

roadway composer George Gershwin was born in East New York in 1898, and today on the corner of Linden Boulevard and Van Siclen Avenue sits IS 166, a piano-shaped middle school that bears his name. As a surprise for the latest class of Gershwin graduates, school officials have invited Lil Mama to perform at the eighth graders' commencement ceremony. It's an event made more notable (and frankly, possible) by the fact that the 18-year-old rapper was in a cap and gown for the same ceremony at George Gershwin just four years earlier.

After a quick, Red Bull-fueled rehearsal session in the PTA room with her gum-smacking, neon Reebok-ed backup dancers, school security guards escort Lil Mama to the field, clad in a white "Smooth Criminal" fedora with a rhinestone hatband. Students, parents, cousins and assorted well-wishers start cheering hysterically, whipping out camera phones and running down the field ("Look at Tisha's mother! She has her shoes off!") while Mama and Co move through a quick, choreographed rendition of her single "Lip Gloss." Once the song is done, the graduating class spontaneously begins to sing and clap the beat to Lil Mama's hood hit "No Music" as she walks up to the stage. She silences them with a "Chill, y'all!" then remarks, "I didn't prepare a speech...but for real, congratulations. Set goals. When you go into ninth and tenth grade there's a lot of peer pressure." She then walks back to the school, stopping briefly to pose for photos with cafeteria workers and former teachers, and a gaggle of younger students watching from an adjacent playground start shrieking over, "Lil Mama I love you for real! My lip gloss is poppin' too!"

The night Lil Mama finished recording "Lip Gloss" at Atlanta's Tree Sound studios this past winter, the MC born Niatia Kirkland had humble—though focused—goals in mind. "I wanted to get a song on the radio and



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