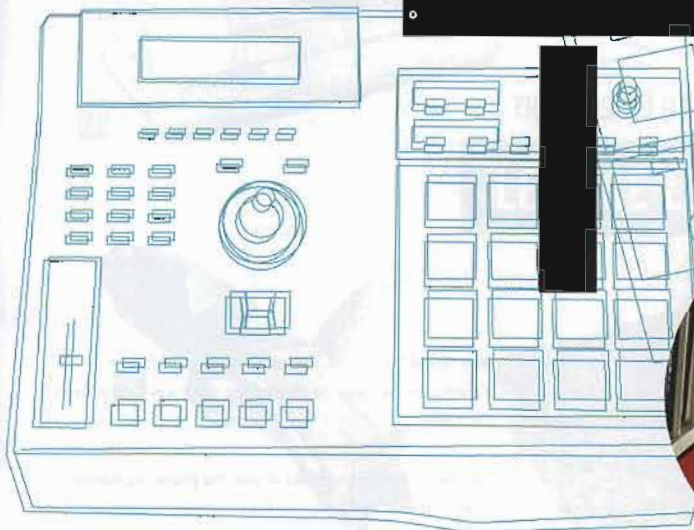


Feature:

FINALSCRA



Soft-spoken Cincinnati beatmaker Hi-Tek has turned Covington, KY, into a hip-hop mecca. As incongruous as it may seem, some of the hottest sounds and biggest stars in the game—including the Game—are converging on Washington Street, a sleepy, historic tract in northern Kentucky. That's because since 2003, this is where the producer has mixed his alchemy and drawn the beat-hungry: an A-list of MC collaborators he calls "regulars," like Snoop Dogg, Common, Talib Kweli, Young Buck and Busta Rhymes.

Hi-Tek moved his production headquarters to the chill digs just across the muddy Ohio from his Cincinnati home, after buying a storefront building housing the former Backstage Studios. He's refit the large space. There's an A room with an SSL console, a B room with a ProController ProTools setup, a rehearsal room, a rec room and three offices—"like a record label," says Hi-Tek.

It's definitely getting a lot of use: He's been chopping beats for upcoming sets from 50 Cent and Busta Rhymes and is working with Kweli on a full-length follow-up to their 2000 Rawkus Records breakout, *Reflection Eternal*, this time for Geffen. It was the mainstream success of *Reflection* that sealed Hi-Tek's producer bona fides, boosting his reputation as a highly skilled beatmaker with shelf life.

Hi-Tek proved on the disk that he was capable of progressing from critically praised past achievement, moving forward in particular from the love heaped on 1998's *Black Star*. Many heads cite the latter set as the pinnacle fusion of tru-school

sound and rhyme, and some of the best work from MCs Kweli and Mos Def. *The Reflection* duo met in the mid 1990s through Mood, a local 'Nati outfit Kweli came to work with after they sparked regional buzz with "Hustle on the Side," a Hi-Tek production. Both have been busy ever since.

Speaking to *Mugshot* from his home in the 513, Hi-Tek detailed a versatile mix of current projects, including a 10-song production deal with Dr. Dre on *Aftermath* and two tracks he's produced for 50 Cent's full-length *The Massacre*. If he seems to have taken on the role of sonic diplomat—a one-man East Coast, West Coast peacemaker—he's not letting on.

"Basically, I'm just workin'," Hi-Tek says. "Whatever tracks I have a feeling would work, I give to a particular project. Certain tracks I keep for myself. But like fresh tracks nobody else has ever heard, I submit them to Dre, the *Aftermath* cats. I got a song deal with Snoop Dogg, too. But I'm really proud of these two tracks for 50 Cent as well."

Wherever you're from—Brooklyn, Compton, Evanston, OH—doesn't seem to matter to the man. It's what you bring to the mic that counts. Hi-Tek's locale and lack of camp mentality bode well for him: His ability to seamlessly blend genres and sonically cater to artists steeped in different styles is what attracts the MCs.

When prompted about this, he credits growing up in the Midwest, which practically forced him, he says, to tend toward a mixed oeuvre. "Basically, you come to Cincinnati, you hear

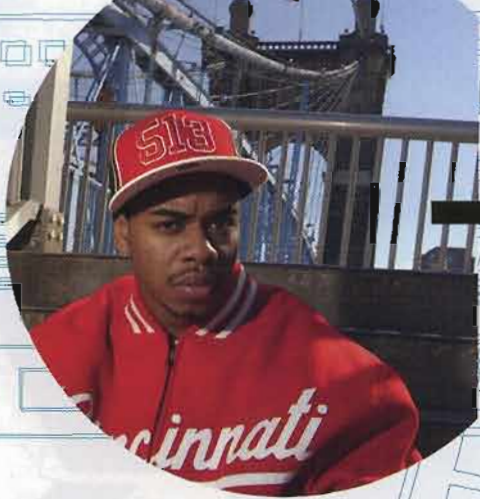
whatever's hot on the radio," he says.

Yet that makes forging a successful career soaking up and distilling the eclectic mélange he's managed in "the heart of it all" sound easy, which it isn't. Hi-Tek's open-source trick has been to blend the music trickling into the Ohio River Valley from every direction with the vintage and homegrown.

