

For Kenzo B, rap is both a family business and a cutthroat competition. The 18-year-old native of the Bronx has quickly become one of the most magnetic voices in New York's vibrant drill music scene, an obvious rising star and a powerful female presence in a traditionally male-dominated space. The vocal adaptability and dogged attention to detail—not to mention the charisma that practically drips off of her—have been evident since her breakout single, “Bump It.”

That Dick Dale-sampling track shows off her instant magnetism and provides her a brutal beat on which she demonstrates her brash confidence and offers bitter barbs to anyone who might choose to stand in her way. On another recent single “Make It Lit,” released on Coke Boys / Warner Records, she slides over a more sensitive instrumental—but her mentality remains the same. Over a beat that recalls both '90s R&B and club music, she relentlessly demands respect. The self-possession and boldness she demonstrates on each successive track is no accident—Kenzo isn't shy about where she feels she ranks among her peers. “People just don't be good at it like I am,” she says with a laugh.

That competitive streak was first nurtured at home, where she vied with her brother, Bando, to see who could write the better verse to any number of borrowed beats. The cameras would come later, many of them wielded by Kenzo herself, who was drawn to MCs who posted clips of themselves rapping verses directly to their Facebook or Instagram followers. There was something about the way they refused to hide behind beats, behind meticulous vocal production, behind the superficial forces that insert themselves between artist and audience. It's about using every 16 bars as a new proving ground. “The studio's cool and all,” Kenzo says. “But do you got the same breath control outside?”

The answer, in her case, is a resounding yes. From her studio releases to her instantly iconic live freestyle over Fivio Foreign's “City of Gods” beat, Kenzo is revealing herself as someone dedicated to songcraft but able to unleash, at any moment, the most venomous string of bars imaginable. And the spirit of rivalry forged in her childhood apartment continued when Kenzo took on the world. While she was still in high school, she recorded “Bump It” and the critically acclaimed “The Realest,” which were equal parts menacing and free-spirited, marked by raw energy and tonal sophistication, the likes of which often elude artists twice her age.

As she gears up to release a flurry of new singles—including the piercing, furious “No Tweakin” and the scorching track “Sanctioned”—as well as her debut project on Warner Records, Kenzo has continued to hone her rapid-fire flows and expand her songwriting repertoire. “I want to stay true to myself,” the rapper says, adding that she should be able to “motivate people” without pandering or softening her image. In fact, in an era where social media can pull listeners' attention in a thousand different directions, Kenzo B is proof that the best way to make yourself stand out in rap is still to set aside any petty concerns and simply go harder than everyone else around you.