

CLASS PRESIDENT

Ivy Leaguer Devo Springsteen goes from venture capitalist to Kanye's beatmaker

It's hard to believe Devo Springsteen when he says music was not his first career choice—or that his work producing tracks for pop betties and soul queens is all a bit of sublime happenstance, a trick of timing and, sure, some ambition.

Crafting gospel-flaked spirit-lifters for soul crooner John Legend, ghetto meditations for Nas and one of Kanye West's biggest hits sounds like the résumé of a man born to music. But Springsteen, known to his mother as Devon Harris, seems as surprised as anyone about the bright arc of his entertainment career.

"I almost went into the Peace Corps," he says. "I never wanted to be in the music business. I never grew up thinking, 'I want to be a rapper.' I wanted to be a stockbroker."

A military upbringing took him to countries like Belgium and Germany, but it was at the University of Pennsylvania, enrolled as a business major, where his volunteer urges gave way to finance—and music. When he didn't make the cut for Penn's choral group, Springsteen pursued DJing, landing in fellow Penn undergrad John Stephens' band.

After graduation, Stephens—later known as John Legend—and Springsteen moved to Manhattan.

Working for a venture-capitalist firm by day and punching out beats at night, Springsteen learned that his cousin Kanye West had also recently moved to New York City. The first time he met his cousin in New York, Springsteen played him some beats. "They were wack," he says, "but he was very supportive. He gave me drum sounds and a lot of tips, told me to delay the 808. I picked up a lot of secrets from him."

When the dot-com bubble burst and Springsteen found himself jobless "for a minute," West hired him as production assistant and A&R man, an arrangement that brought Legend onto West's nascent G.O.O.D. Music label. Springsteen later produced three tracks ("Livin' It Up," "So High" and "Refuge") on Legend's debut, *Get Lifted* (G.O.O.D. Music/Sony 2004), but it was his work on West's 2005 hit, "Diamonds from Sierra Leone," that earned Springsteen a Grammy, accelerating his production career.

"There's a certain amount of respect that comes with it," Springsteen says of the honor. There's also friendly rivalry. "One of my best friends, [Legend], has five Grammys. My cousin has six. I need at least one or two more to really be complete." With tracks for Common, Britney Spears and a bouncing Prince-funk production for Aretha Franklin online for 2007, he's in the race.


New Springsteen tracks start with the melody. "It could be a sample, it could be someone playing keys," he says, "but the melody is the root. The drums come next,

then an alternate melody, which becomes the bridge."

His modest production center includes a Yamaha Motif, Pro Tools and a MacBook Pro, with an MPC, Roland VS-1880 and "a little mixer and some speakers" rounding it out. Surprisingly, he doesn't program drums in the MPC. "I don't even know how to do it. I use it on every joint, but mainly for the sounds."

A Neumann TLM 103 mic handles everything from guitars to vocals, and a new Vintech 273 preamp is barely out of its packaging. But even with Pro Tools, Springsteen still records heavily on the VS-1880. "I don't love the sound of Pro Tools," he says. "Maybe I'm just accustomed to the 1880, but there's a certain warmth it gives to basses and drums that I don't get in Pro Tools."

And his keen ear for drum sounds leads to some old-school recording techniques. For Nas' "Let There Be Light," Springsteen sent the drums to tape—regular, old 90-minute cassette tape. "We recorded live drums, squashed the hell out of them, then ran them through a TEAC cassette player that probably hadn't been used in five years," he says. "We literally recorded it to a Maxell cassette, then back into the board."

For aspiring producers, Springsteen offers encouragement: "I don't play any instruments, and I'm relatively new to the production/songwriting landscape. And I have a Grammy, and I'm going around the world. If I can do it, anyone can. It's not rocket science. But it is a lot of hard work and sacrifice." 

**"I never grew up thinking, 'I want to be a rapper.' I wanted to be a stockbroker."
—Devo Springsteen**