

Zactly!

How Tim Westwood became the voice of Hip Hop.

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Then the moment finally came, I have to say I was touched. It was about 10.50pm, near the end of a Friday show on Radio 1, after the usual aural assault from Ludacris and G-Unit and Kanye West, when Tim Westwood said, 'I want to big up my man Simon at The Observer - we're travelling with a journalist tonight because we're BIG like that!' I felt honoured, but I tried to be cool, like I knew it was coming all along and it was no big thing, concealing my crushing true belief that I would be leaving yet another Westwood show without a mention.

Up to this moment, it seemed that everyone else in the whole of Britain had been acknowledged. All the crews and clans, 'my Eastbourne crew, Dave and the Big Knob Crew in Scotland, Drash in Bolton I GOT ya! Shout out to my man Trevor Nelson who really showed me mad love in hooking me up with that Fifty show. I want to big up my team Tuan and Dre and Anna. Come on let's GO! To all our freaky LADIES...'

I was pleased to be included in a show that had included the phrases 'Bow down and kiss the RING', 'underSTAND this!' and 'ZACTLY! Without the E!' - that strange urban lexicon that has brought as much ridicule as respect, dispensed by a white man who speaks like a black kid, standing up aggressively at the microphone, hitting a touch-screen to unleash sound effects of screeching cars and exploding bombs. 'Fall back,' he says. 'Kiss the ring. Damn, that's the way it's going down. We're riding out tonight. Fall back. We're coming to Club M in Luton tonight. Luton come party with Westwood!'

An hour later, he sits in a van emblazoned with his face and logos and show times, on his way to a club where denim and trainers are permitted but no hoods or caps, guided there by satnav and all manner of toys and gadgets and DVD screens that fall from the roof to show the latest American car shows. Westwood talks about his new satellite television programme, and his plans to attend a memorial for a young black friend. He talks about the possibility of getting a manager now that things are getting so busy.

'I tell you, man, things are crazy right now,' he says. 'People said that hip-hop was a phase, but this is 2004 and we have the hip-hop generation.

People used to hate us, but now it's a multi-million-dollar industry. It's always been a struggle, but now I'm ready. I'm built for it.'

Westwood - mid-forties though he says he's 27, heavy eyelids and tidy black hair - is the foremost hip-hop DJ in Europe, a position he's held for almost 20 years, practically since hip-hop was invented. Meeting him at his Justice Entertainment office in Portland Square, one encounters a tall and powerful man concerned with standard creative business matters: delivery dates, emails, future engagements. Everywhere I go there are framed Sony Radio Awards. He tells me he used to be

envious when he saw how frantic things were for his DJ friend Funkmaster Flex in New York, and how hard it is to get work or respect or money in London, but how things have changed.

'This office is all about making it happen,' he explains. 'My dad would always ask me how it's going, and for about 15 years I would say to him, "I'm just trying to make it happen." Then he would keep on asking, "When is it going to happen?" Truthfully, I think it's happening right now.'

When he speaks he does not sound like he does on the radio, and he does not wave his arms. 'It's a Wednesday lunchtime,' he observes. 'It's a different vibe with a different energy level. You wouldn't want me sitting here going, "Yeah, man! This is how it's going DOWN!" If I'm with my mother I might do my belt up a little tighter and not have my trousers hanging down and drop the swearing, but I'm still me. I'll just change the tempo. But if I'm hanging out with Dre in a club tonight, sure my trousers will be hanging down, sure we'll be kicking it.'

On this Wednesday lunchtime, Dre, Westwood's 20-year-old personal assistant, is just on his way to get the cappuccinos. 'You got dough, man?' Westwood asks him. 'This is show business,' he says when Dre has gone. 'People don't want to listen to the show and it be mad fucking straight. It's a hip-hop show, they want some realness in there. That's where a lot of BBC television always fails - they always want that middle-class explanation.' I ask Westwood about his detractors, those who call him a whigger - a white nigger - and he says he rarely meets them. 'The way I speak is the way a lot of kids speak now,' Westwood says. 'All cities are multicultural. The racial issue has never been something I've been very much aware of - I'm so involved with the audience, and they've always known me, and it's never an issue if I'm white or black.' The phone rings. It is his mother, to whom he speaks softly, as if in a secret pact. 'When I started in this game all the other DJs would hate me,' he resumes. 'This is not an easy game to make it in.' Personally, I love the way he speaks, and the passion he brings. Rather than ridicule him, hip-hop artists love him, not least because he was the only man who gave them airtime when they were starting out. After a recent appearance on his Radio 1 show, Jay-Z affirmed that 'Westwood has held me down from day one, Westwood is family - we've grown up together.' 50 Cent came to see a Westwood show in New York earlier this year. 'He's in tune with what's going on over here, even though he's all the way over there,' 50 Cent informed Mixmag. 'So when he calls, I'm going to come out especially.'

