

FROM HIPHOP TO HEARTLAND WITH MOE-Z M.D.

Mississippi Delta roots. West Coast gangsta rap. Heartland rock and roll.

YOU'D HAVE A DIFFICULT TIME FINDING THOSE THREE STYLES IN ONE SECTION OF a record store, let alone in one man. But the three streams flow together in the person of rapper/singer/songwriter/producer/multi-instrumentalist Moe-Z M.D. Who else can claim to have worked with hip-hop legend Tupac and rock acts like John Mellencamp and the Wallflowers?

Moe-Z was born in Clarksdale, Mississippi, the epicenter of the Delta blues tradition. He started singing before entering grade school and learned to play several instruments not long after. "Then," recalls Moe-Z, "my pops saw that my sister and I had some talent, so he decided to move us out to California."

The transplanted youngster came of age in parallel with West Coast hip-hop. Snoop Dogg was one of his early musical acquaintances, and Moe-Z became part of the circle of rappers, musicians, and producers who contributed to Tupac's landmark 1995 album, *Me Against the World*. Moe-Z also wrote songs for New Edition and sang backup for Phillip Bailey and Earth, Wind and Fire.

Moe-Z remembers his role on *Me Against the World*, now universally regarded as one of hip-hop's most significant discs: "I was a producer. Some people think that in hip-hop that just means the guy who makes the beats. I did do that—I'd make the music, send Tupac the tracks, and he'd write to them in the studio. But I was also responsible for hiring musicians, booking the studio, and talking to the people at the record label. I was in control of the way everything sounded."

Not long after, Moe-Z's publisher learned that Mellencamp was looking for someone who could add beat loops to his music. "He was trying to get hold of Dr. Dre," recounts Moe-Z, "but my publisher said I'd be perfect. Mellencamp was impressed, and this began a six-year stay."

Moe-Z says the transition wasn't as big a leap as it might seem. "Switching over to being a member of John's band was actually pretty easy," he says. "I grew up with all styles of music. I've been surrounded by gospel, hip-hop, jazz, pop, R&B, and rock all my life."

Has that mixed-bag background helped Moe-Z distinguish him-

self as a performer, songwriter, and producer? "Absolutely," he says. "It stretched my creativity. Having more genres to draw from lets me mix things that might not have been heard together before. I like to surprise people that way. For example, right now I'm working on a hip-hop track with banjo. People hear it and say, 'What?!'"

The Mellencamp stint led directly to Moe-Z's current gig with the Wallflowers. "I was already a fan when they opened for Mellencamp, and then they became fans of me," says Moe-Z. "I played keys and percussion and sang on their tour, and loved every minute of it."

Moe-Z's main instrument these days is a Yamaha Motif music production synthesizer. "Oh man," he says, "I just love that keyboard! It's incredible for writing on the road. It's a total workstation — you don't even need a separate drum machine. It has a great mix of old and new sounds. You can play, sample and program whole tracks all within one box. It's easy to use, too. I've barely even looked at the manual. I've been able to learn almost everything by feel and common sense."

How does Moe-Z — who also plays drums, bass, guitar, sax, flute, and trumpet — rate the onboard instrumental sounds? "Some of them are so close to the real thing, it's incredible," he says. "I recently recorded some tracks using the guitar sounds, and if you didn't watch me play them on the Motif, you'd swear I was really playing guitar. The keyboard sounds are also very realistic, especially the electric pianos and organs. The bass sounds are great, too—there are uprights, fat roundwound tones, deep drum-machine-type basses, and DX7 sounds from back in the day. There's even a patch called 'Snoop Bass,' which sounds exactly like Snoop Dogg's synth-bass sound."

Moe-Z plans to include the new Motif tracks on his upcoming solo debut. He promises that the as-yet-untitled disc will be as unpredictable as his career: "There are lots of surprises. For example, I might sing over the sort of track that you'd expect a rap on, or rap over a smooth track. I've never wanted to do exactly the same thing as someone else, because when you copy another sound, you diminish the meaning of your music. So I just do what makes me happy."

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