

# The ecology of Fashawn: From the ‘slums of Fresno’ to a major record label

By Joshua Tehee

Santiago Leyva is a kid from the slums of Fresno.

“I grew up with half a mother and no father at all,” says Leyva, who is known to music fans as Fashawn. His father was in a gang and mostly always in jail. His mother was around only when she wasn’t on drugs.

So, Fashawn was a child of social services.

“I remember waking up in the Marjaree Mason Center. I remember waking up in the Craycroft Center and thinking I wouldn’t make it to 18,” he says.

He did make it, and without a court case or a bullet wound.

Today the budding superstar who is known to music fans as Fashawn thanks hip-hop.

“That was my solution,” Fashawn says, recalling the pen and notebook he started carrying with him to document his life at 8 years old.

By 12, he was telling people he was going to be a rapper.

“I knew that would keep a pistol out of my hands. That would keep drugs out of my lap,” he says.

He is 26 now, a masterful MC who is carving out a life far from the streets of his youth, without turning his back on the city that shaped him. On Tuesday, he releases his first major-label album, which features collaborations with rapper Nas, singer Aloe Blacc and Busta Rhymes. [The album is available now on iTunes.](#)

“Fashawn is destined to be one of the greatest to ever pick up a mic,” says Kay Rich, a longtime hip-hop fan and the night show DJ for Fresno radio station B95. He has been following the rapper’s career since 2007 and says having an artist of this stature from Central California is unheard of. “He embodies qualities of hip-hop greats from New York to Los Angeles,” Rich says.

On (and off) the mic

In most ways, Fashawn is a contradiction; equally shy and electrifying.

Backstage before his sold-out Beary X-Mas show in December, he finishes a face-time chat with his daughter and begins mentally prepping for the performance. Here, he is quiet, low-key and reflective in a way that comes off as humility.

That’s the impression that gets passed along from most who meet him off stage.

The guy is *really* humble.

On stage, his presence expands, almost physically. There’s a strut and swagger and the ability to captivate and hold the audience with just his words. On this night, the crowd fills Strummer’s nightclub beyond capacity and is equal parts hip-hop heads and hipsters. From the first beat, Fashawn has them in his command. It would be a good time to get a drink at the bar if there was room to move through the crowd. There’s not.

Fashawn's success as an MC has already been noted. He was featured on the cover of the hip-hop magazine [XXL](#) back in 2010 — the only member of its prestigious Freshman issue not signed to a record label at the time. His classmates included Wiz Khalifa and J. Cole.

The rapper has toured the world and shared stages (and mics) with luminary MCs like [Rakim](#) and [Nas](#), who signed Fashawn to his Mass Appeal record label in June. That puts Fashawn in company with the uber-popular indie hip-hop duo Run The Jewels.

At times, though, Fashawn has struggled to exert his talent.

There was a show in Europe, an opening slot for Rakim, playing to a crowd of 15,000. At the end of the night, Rakim invited all opening MCs to join him on stage for a final giant freestyle. Fashawn stood on the side of the stage, unsure of making his presence known. He had to be pushed, almost literally, into the spotlight.

“Can I touch the mic?” he asked, polite as all that.

Then, he killed his verse and the place erupted.

From a shoebox

In Europe, promoters tend to list Fashawn as being from Los Angeles. He makes sure the crowds know he is from Fresno.

The city has become his image. The words Cen Cal (for Central California) are tattooed on the back of his hands. It's his unofficial logo, noticeable in almost every press photo and printed on his T-shirts. He also has a tattoo of the number 3420 on wrist. It's an address for an apartment complex on First Street near Shields Avenue.

“That's the building I came from,” Fashawn says.

It wasn't the only place he stayed. He grew up in halfway houses and group homes. In the late '90s, he was taken from his mother by Child Protective Services and spent several months at the Craycroft Center at the Fresno Rescue Mission downtown. Eventually, he went to live with his uncle.

Fashawn's manager, [Aren Hekimian](#), remembers neighborhoods full of junkies and prostitutes and police tape where he would drive to pick up the young rapper, wherever he was staying at the time.

Hekimian marveled at how Fashawn managed to leave those things behind and focus on the work.

A neighborhood barber introduced Fashawn to Hekimian, at the time a local hip-hop producer who had worked with guys like Planet Asia and Diego Redd — rappers who were making money.

To Fashawn, Hekimian was a star.

But Fashawn was a kid, still, and didn't understand the opportunity that was being presented. He would have blown off the meeting, had the barber not tracked him down, put him in a car and drove him across town to Hekimian's studio.

The meeting was an impromptu audition.

“He came in with literally a shoebox full of raps,” Hekimian says.

Fashawn was 15 or 16 years old, wearing his brother's hand-me-down clothes. He was humble and had done his homework. He knew hip-hop, Hekimian says.

