

WORK IT OUT

Even on left-field joints, Oh No makes beats because practice makes perfect

He started making beats by breaking into his elder brother's room and learning the SP-1200. Now well past adolescence, producer/writer/rapper Oh No and big bro Madlib (you mighta heard of him) hold down a collective crew of misfits from Oxnard, Calif., with their hypnotic, jazz-infused beats and spiritual affinity for hip-hop's mid-'80s Golden Era.

It was Brother Lib, as Oh No calls him, who introduced him to the artists and rappers living between L.A.'s San Fernando Valley and sleepy Santa Barbara. It was on Brother Lib's bed that Oh No would sit and watch big bro craft his future hip-hop credentials. And it was with Oxnard-area spitters such as

Lootpack, Wildchild and MED that Oh No started taking his own at-bats.

So it's slightly jarring to hear the plaintive Arabic vocals and Middle Eastern strings woven with scratchy, distorted guitars and distant horn squalling over kicks and claps that thread through Oh No's latest record, *Dr. No's Oxperiment* (Stones Throw, 2007).

"My man Egon, he's the mastermind," Oh No says about Stones Throw's general manager and the genesis of his dark and vaguely menacing 28-track beat tape. "He shot me some Turkish and Lebanese music, all kinds of Italian loops—just crazy, ill music—and said, 'Just try to make some beats out of it. Do whatever you want to do and just open your mind to it.'"

Oh No opened both his mind and his car's windows to the experience. "Everything starts in the car," he says. "If I have a record, I might burn it to CD and go bang it out in the car. When I ride to it, I can examine it,

put it all together like a Rubik's Cube. You know where you want to put the colors."

It took him "a minute," he says, to get into this new music. But once he did, he moved fast—an Oh No trademark. Two weeks later, he'd sent nearly 40 beats back to the label, receiving the remainder of Egon's new collection in return.

Freed from the car's CD player, *Oxperiment* beats followed a path like Oh No's others, starting in the producer's trusted Akai MPC2000. Bass lines and keys anchor the drums and loops. Oh No recently discovered Propellerhead Reason and uses it primarily for its keyboard sounds. "From there, I might put it through the Roland VS-1680, add textures to it, then take it to Pro Tools and lay it down, ghetto-style."

Classic style, too. Oh No eschews the latest tech to stay with familiar tools. He records to Pro Tools 5 in Mac OS 9, going through an old Digidesign Digi




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001 interface. "I prefer OS 9 for some of its features," he explains. "And I got my plug-ins: reverbs, delays, echoes, stereo effects, wah-wah. The simplest are the best. I'm not doing a Spielberg movie, you know? I grew up off of Pete Rock and Primo. I like it raw."

For this record, Oh No focused on trying to make every beat "something different," he says. "Just totally flip it. Sample it backward, add wah-wahs—whatever. One time I might want to loop it, or I might just try to find some drums or melodies to chop up. I'll flip whatever, I don't care who it is. It don't necessarily gotta come out. Just purely for practice, just doing music. If it happens to come out, that'll be tight."

The *Oxperiment* isn't all trippy microtonal psych-soul, though. There's some dirty blues, like the Sly Stone-inflected "Bouncers," the Motown jangle of "Come Back" and some Isley Brothers guitar strut ("No Guest List").

"A lot of people say hip-hop is dead, and I understand that being where music is nowadays," Oh No says. "But it ain't dead. Hip-hop is right here in the Ox. You can come out here and hear the real hip-hop all day."

"There's a lot of good music and there's a lot of bad music. You just gotta filter through it. Just like food. I'm not gonna eat bad food. I'm trying to eat gourmet meals all the time, whether it's macaroni and cheese or whatever. I'm trying to make it gourmet, trying to make it the best way I can. That's how music has gotta be." 

DAN MONICK