It's a unique, if subtle, Midwest sound, which Hi-Tek describes as hooking the two coasts up with the South to form a bumping, funky hump that sits in the middle of the pocket—vibing just north of the craggy hills and southern Kentucky bluegrass. "It's soulful, real soulful," Hi-Tek notes, "but at the same time gangsta, with more of a bounce, a southern feel."

That accurately depicts the auricular funk underpinning "Tough Guy," a Hi-Tek-produced track off Xzibit's *Weapons of Mass Destruction*, released in December on Sony. He takes Parliament to gangsta-land on the cut, which teams the West Coast MC with Brooklyn-born, Long Island-raised raggaman Busta Rhymes. A fat, down-register, creep-and-stop bass line mixes with suspense-sustaining keys, while an undercurrent "oompah" chorus flexes the whole freaky, jack-in-the-box proceeding. And Xzibit and Busta just gnarl the shit out of the mics.

On another cut, "I Get High," off Lloyd Banks' 2004 Interscope release, *The Hunger for More*, Hi-Tek switches up expectations, mixing the cheeba ode, which features Snoop Dogg and 50 Cent, into a subtle, "doh-doh bags" sophisticate. The stac-



Hi-Tek

cat guitar runs, metronome swing and organ turnarounds conjure a pair of two-toned shoes propped up on a desk; some cat leaning back in the shadows, smoke rising from his tilted homburg.

While some of the collaborative joints are electronic, that there's a space enabling these moments is just great. Regardless, Hi-Tek's studio has been well received by the high-wattage spitters who've flown in to pay a visit, and it's not hard to understand why. Located well away from the klieg lights, egos and effed-up beefs that tend to burn hotter in industry towns, MCs can breathe deep, relax and just flow. Hi-Tek has to switch backdrops too: Traveling is part of his work. But the skills and hassle-free nature of Covington's resident producer have clearly magnetized the platinum players.

Regarding other projects, he's got a "cold, shit is crazy" joint destined for Busta's upcoming full-length called "Rough Around the Edges." The track features Queensbridge's Nas and Cincinnati R&B man Dion—one of Hi-Tek's go-to vocalists for big-label work.

A longer-term project involves trying to break Dion large. The soul man nails the chorus on the Game's "Runnin'," which Hi-Tek produced for *The Documentary*, the West Coast MC's chart-topping January release on Aftermath.

Yet Hi-Tek is wary after a less than sanguine artist-under-development experience with Jonelle, the soul singer featured on "Round and Round," the single off the producer's first solo full-length, *Hi-Teknology*. Released in 2001 on Rawkus/Priority Records, the track charted number one on Billboard and garnered Jonelle a deal with Def Jam. Problem was, she wasn't ready.

"I was producing the hell out of it," Hi-Tek says. "At the end of the day, the artist has to carry the torch; it's not about me. I have an avenue to get Dion a situation, like a record deal, but I just want to make sure he's ready and the music is ready before I go up to the big dogs."

Despite his studio move, Hi-Tek says he's committed to the Queen City, "passionate to crack Cincinnati open and bring some millions home, you know? There's real solid talent out here."

History proves that claim: Some of the funkier tracks ever pressed were recorded at Cincinnati's King Records, including James Brown's first hit "Please, Please, Please." The label was the first to sign Brown on its Federal subsidiary back in 1956 when he was still seeking wider appeal. Funktabulous 'Nati native, Bootsy Collins, who grew enormous calluses thwacking the bass for Brown's backing band, the JB's, and later for Parliament Funkadelic, remains a resident. He's also a regular drop-in at Hi-Tek's studio.

Still, nurturing local artists can be tough. Hi-Tek has yet to put on another talent show like the one he held in 2003, which garnered Dion a production agreement with the producer. Meant to reinvigorate the local scene, the show recalled the Friday nights of Hi-Tek's youth, growing up on Cincinnati's west side when his miniature crew would breakdance at the old Regal theater.

Drawing the community together in this way also served another goal: a need to heal through art. The community and local authorities have struggled to improve relations since their 2001 nadir, when police fatally shot an unarmed 19-year-old African-American man. The shooting set off protests, some violent, as the tragedy followed a string of similar events in which lethal force used by local constables was questioned by many residents and community leaders.

Hi-Tek's contest, which drew hopefuls from all over the Midwest and included Def Jam and MCA Records execs, took place at the Cincinnati Convention Center amid an ongoing boycott of city businesses. Nonetheless, the show was considered an apolitical event that highlighted the area's potential. It received a great deal of support both inside and outside the community, despite a recent penchant among the most tight-assed members of the city's conservative political machine for stifling artistic expression: from censoring Robert Mapplethorpe's erotic photography to banning performances by N.W.A.

As is typical for Hi-Tek, who searches for continuity in differing perspectives, he claimed the show was mostly about the music.

Just then a little voice breaks in over the phone, squeaking: "Hey... I'm making beats!" Hi-Tek's two-year old son, Montana, after a little bit of strained conversation, then says to me: "Peace out!"

"That's my little music man," says Hi-Tek, whose given name is Tony Cottrell. "He under construction right now, though. He's in training."

Pass it on, man, pass it on. It's your style.

By Shane Kite
Photos by David Sorcher