

The Saints have a new anthem. For Choppa, it's a whole new world

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Choppa does not have his cowbell.

This is a problem, because like all of us, Choppa has his game day traditions. But, about five weeks ago, all of Choppa's plans went right out the Sprinter van window.

He should be at home on the West Bank. He should be sitting in his certain chair in his certain corner of the house. He should be surrounded by all the things that make the juju feel right on game day. He's still wearing those lucky drawers, but he's got a lucky cowbell, too, and that's on the West Bank. Instead, the Saints are playing against the Philadelphia Eagles for a shot in the NFC Championship game Jan. 20, and Choppa's somewhere on Interstate 10 between New Orleans and Baton Rouge, watching the game on a phone as the signal pops in and out during commercial breaks.

It's not like, when the season started, Choppa knew any of this would happen. Like all of us fans, he didn't know the Saints would have the kind of chemistry it takes to knock down records, one after another. He didn't know it'd be what powered the team to a 10-game winning streak. He didn't know Drew Brees would turn in the kind of performance that has people talking MVP.

And Choppa sure as hell didn't know he'd end up at Brees' surprise 40th birthday party, singing the track he dropped more than a decade and a half ago, while the quarterback blew out candles on a Superdome-shaped cake with a miniature goat on top of it.

Nope, he didn't know any of that.

It's why, though, riding a high propelled forward by the Saints players' love for his old school bounce record and the fans' reawakened appreciation of it, Choppa may not be where he should be. But Choppa's exactly where he's supposed to be.

It's game day in Champions Square, and the wide expanse of concrete between Benson Tower and the Mercedes-Benz Superdome is writhing. It's a mess of fans in black and gold, decked out like it's Mardi Gras and dancing like it's 2002.

Choppa just stepped out onstage, and the lid came off the people below; even the security guards are chop-chopping the air in front of them, bending their knees and shaking their behinds like they were waiting for "Choppa Style" since they woke up this morning.

Choppa's manager, James "FLX" Smith, leaps off the side and runs off to take video from the sound board — the former TV guy will laugh later when the crew makes fun of him having to "catch those angles" — and Choppa leads the audience in a cacophony of "Who Dats."

Like the three other performances he'll give today, Choppa's brief. He gives the fans what they want, amps them up, then hustles on to the next spot as his guys shuffle him through crowds as quickly but as nicely as they can. It's a two-and-a-half minute song, but it's also a thousand selfies.

"This was done organically," Smith tells me in the Sprinter van later, recounting how, in a matter of weeks, a video of the Saints players dancing to "Choppa Style" in a post-game victory just popped off. Next thing they knew, the song was playing inside the Superdome as fans caught on and Mark Ingram, Alvin Kamara and Michael Thomas were dancing on the sidelines. There was a spark, and then, the explosion.

"They say lightning never strikes twice," Choppa said Sunday. "But I'm here to say, stay prepared. Embrace it. Embrace it when it's your turn."

And right now, it's Choppa's turn.

He and Smith were already working on a kind of rebrand, a rethinking of what to do next. They had a couple songs, maybe three, ready to release when they were thrown onto a different course. It wasn't what they planned, but that doesn't mean it wasn't on the right track.

"We were working to cultivate his image around celebration," Smith said, "because when the song first came out, it was about booty shaking, but we're a little older now."

Taysom Hill grabs the ball on a wildcat play, and Choppa watches from the back seat of the Sprinter carrying his crew from show to show on game day. The sun's starting to set, so golden light is filtering in through the blacked-out windows, and Choppa's fingers are orange from the cheddar and sour cream Ruffles he got to go with his hot tea, a salve against all the singing he's been doing the past few weeks.

"Taysom Hill a tough white boy," he points out. "I *hate* to see that boy get drunk and fight."

We're barely out of that "sad-ass first quarter," but things are already looking up. Marshon Lattimore had just made a pick, and Choppa's nearly ready for the day's Round 2: An event for former U.S. Rep. Cleo Fields, who infamously was caught on video stuffing cash into his pockets from former Gov. Edwin Edwards. It's a fundraiser for Fields, but Choppa's getting paid.

It's another quick performance and another round of selfies, but soon Choppa's got the full screen. We're at Quarters, a bar and restaurant in Baton Rouge with a bowling alley. The photo requests have died down as just about everyone in the place keeps their eyes on the screen. Smith is rolling a ball toward the pins on the other end of the alley during commercial breaks, but Skip, Choppa's hype man; and Evil, the muscle of the group, stand with the rapper. When something goes right for the Saints, Choppa and Evil smack the bar in front of them like they're high-fiving the whole team.

It's late in the fourth quarter now, and Marshon Lattimore makes a pick.

"This is why I did not cut my hair!" Choppa says, running a hand over the twin braids on the crown of his head. When the Saints win, you don't change what works, and right now, the Saints are winning.

Alvin Kamara seals the game with a first-down.

"Let's go," Choppa says, a hand in the air to round up his guys.

"I just thank the Saints," Skip says in the car. "Because this woulda been a bad ride home."

We're back in New Orleans, and it's just before Choppa goes onstage at Harrah's Casino. Cheeky Blakk is here, hugging, laughing and catching up, but Smith pulls his artist to the side.

Smith has been holding something back from him all day, quietly making arrangements between check-ins on his daughter, who was born just hours ago. Smith's baby girl — all 8 pounds, 15 ounces of her — is in the hospital with her mother, but he couldn't miss today. Especially not now.

Finally, Smith tells Choppa: He's going to Drew Brees' surprise 40th birthday party.

Are you for real?

Yeah, it's for real.

"Man, three weeks ago, nobody wanted me in no private party," Choppa laughs.

As soon as the Harrah's show wraps, the Sprinter is headed Uptown to Port Orleans, where former and current Saints players are sipping out of customized Yeti tumblers and coupe glasses filled with an orange sherbet concoction topped with images of Brees as a little league player. There's a turf floor at a perpetual 40-yard line, live artists painting a giant number nine and lots of Untuckit jokes. When Choppa walks in, Drew and Brittany Brees are drinking off the luges that run through a giant ice sculpture in the shape of No. 40.

Choppa's here when someone hands him a mic, and he gets to sing to Brees as the birthday cake is rolled out.

Choppa's here when Ingram finds him to show him the shoes he wore today: Cleats with Choppa's face on them. Choppa's face on *Mark Ingram's shoes*, man.

Choppa's here when there's a video tribute playing to Brees, but he's not looking at the video. He's looking around the room. There's a half-smile on his face, so you can't see the gold in his teeth, but it makes it to his eyes. It's wild.

He's just so incredibly, inconceivably here.

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