

Van City rappers t

Swollen Members is part of the strong hip-hop vibe that's busting out on Canada's West Coast, writes **ALEXANDRA GILL**

VANCOUVER

When Swollen Members won the Juno Award for best rap recording last spring, many in the Toronto hip-hop community shook their heads and asked: "Who are these guys?"

They would be two mid-twenty-something rapper MCs from Vancouver, who go by the handles Mad Child and Prevail. And even though their debut album, *Balance*, had yet to enjoy a whisper of radio play in Canada when they scooped the country's most prestigious music prize away from the supposed sure bet, Toronto rapper Kardinal Offishall, it had already moved about 50,000 units — mostly in Europe, where it had been released two years before.

Having logged thousands of tour miles across England, Australia and Japan, the Vancouver duo was well established in the international hip-hop underground. Their dark rhymes and dense beats had been included on a compilation CD attached to the German edition of Rolling Stone, used in a commercial to sell a Sony PlayStation video game and featured on *Resistance*, one of the hottest-selling snowboard videos in history.

So how come no one in T-dot O-dot had heard of these dudes from Van City?

Ryan (Fritz the Cat) Hanes, an urban music A&R representative for Universal Music Canada and columnist for New York-based *Vice* magazine, blames the self-absorbed nature of his big-city 'hood.

"Toronto doesn't really pay attention to what's happening outside of itself. That's why a group like Swollen Members could tour all over the world and sell records without anyone here even knowing who they are. A lot of people were really surprised when they won. But I said 'Man, if you read the magazines or buy vinyl, you should know

a lot about them.'"

Mad Child and Prevail are reluctant to dwell on the so-called controversy, for fear of fuelling any of the bicoastal rivalries that have inflamed and divided gangsta rap south of the border.

"We're a West Coast group," Mad Child explains over a cellphone, while travelling on a tour bus en route from Ottawa to Hamilton. "Of course we represent Vancouver and we're proud to be where we're from. But we really don't trip out on that sort of thing. We're a world group. Boundaries and barricades have been broken all over the world and hip-hop culture is flourishing everywhere. I'm telling you, every time we go to Toronto we have a better time each time. It's mad cool out there."

Swollen Members will be returning to Toronto tonight to perform at Edge 102's Electric Christmas concert with Joy Drop and fellow Vancouverite Bif Naked, before going back to British Columbia to continue their cross-Canada tour in support of their new album. And this time 'round, a lot more people in Toronto know exactly who these guys are.

When *Bad Dreams* was released last month, the album ripped onto the charts in its first week, establishing Swollen Members as the No. 1 Canadian Artist, in R&B retail, and the No. 3 Canadian Artist, period.

The folks in Toronto and all across North America are going to be hearing a lot more about these guys, and the small scene from which they hail, now that the group has secured a lucrative distribution deal with Nettwerk Records; has the video for its first single, *Fuel Injected*, playing in heavy rotation on MuchMusic; is riding high off an A-minus accolade from *Spin* magazine; and keeping busy with heavy-weight West Coast superstar Nelly Furtado — appearing on the new video for her song *Shit on the*



Prevail, left, and Mad Child of Swollen Members at Christmas concert with Joy Drop and

Radio, and as special guests at her Vancouver concert at General Motors Place next month.

If there's a strong hip-hop vibe busting out of Vancouver — as those with their ear to the ground such as Hanes assert — it began with a five-member crew called the Rascalz.

After slogging it out on the West Coast for six years and scratching a number of records on their own label, the Rascalz inked a deal with BMG in 1997, becoming one of the first Canadian rap groups to sign with a major record company.

But the buzz didn't stop there. When the Rascalz won a Juno later that year, they famously turned it down after realizing that the award would be presented backstage and not on-air. The controversy helped raise the stature of hip-hop in Canada, which had largely been neglected by radio programmers and the industry's prize makers. And