

ZZZ.Sam makes heartbroken ballads for the terminally online. The Miami singer/rapper makes songs powered by the frenetic attention spans of the internet age blending melodic emo-rap, bristling pop-punk, and colorful anti-pop experiments, as the basis for songs that feel empathetic and vulnerable. He's a fitting voice for a generation of kids that's lived their young lives in the comfort of digital spaces, forced indoors by forces outside of their control.

His breakout 2022 hit "Running Away" distills the twitchy magnetism of his work into a little over two minutes, using bleary-eyed melodies as the canvas for a meditation on his struggles in life and love. It's relatable and real, which has earned the 18-year-old a lot of listeners in a short amount of time. The track has notched 4 million plays on SoundCloud and reached the top 25 of the SoundCloud charts. Now he's newly signed to Warner Records and working with a host of A-list producers and collaborators including Internet Money, Taz Taylor, Bakkwoods, Marshmello, and Benny Blanco. It's the deserved result for an artist who's always worked to make songs in a way that feels both ambitious and honest.

The young Sam Zelaya recorded his first tracks four years ago, laying vocals off his phone over beats from YouTube. Eventually, his dad gave him a cheap mic, which he used until Warner Records signed him this year. The guerrilla style of Sam's recording harks back to the early SoundCloud rap scene, taking influence from XXXTentacion and Juice WRLD and the singer/songwriter efforts of fellow Floridian Dominic Fike.

Sam's early tracks like "worth it," "cope," and "Out My Face" found some success and he pushed on, submitting his singles to blogs like Daily Chiefers and hosting Twitch streams for his music. One of these was attended by DJ Khaled and led to a shoutout from Khaled that went viral on TikTok. Sam's savviness and ability to put himself out there eventually got him on the radar of Chicago rapper and label executive Lil Bibby, who discovered Juice.

"I made a post of my music and DM'd Bibby two years ago saying 'SIGN ME' in all caps on some weird shit," he says. "Then two years later I'm sitting in my college dorm and I get flooded with DMs from people." Some fans had encouraged Bibby on a livestream to check out Sam's music—and the tracks ("Running Away" and the unreleased "5 Minutes") immediately clicked with the Chicago music mogul. From there, Sam's life would never be the same. "I was trying to balance my school, drop singles, all that," he says. "Then I was just waiting for that moment, and it finally happened so I knew I had to go at it full force. I was kind of speechless."

The University of Florida student flew out to meet with Bibby and played him his whole catalog of more than 150 songs. Bibby was impressed enough to offer the young rapper a deal with his

label, Grade A Productions. “We were just in the back of a car driving around and he turns to me and says, ‘I can tell you’re humble, but just know, you’re the one,’ and I was so caught off guard,” Sam recalls. “But that made me want to go 10 times harder because I realized what my impact could be, me talking about my life, my situations, and how much it resonated with people.”

And so as he works on new music, he’s put that work ethic front and center. Tracks such as the pop punk-influenced “Another Day” detail Sam’s desire to make it, though he’s cognizant that doing so will corrupt his young adulthood. “*All my innocence is slowly drifting me away,*” he sings *From my other shit, but that ain’t getting me some cake.*” He claims to now have more than 200 unreleased songs in the vault, evidence of his grind and that his recent success isn’t enough. He won’t stop until he’s reached everyone who feels as intensely as he does.