



COMMUNITY

OLD-SCHOOL REMIX

Workshop Houston's Beat Shop

THIS ARTICLE FOLLOWS UP ON PIECES IN THE PREVIOUS TWO ISSUES OF CITE (84, 85) ABOUT STUDENTS AT WORKSHOP HOUSTON WHO DESIGNED AND FABRICATED A BICYCLE AND CLOTHING LINE.

WORKSHOP HOUSTON BEAT SHOP IS LOCATED IN A house so unassuming I had trouble finding it and had to ask the instructor at Workshop Houston's Chopper Shop for directions. I met there with Javonte Guilory, a Ryan Middle School student who has participated in the Beat Shop for a year. It seems fitting that the creation of music, of hip hop, should be tucked away from the flash, the candy paint, the jewelry, away from all the materialistic images associated not just with the Houston rap scene but with rap music in general. This setting allows kids to focus on their craft and experiment with kick drums, bass lines, melodies.

Javonte was waiting for me, his tall, slender frame leaning against a shelf full of vinyl records. Above us were posters of music greats such as Robert Johnson, his giant spiderlike hands fretting a guitar, and countless hip-hop stars from the past 30 years.

We shook hands and introduced ourselves, his Louisiana accent immediately noticeable. He has only been in Houston for a few years. After a brief tour we settled into the computer lab. All of the computers

were programmed with recording software that music industry professionals use. His initial nervousness fell away as he grabbed two sets of headphones. "I've been working on something. Something old-school." I smiled thinking that the term "old-school" was meant for me, but I was mistaken. He explained that he had been listening to Ray Charles and Nina Simone and had come across the song "Firefly" by Jeremy Steig. He played the original song for me. The music was brooding and melodic, the audio hissing as if it were being played on a record player. Javonte stopped to explain his creative process, "I sampled this part and made the voices higher."

"You mean you raised the sample an octave?" He nodded. "It sounded better to me this way."

He proceeded to show me what he did with the music sample. The sample was displayed as a sound wave. He programmed kick drums, snares, and synthesizers, all shaped around that initial sample. I asked Javonte to explain what made him choose the specific sounds. He replied, "The music has to hit you." He emphasized this point with a closed fist tapping the desk. "Like it's from your heart. A heart beating." I asked him if it was music that made someone reflect on life. "Yeah, it's music that you can think to. Music that you can drive to."

"If you were a rapper, what would you rap about

with this song? Would it be about a girl?"

He shook his head. "I like serious rap music."

He went on to explain that his friends told him about the Beat Shop program the year before. They were rapping and creating beats back then. Javonte sang their praises, but added that he'd improved, and now they liked to rap over his beats.

A drum lesson was being given two rooms away; we left the computer lab and stood by the door listening to the practice session.

"Do you play instruments?"

He shook his head, "I played the clarinet in elementary. I've played the drums before, but I like making beats better."

When asked if music was something he wanted to pursue after high school, he shook his head casually. He wants to be a chef, but he quickly added that music would always be a part of his life. The answer makes sense. Fusing concepts together is a part of both the kitchen and the recording studio. Javonte is learning how to shape music, which is about abstract problem-solving, and his portfolio is proof that he is figuring out the rules. The skill set translates into any creative endeavor. If Javonte is able to mix sounds from 30 years ago with the rhythms that he is growing up with, and creating something uniquely his own, any profession he wants to try will be possible.

- Brandon White