A rap battle from your phone: Interview with Alena Golden, CEO Rap Tech Studios

Rap Tech's trio of rap and hip hop apps are helping five million rappers worldwide record, produce, create and collaborate. Can you really recreate that live music experience on an iPhone? There's never been a better time to find out.

Maddyness spoke to CEO Alena Golden about recreating hip hop's vibrant offline community online, responding to seismic political events as an organisation, and giving aspiring musicians a leg up.

[Maddyness] Can you explain in your own words what Rap Tech does and how it all came about?

[Alena] Rap Tech Studios is a small company; we build apps for hip hop fans. We decided to combine our passion for hip hop and rap music and our expertise in building mobile apps.

It's been a while; we've been doing it for four years now, and we now have three apps in our portfolio. They all help our users to unleash their musical talent through their phones. We try to make it as easy as possible for everybody to enter the hip hop space.

How many people are there on your team? Do you all have a background in hip hop music or is it mainly a tech background?

There are three cofounders and the whole team is about 12 people now in total. One of my cofounders is actually my brother, who's been a hip hop fan since the late '90s. As his younger sister, I've always followed his hobbies!

It all started with our passion for Italian hip hop – because originally my brother and I are from Belarus, and in Belarus there was no hip hop scene in the '90s. My brother went on a trip to Italy where he met some friends who into hip hop. He got really into the genre, and we became the first to build a 'rap fan ecosystem' in Belarus.

We ended up partnering with O2 here in the UK, and that's how we came to moving the headquarters to London – as it's a nice bridge between the US and the rest of Europe. We've been in London since 2017.

I know that hip hop has a really vibrant community. Did you think the app was more likely to be a success because of that community? Would it be the same if you made it with another type of music?

We are considering going into other genres further down the road, but hip hop is so massive and so much beyond just music. It's your lifestyle.

We launched our first app, called BattleMe – for rap battles. *Eight Mile* was what inspired us, so we decided to bring the movie into an app. You can record a track, challenge everyone, and then the whole community get involved. You don't have to be a musician to be part of this community – and that, I think, is where our success comes from.

We try to encourage even those who can't rap themselves, but really like and enjoy this music, to be part of it and give feedback to those who are actual musicians.

Do you have big stars on the platform as well, or is it mostly amateur musicians?

We focus on independent artists, although some of our users already have record deals. We like to partner with established artists and invite them to be judges for our competitions. Every week, on our flagship app, which is called Rap Fame, we run tournaments and competitions. Sometimes we invite music experts, or celebrities, or Grammy-nominated and Grammy-winning producers, to become our judges.

Do you have any success stories of people finding fame through Rap Fame?

One of our users just recently got signed by universal music in the US, and there are several other examples in Europe with smaller labels. No Eminem yet, but we are getting there!

And interestingly enough, to elaborate on the community topic, two of our users met on the platform and now have a baby together. The guy is from the UK and she is from the US. They became friends on our app, recorded some tracks together and fell in love!

Moving on from the community aspect of your app, I wanted to ask about the production side. How do you use tech to help people produce their own music?

Those are the two main things for us – community and technology. Combining the two is where our success came from. We have a 24/7 content management

team, who curate the content and find people who are showing really big potential. We give them a boost so they don't get lost. We also support complete beginners by providing masterclasses.

On the tech side, nowadays luckily your phone can produce really decent sound quality. You don't really have to go to a professional recording studio to experiment. Also, for hip hop, it's very important to work with producers and beat-makers, because your beat is about 70% of the success of your song.

That's where all the partnerships come in, and we do partner with independent producers as well as Grammy-nominated and winning producers. They provide us with the top beats so that our users don't have to go and look on the internet for instrumentals and beats. They can just use our platform for everything they need – instrumentals, mic and notes for lyrics. We help with lyric inspiration as well; we have a handy feature to help you find the perfect rhyme.

I've also been thinking about the quite political side of hip hop and rap, which often relates to issues of race. Did you see your users come together during the BLM protests? Did you touch on it as business leaders as well?

Yes, exactly. There are a few points I'd like to share with you.

Point number one, the political aspect. Indeed, hip hop was always considered to be quite a 'rough' genre. Explicit lyrics are very common and that's something we initially tried to avoid or suppress or whatever, but then we just thought 'you know what, that's just not authentic. We have to be aware of it, and moderate it so that it doesn't get violent, but we will not prevent our people from expressing their minds. That was our decision as a company, but we had to pay a price.

In the app industry, there's such a thing as being 'featured' by Apple or Google. It's very beneficial for you as a developer to get featured – because so many people will see you. We could never get there because they are so conscious about those kinds of things. We were always upset about that – but we had to stick to our values.

But then, in spring this year, after the whole movement and the tragic murder

of George Floyd, they featured us in 163 countries. We were app of the day pretty much worldwide.

I can't relate it 100%, but for us it was a big milestone: we stuck to our values and, at some point, even Apple recognised, appreciated and embraced it.

And in response to the tragic murder of George Floyd, we thought a lot about what to do. There were lots of songs about it in our community, and we wondered whether we should respond as a company or not. We didn't want to exploit it for commercial purposes, so we didn't make any political statements as a company.

But we launched an initiative on the app, where everybody could submit their tracks about this topic – their feelings and emotions – and as a result we created a beautiful mixtape with the best submissions. We gave away lots of different in-app bonuses to everybody who participated, regardless of how many votes they got, just to say thank you.

I was also going to ask about another seismic political event – about COVID and how it's affected your organisation, and the UK music industry overall. Do you have any insights?

COVID has been tough for all the creative industries – for theatres especially, and for musicians as well with gigs not happening anymore. In our particular

case, we were always about combining live experience with digital experience.

For example, we had a couple of competitions where people would submit their tracks – but then for the final round we would invite them to perform live. We did this in Westfield, in O2 store of the future. Of course, events like that aren't happening any more, but our business was not affected that much because digital has always been huge.

We've just launched Rap Fame TV, where we invite top users to do live freestyles and compete with each other in real-time, and other users can join. We definitely try to replace live experience with live freestyle sessions. We're also looking into VR, potentially early next year.

We're asking everyone we interview: do you have a ridiculous CEO-style morning routine? If not, tell us how your days normally unfold and the rules you live by.

It's been tough. The first three months especially. Because we switched all of a sudden to Zoom calls. When you're participating in a Zoom call it's fine, but when you're leading the Zoom call for half a day, you're really emotionally exhausted by the end of the day. There are seven people on my screen and I have to fill all of them with my energy! I have to compensate for us not being in the same room.

Everyone suddenly became a bit disconnected and lonely. So I looked for extra ways to get energy, ways to keep going so that the productivity of the team didn't go down.

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