

The Early Bird

— He's been around for as long as we can remember, is responsible for bringing some of the world's biggest Hip Hop acts to the country as well as single-handedly putting Belgium on the global musical map. Alex Deforce and Julien Mourlon spend a Sunday afternoon with illustrious soulster Lefto and are pleased to finally find someone who made judicious use of VHS'.

Writers **Alex Deforce** and **Julien Mourlon**



Let's Go Back, Way Back. Back Into Time.

The eighties are running to their end and with that, the golden era of Hip Hop is peeking around the corner. Whilst groups like De La Soul weren't particularly big in Belgium, home-grown pioneers like Benni B and Daddy K were schooling Belgium's future b-boys in Hip Hop culture. "10 Qu'on Aime" was the name of the generation's television show and it had the young Lefto glued to the screen.

"They got me interested in the whole style, I had the same shirt they had, checked their shoes and everything" explains the DJ. "Back then, I also made mixtapes with songs I'd record from television. You had Yo!MTV Raps on and I didn't know where to get that music. I don't even know if it was available around here. So I made mixtapes to listen to in the car and to give out to friends."

"Every day started with music, the same routine always put into play: wake up, go downstairs, have some breakfast, go to school" says Lefto "and this, always to the sound of my father's music, from Jazz to France Gall". The family lived in Ternat, so the 40 minutes drive to the young music-lover's school was always accompanied by the likes of Stan Gets, Miles Davis and others.

Whilst at high school, Lefto met Akro (ex-member of Belgian Hip Hop outfit Starflam) who got him into mixing and, ultimately, into Hip Hop. "We were headlining the yearly prom night at Jette's Atheneum" he proudly says.

At the time, graffiti was the occupation of choice for most young urbanites and Lefto quickly become acquainted with Brussels' P50 crew. "I usually was the guy on the look-out. We hit subway stations by night, sometimes taking scaffolds with us, and I was there to check if there wasn't any police creeping up on us". His knack for being the first one awake after nights spent out in the cold in deserted subway stations and empty train yards gave him his nickname: Lefto.

A name soon lent to his first and self titled radioshow: The Lefto Show, on local radio station Radio Action. From six till eight in the morning, Lefto was on air for all fellow early birds in the city, although not all the way live... "I pre-recorded the show on mini-disc I wasn't actually there" remembers Lefto "but my colleague Rim-K was in the Stockel studio every morning though". The show got a lot of response, especially from school kids on their way to class in the morning..

True to his ubiquitous nature, our man of many styles soon found himself behind the counter at what was arguably – until its



recent closure – the country's Holly Mecca to any music aficionados: Brussels' Music Mania record shop. "I used to work for the European Parliament, as third secretary for Minister Willy De Clercq, and after my nine-to-five I'd run to Music Mania to buy records. Since I was a regular customer, I could go behind the counter and check out the records that weren't yet put in the shelves. So when a man one day asked me for a certain record, I gave it to him, because I knew my way around there. The shop owner stepped up to me and said I should come and work with him". Lefto quit his job the next day and the rest is history...

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A quick glance at his busy schedule, and we find it hard to believe our man still isn't living of his music – he still works a three-day-a-week job at Footlocker, partly to feed his sneaker addiction. Seen from our perspective, Lefto has everything to gain by quitting his daytime job and go for a fulltime DJ career... "I could but it's though, you never really know with DJ'ing. Plus I don't want to lose the contact with the streets.

If you stay in your studio all day long, you might not feel it anymore. Some bigger DJ's sometimes ask me for tips because they don't know what happens outside anymore".

For almost an hour now, we've been talking about music, surrounded by thousands of records, a stack of mixing gear, boxes of old mixtapes and demos. On the ground we spot a couple of piles of new cd's. Presumably promo copies sent out to be played on the radio. Going through all of that seems like a dreadful task, one might want to hire an assistant for. That, however seems unnecessary. "Usually the cover shows if the album's quality or not. If you have good taste for music, you have good taste for artwork. But there are exceptions to that, of course. With some albums the music's brilliant, the cover's shit. It's a shame, really."

And with that bit of advice, we shake on it and leave the man in his studio...

www.lefto.be

DJ Lefto has a residency with Appletree Records in Amsterdam and will be playing at Giles Peterson's Worldwide Festival this summer in Sete, France. His radio show De Hop can also be heard on Studio Brussel every Thursday night from 22h00.