Westwood says he'd soon know if they thought he looked foolish. 'If I do a club and I'm on until two, I'm not going to disappear at five past two,' he says.

'I ain't built for that. I'll be there hanging out. The next day we might go for something to eat in the local hood spot or a little American clothing spot and hang out. Everyone's got a story about meeting me, or their friends meeting me. There's always relentless Westwood stories out there.'

This is his 10th year at Radio 1, and about 600,000 listen to each show. Matthew Bannister, the station's former controller, told me that when he was constructing a new credible image for the network, all the research said that he would have to recruit Westwood. The DJ was at Capital earning £35 a show, and was originally reluctant to move. 'They sent Pete Tong to offer me the job,' he remembers. 'And I thought, "Anything Pete's offering me I'm going to say no to." And then I spoke

to my dad about it, and a friend, and they said I should go and meet Matthew just out of respect.'

Bannister assured Westwood that the DJ was the epitome of the public service broadcaster. 'He didn't want to be seen to sell out by going to a national radio station. But this was his real home.' As a show of independence, Westwood was told he could make the show with his own production company. When he agreed to move, Biggie Smalls and Puff Daddy held a launch party for him at Hammersmith Palais. Not long afterwards, Bannister took him to have drinks with the then director-general John Birt. 'Westwood and Birt got on like a house on fire,' Bannister recalls. 'Westwood came out saying, "I really love working for him! He's my man!"'

He probably felt at home with authority. His father was the Right Reverend William John Westwood, Bishop of Peterborough, but Tim believes this title has led to some misunderstanding. 'When my father did so well and lived in the Palace and had a chaplain driving him around in a Rover, I didn't grow up with that. My dad was from very humble means. His mother was one of 16 children and his dad was one of 17 children.'

His father went to Cambridge before the war, and after that went to Hull as a curate, which is where he met Westwood's mother and where his older sister was born. Tim grew up in Lowestoft, and moved to Norwich at the age of eight when his father became a vicar. He went to church and enjoyed a loving upbringing, but there were problems at his comprehensive. 'I was dyslexic, and people didn't really know what that was. They used to do these weekly spelling tests, and for nearly six years I was always second from bottom, getting one out of 20. Then the kid who was bottom left, and I was bottom. I went for special schooling, but dyslexia was murder for me.' I ask him about his ambitions at that time. 'Nah, I was worthless, man. I was clueless at work and poor at sports. My dad would have been happy had I become a butcher. A kid at school became a butcher and my dad said, "That's a good job, Tim."'

His father died a few years after he retired, in 1996. The DJ says they were equally proud of each other, especially as they were both self-made. Westwood shielded him from the details of his first forays into the London scene when he was 16. He was a glass collector at Gossips in Soho, and would earn 30-minute warm-up slots on the record decks by bringing in 50 people from Hammersmith and Ladbroke Grove. He was paid £15, and his earnings increased when a regular DJ quit. Initially he played jazz-funk, but occasionally a new rap record arrived from New York: 'Rappers Delight' by the Sugarhill Gang, 'The Message' by Grandmaster Flash & the Furious Five, 'The Show' by Doug E Fresh.

'I knew that was me as soon as it started,' Westwood says, 'but then dance music came in - house music - and all those guys who jumped on the hip-hop bandwagon just jumped straight off. Like Dave Pearce and Pete Tong -- they were straight into dance music because that's where the dough was and the big crowds.'

Westwood also had a Thursday-night slot at People's Club in Praed Street, where Run-DMC would drop in when they were homesick. 'It was the hot crazy ghetto spot, a lot of prostitutes and pimps, you could only buy champagne or brandy by the bottle. It used to start about midnight. Cars would triple-park outside. If you

wanted a piss you had to go outside, because the toilets were just for drug dealing.' Westwood was inspired by the club DJ Paul Anderson, and the success of reggae specialist David Rodigan on Capital Radio, and he was keen to join him when Richard Park offered him an early-morning show in the mid-Eighties. It was a token gesture, he says; when he arrived at Radio 1 seven years later he was amazed that people at the station took an interest in what he played.