Fashawn can still recite the lyrics to almost any rap song.

A Grizzly City boy

That shoebox is a reoccurring image in Fashawn's early days.

[Omar Aura](#) remembers it from his first meeting with Fashawn. They were both 16, had shared friends and a mutual love for hip-hop — *real* hip-hop. Aura had his journal filled with rhymes he had written. Fashawn brought the shoebox. The pair started rapping together in a group called Section 8.

Aura feels the effect of Fashawn's presence in town: "It's inspirational at the end of the day. Being part of his life, puts me in other people's lives."

There was a reason Fashawn called his first mixtape "Grizzly City." It was a nod to Fresno (home of the Grizzlies baseball team), but also to the group of friends (and fellow rappers) who hung around his neighborhood at First and Shields. For his Beary X-Mas concert in December, he made sure the Grizzly City Boys (and Aura) were on the bill.

"They are my extended family. I mean that wholeheartedly. Ultimately, there is no me without them."

Still, there were moments when Fashawn wondered if moving to Glendale would be better for his career and his family. It would put him closer to the industry and give him some distance from his past.

If he was forged by that past, he is not defined by it.

Yes, he is an MC and a self-described kid from the slums whose mother came into the world strung out on drugs. He also is a fatherless man who wants more for his child than was given to him, even if it comes at the cost of his career.

Fashawn's daughter, Hannah, was born in 2010 at the exact moment his career was starting to take off. His debut album, "[Boy Meets World](#)," had just been released and he was on the cover of a major hip-hop magazine and scheduled for a promo tour in New York with no less than Ghostface Killah, of the Wu Tang Clan.

But Fashawn bailed on the tour so he could be at home when his daughter was born.

Hekimian covered for him, made up a story about him being sick. It was a risky move for such a new artist, but one he says wasn't hard to make.

"I wouldn't miss it. You can't take that moment back," Fashawn says.

The ecology of Fash

Fashawn is sipping tea at Teazer World Tea Market, a trendy place in River Park. It's his daughter's favorite spot, and she waits quietly while he finishes the interview. There's a promise they will go play at her favorite park after.

The new album has been a long time coming, he says. He has been working on it since 2010 as a continuation of the themes in 2009's "Boy Meets World."

It's called "The Ecology," but it could just as easily be called "World Meets the Man."

It's the rapper actively reflecting on his life.

For fans, it is an introduction to the man he has become.

The album coincides with the release of a mini-documentary that traces Fashawn's upbringing. In it, he talks candidly with his mother and his uncle and the social worker who handled his case.

It's none of the glamour you would expect from a rap star, but it is his life, his ecology.

"Everyone's aware of what I do," Fashawn says. "No one really knows why I do it, who I do it for."

The album also reflects a new world view for the rapper.

When he started, his world didn't extend much past that apartment complex at First and Shields. He was 18 years old before he saw the ocean.

"I always felt like I was speaking for my block," Fashawn says. After the success of "Boy Meets World," after traveling the world and seeing the connection his music has with fans in places he never had been, he realized that wasn't enough. His story may be particular to a neighborhood and a building, but it's also universal.

And there is a world outside of Fresno. He knows because his rap career has given him the opportunity to see it, and speak to the people there.

"I knew I couldn't just talk to kids that looked like me," he says.

"There's a Grizzly City everywhere."

'The Ecology Tour'

**Feb. 26:** Los Angeles (Echoplex)

**March 3:** Vancouver, British Columbia (Alexander)

**March 4:** Seattle (Crocodile)

**March 5:** Portland, Oregon (Peter's Room)

**March 6:** Eugene, Oregon (Wow Hall)

**March 7:** Oakland (Leo's)

**March 8:** Sacramento (Harlows)

**March 10:** Boston (Middle East, downstairs)

**March 11:** New York (SOB's)

**March 12:** Philadelphia (The Barbary)

**March 13:** Toronto (Drake Hotel)

**March 14:** Pittsburgh (Club Café)

**March 15:** Chicago (Reggie's)

**March 16:** Grand Rapids, Michigan (Stache)

**March 18:** Kansas City (The Riot Room)

**March 19-21:** Austin, Texas (SXSW)

**March 22:** Jacksonville, Florida (Jack Rabbits)

**March 24:** Atlanta Masquerade (Purgatory)

**March 25:** New Orleans (Parrish Room at HOB)

**March 26:** Houston (Studio at Warehouse Live)

**March 27:** San Antonio (ACMC)

**March 28:** Dallas (The Loft)

**March 30:** Denver (Cervantes, Other Side)

**March 31:** Albuquerque, New Mexico (Launchpad 0)

**April 1:** Phoenix (The Press Room)

**April 2:** Santa Ana (Constellation Room)

More online

- Buy concert tickets and more at [fashawn.ca](http://fashawn.ca)
- “The Ecology” on [Audiomack](#)

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