by-side with the projects that earned the Nicolo brothers their reputation as two of the most sought-after producers. A Billy Joel hit. An Aerosmith single. Bon Jovi. The Rolling Stones.

The Columbia deal and star-studded roster notwithstanding, Nicolos and Schwartz are the first to admit that Ruffhouse is still just a small independent label in the suburbs — complete with crowded cubicles, posters and newspaper clippings plastered on walls and executive offices featuring a video game, an exercise bike and a pool table.

"The decisions are still made over a cup of coffee and a gut feeling," Phil Nicolo said.

They still hear about new acts from other bands they've signed and they still depend less on advertising than on

urban music stores, clubs and radio stations creating that "buzz" for their releases.

"That's why labels like us exist," Schwartz said. "We operate on the streets."

"They're kind of like what you would think that old school record people are like," said Jessica Clarke, manager for Cypress Hill. "They're hustlers. They're down in the trenches. They get really excited."

What Columbia — The Machine, around Ruffhouse — adds is clout in the chain stores, massive marketing resources and the ability to pour millions of compact discs and tapes into shops when an album catches fire.

"At the end of the day, though, it's still what's on the record," Schwartz said, lighting his fourth cigarette in an hour with an official Fugees lighter.

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## 'Ghost' debuts at No. 1 while 'The Chamber' does so-so

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

LOS ANGELES — "The Ghost and the Darkness" emerged as the nation's weekend box-office winner after a squabble between the studios over which film was No. 1.

Paramount claimed the lion adventure movie starring Val Kilmer and Michael Douglas debuted in first place, while New Line Cinema claimed its action film "The Long Kiss Goodnight," starring Geena Davis and Samuel L. Jackson, was the most popular film.

New Line and Paramount delayed providing final totals until late Monday, apparently waiting to see the competition's figures.

Final figures from Exhibitor Relations Co. Inc., which tracks box-office figures based on studio reports, put "Ghost" in first place with \$9.2 million and "The First Wives Club" at No. 2 with \$9.1 million.

"The Long Kiss Goodnight" was in third place with \$9.07 million.

Industry analysts said it seemed the studios were playing a can-you-top-this game, raising their figures in relation to each other.

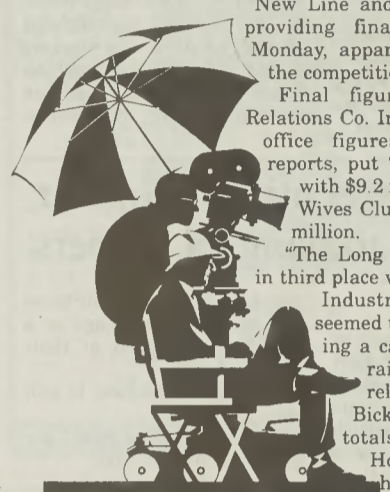
Bickering over box-office totals is a tradition in Hollywood. Studios have reason to spar, with reports on grosses seen as influencing a film's future performance.

The latest John Grisham film, "The Chamber," took in only \$5.6 million for fourth place — a relatively poor debut compared to other Grisham-inspired hits such as "The Client" and "A Time to Kill."

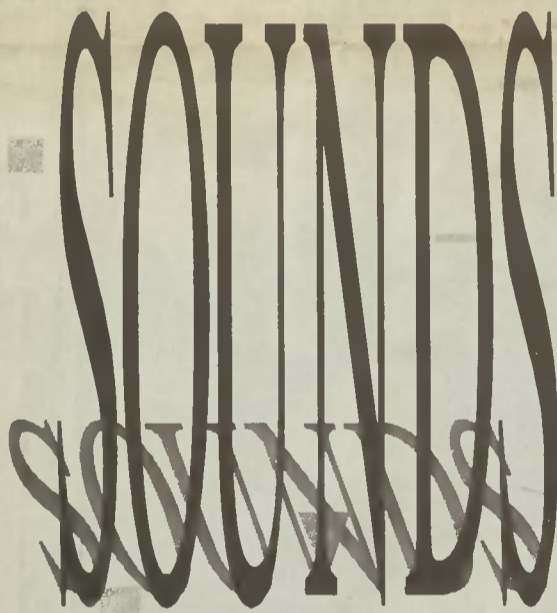
The top 20 movies at North American theaters Friday through Sunday, followed by studio, gross, number of theater locations, receipts per location, total gross and number of weeks in release, as compiled Monday by Exhibitor Relations and the studios:

1. "The Ghost and the Darkness," Paramount, \$9.2 million, 2,142 locations, \$4,302 average, \$9.2 million, one week.
2. "The First Wives Club," Paramount, \$9.1 million, 2,406 locations, \$3,794 average, \$72.1 million, four weeks.
3. "The Long Kiss Goodnight," New Line, \$9.07 million, 2,247

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## Gill's new CD filled with lots of passion



By Winfred B. Cross

Johnny Gill  
Let's Get The Mood  
Right  
Various producers  
Motown

☆☆☆ 1/2



702

Surprisingly, the use of numerous producers doesn't spoil this project. Usually, that makes for a confused mess. Not so for this CD. Each song has its own merit. Nothing's fighting for superiority. Everything's in check.

Gill could have spiced things up with a slamming track in the vein of "Fair Weather Friend" or "Rub You The Right Way." The mildly up tempo "So Gentle," featuring New Edition member Ronnie DeVoe does nicely, however. Gill's got a winner.

702  
No Doubt  
Michael Bivins and  
Todd Russaw,  
executive producers  
Motown

☆☆☆ 1/2

Motown's latest girl group 702 got a lot of attention last year on Subway's hit "This Little Game We Play." Now the group's got has its own release and its a smoker.

The group concentrates on hip-hop, hard-core r&b and soulful ballads. It handles everything with a flair that puts it near the same category as SWV, but more in-your face.

Take for instance "Get Down Like That," which uses a Barry White sample. The beat thumps as the lead singer makes it plain she has her eye on a man who obviously has a love interest. She says "her name's not written on you" declaring "she's no threat to me." The women get pure funky with "Steelo" which samples the Police's "Voices Inside My head." It sets your

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Gill has relied heavily on his power too often, however. His uncontrollable urges to real off non-stop riffs and unbridled screams often spoil his presentation. Not so on his latest CD *Let's Get The Mood Right*. Gill is clicking on all cylinders. He's relying more on his ability to deliver a song than his power. In short, he's singing.

The prime example is found in the title song, which is also the first single. It's a classic Kenny "Babyface" Edmonds composition — sexy, soothing and meaningful. Gill wraps his rich baritone around the song, stroking it sweetly as he builds to the climax. It's a wonderful performance, filled with passion and controlled emotion. It's one of Gill's best performances.

So is "Maybe," a song Gill co-wrote with Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis. Gill again sings from his heart, not just his Herculean lungs. The song is reminiscent of Boyz II Men's "On Bended Knee." Gill modulates on the chorus until he's into falsetto, yet he never loses control. He avoids unnecessary theatrics and concentrates on the melody.



HIROSHIMA



JOHNNY GILL