

August 12, 1990---

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. ----It took a velvet Hammer to tap new strings in rap music. Smoothie M.C. Hammer has become the summer's hottest act by blending the building extravaganza of a rhythm and blues show within rap's confines.

In fact, the commercial force of Hammer's breakthrough album, "Please Hammer Don't Hurt 'Em" (Capitol Records), has come exclusively from classic rhythm and blues riffs that have been sampled by the 27-year-old native of Oakland, Calif.

The album's first hit, "U Can't Touch This," is deeply derivative of Rick James' "Super Freak." Hammer's current single, "Have You Seen Her," is a tender remake of the Chi-Lites' 1971 hit ballad. It is a great song but is not rap music. "U Can't Touch This" also features the gospel-tinged "Pray," which is partially copped from Prince; "Help the Children," in which Hammer picks up where Marvin Gaye left off, and the Jackson Five's "Dancin' Machine," a song that was an early influence on Hammer. It's rap that crossed over the melody line.

"Please Hammer Don't Hurt 'Em" has held the No. 1 spot on the pop charts for two months. It has sold nearly 5 million copies, making it the best-selling rap record of all time. "U Can't Touch This"?

Right now it seems Hammer can touch anything he wants.

Hammer will kindly admit he pays royalties to the artists from which he samples - they also are given co-writing credits on his album. (Rick James told USA Today he was still "furious" with Hammer's "stealing" the tracks from "Super Freak.")

Hammer responds less kindly if you describe his music as "soft."

"I'm not soft," he said in a backstage interview after a 90-minute show here. "I'm simply intelligent enough to know a person is made up of many characteristics. You have a time to be angry, a time to be sad, a time to love. I want to express all that in my music. People don't walk around all the time with the attitude that the whole world sucks. C'mon, let's be real. So, Hammer has all the characteristics of a normal human being, and if that's being soft, then thank you for the compliment."

Hammer has pounded out a new face for rap, especially in a live setting. Where the majority of rappers walk mightly from one side of the stage to another, Hammer employs dangerous dance steps, twirls and jumps.

Nor does Hammer rely on pre-recorded backing tracks, vocal samples or lip-synching to accent his choreography. He is proud that he has learned to pull off the physical demands of his show without compromising the vocals.

"It is more than rap," Hammer said, as he relaxed in leopard-colored leotards after the show. "In all fairness, name me a rhythm and blues show that does it like this. You couldn't do it. No one is dancing like us. I'll give you an example.

"A couple of weeks ago, about 20 of the Philadelphia Eagles danced with me onstage for 'U Can't Touch This.' They came offstage with their tongues hanging out. They said, 'Hammer, you've got to be out of your mind.' You have to be in all kinds of shape to do what we do."

"My show is a statement to the entire music industry, not just rappers. Even if you don't like the show, you have to admit it's entertaining. And that's because I was impressed with Earth, Wind and Fire. James Brown. George Clinton landing the mother ship onstage. I thought if I ever became a performer, I would have to live up to those standards."

Hammer was born with the hustling blood that runs through all aspiring performers.

Chicago insurance executive and former Oakland A's owner Charles O. Finley discovered Hammer (then Kirk Burrell) in 1973 at the pass gate of the Oakland Coliseum. The 10-year-old Burrell was dancing to James Brown out of his boombox.

Finley, in a separate interview in his North Michigan Avenue office in Chicago, relished the opportunity to reminisce about the man he once called "Little Hammer."

"I was intrigued by the way he could dance, and he had a terrific personality to go with it," Finley said. "He asked if I'd take him into the park with me. I said to come along and then he asked about his buddies. There were four or five of them."

Finley invited the entire pre-pubescent posse into the stadium. Finley gave Hammer and friends a private box in the loge section, adjacent to his own box. That was the good news. The bad news was that there was no concession service in the area.

Little Hammer began running big errands for Finley.

"He was very attentive," Finley said. "I like a lot of onions and pickles on my hamburgers. Well, he'd always come back with the right amount of onions and pickles. If there were six guests in the box, he'd come back with six hot dogs and six Cokes. He was very good. I also knew he was a good dancer, and once in a while, I'd have him put on a show on top of our dugout."

Hammer was so good that Finley eventually made him a club vice president.

Finley said Hammer's executive salary floated between \$15 and \$20 a week.

"Everyone knows vice presidents are a dime a dozen," Finley said. "So, I made him a vice president. I know the clubhouse man made him a white baseball cap with VP on it. (Always color-coordinated, Finley had players wear green caps, while coaches and managers wore white caps so they could be distinguished.) As vice president, he did things for me while I was gone. For example, he would sit in the box by himself and broadcast the game to me over the telephone, wherever I was."

Hammer once broadcast half a game with evangelist Billy Graham, whom Finley befriended while the A's were in Kansas City.

Finley, 72, plans to attend Friday's concert - "if he leaves me tickets," he mumbled with a grin. Hammer keeps in touch with his old boss.

"He extended his hand out to me," Hammer said. "It grew into a daily friendship. He was trying to expand my horizons. He saw a young kid who was impoverished and tried to show me another side of life. To this day, I'm very appreciative."

Baseball has been very, very good to Hammer.

Former Milwaukee Brewers second baseman Pedro Garcia first called him "Little Hammer" because he facially resembled "Hammerin' " Hank Aaron. The label stuck after A's slugger Reggie Jackson started using it.

In 1987, outfielders Mike Davis and Dwayne Murphy each lent Hammer \$20,000 to start Bustin' Records, his Oakland-based record company. "Mike did it from his Christianity standpoint," Hammer said. "He didn't know for sure if I'd be great, but he knew one thing - he saw a guy trying very hard to be something. Mike didn't care if I flopped or not. He was a committed Christian, and he knew I made a lot of sacrifices to try show business.

"I was dabbling in real estate, I had a Porsche and a nice apartment. But when I started doing music, I locked myself in a room. I got three months behind in my car payments. I faced eviction on my apartment. My Porsche got repossessed. They were tough times, and Mike came to my rescue. Murphy did it more as an investment. He could care less about that other stuff. He saw dollars. Dwayne came in after I had my first hit in local radio."

Hammer was a shortstop and second baseman at McClymonds High School in Oakland, the alma mater of baseball greats Frank Robinson and Vada Pinson. He was scouted in high school and was one of 25 survivors in a 500-player tryout camp conducted by the San Francisco Giants.

Hammer said the fluidity needed to play shortstop also serves him well as a dancer. "You need to have quick feet and soft hands to be a shortstop, and to dance you have to be light on your feet and have good coordination," he said.

Hammer doesn't play baseball anymore (although he recently hit a warning track shot on the first pitch of a batting practice session with the Minnesota Twins), but athletic discipline remains an integral part of his agenda. Hammer said he prepared for his 60-city tour by running four miles a day and dancing six hours a day. While he is on the road, he does light weight lifting and two hours of daily dancing as part of his 18-hour workday.

"You'll see a lot of M. C. Hammer in movies," he said. "But it will be Hammer in other characters. I want to do `Die Hard'-type movies as well as `Beverly Hills Cop' movies. I am an actor and it's not a new thing for me. You can hear my music and look at my video work and see there is something there.

" I plan on being around a long time."