Partly this was due to language. Even at the illest end of Saturday night, BBC governors and the Daily Mail didn't take kindly to the casual use of the word 'motherfucker', and the DJ says he understands their concerns. 'I play the game. I can respect that you don't want it too grimy. I can then put out those grimy tapes and CDs for cats who are built for it. It's important for cats to hear me swear so that they know I'm real, that I'm not just some corny radio DJ. Or that I'm not some personality type. Because for me it's all music-based, and people need to know I'm real.'

One of the ways he keeps it real is through his street teams, scattered around the UK, who promote Westwood live events (his 'parties') and feed back to him the latest trends. 'My whole thing is I haven't got family, I don't want that in my life,' Westwood says. 'But I'm being a father to some of my team. Dre nearly didn't come through - a lot of cats don't survive, they get gassed up or twisted and don't understand how hungry you've got to be. Jay-Z gave me his number and Dre lost it so he's under a bit of pressure from me.'

Dre lives in Peckham and keeps his employer informed on the content of the latest mix-tapes at the Real McCoy, the local clothes shop.

Others in the street team blitz areas with flyers advertising Westwood's upcoming live appearances. Westwood says his parties don't make much money - £8 to get in, with 'the ladies' usually admitted free - but often he will print 40,000 leaflets for the show, on the back of which are his radio schedules and details of his latest album.

The street teams also offer an element of protection. In July 1999, he was with his London team as they pulled away from a show at Brockwell Park when their van got stuck behind a bus in Kennington. A couple on a motorcycle pulled alongside and a man riding pillion shot at them, hitting Westwood in the arm and a friend in the leg. Instantly, the DJ's celebrity widened. Five years later he is still wary of talking about it, and the threat may not have disappeared. The cause of the shooting was extortion, Westwood refusing to meet a gang's demands. Before the incident, both he and his girlfriend were beaten. On the record, he plays it cool: 'To be honest, my attitude towards it is, I got shot, and that's that. Like having a car accident. When you're in this game, these things are out there; never far from you.'

I wondered whether he thought of lowering his profile, perhaps painting over his name and logos on his transport? 'No. I'm a DJ, man. Radio 1 wouldn't be keen if I got stopped in a car with people carrying guns. I do parties, man. I need everyone to know I'm going to be there or the parties will be empty. Before the shooting, the only people who knew me were the hip-hop crowd. It made me big! I wish I had an album out at that time!'

The police suggested he might like to get an anonymous black BMW 5-Series, but Westwood went the other way. 'The police were saying "Lo-pro", but I stepped up

my game. I worked harder than I ever worked before. I was ready. I ain't scared of nothing.'

In addition to his customised promotional van, Westwood owns a GMC Yukon, a Suburban Chevrolet, a GMC Suburban with TV screens, and a classic Chevy Impala 1966. The cars are his main expense: until recently he lived in a tiny housing association flat, and he doesn't spend much money on clothes - a fat wristwatch his only concession to bling. Like others in his industry with humble origins and a conscience, he does like to give something back. He is the patron of the radio station at Feltham Young Offenders Institution, where he holds regular high-testosterone parties. He says the next one will take place one morning in the chapel, so he'll probably play the edited radio versions of songs. He will then tour the wings. 'I don't pre-judge, man. I came from a good family that kept my life smooth, but any of us could have made mistakes and ended up in there. One guy I was with at the station, his mother's in prison, his father's in prison, his sister's in prison, and his two older brothers are in prison. The dude was just waiting to go to prison. At 17, he got sentenced to 18 years mandatory. With those guys it's good to be there. I'm no hero to them, but as a radio dude I'm paying them some attention.'

He finds that the people he meets just want stories about the artists. 'I tell them I don't drink, I don't smoke, I don't get high, so I'm pretty focused and I love what I do. I tell them that a lot of artists who are mad grimy don't actually smoke weed - 50 doesn't smoke weed, Jay-Z doesn't smoke weed.'

I asked Westwood whether he thought hip-hop could change anything. 'Not really. The world made hip-hop, hip-hop didn't make the world. My father's generation came back from the war and believed that everything was possible, but I don't think that's true any more.'

We are nearing Luton in the van. Westwood is flipping between DVDs and CDs on the complex entertainment system, saying, 'You gotta watch this!' as some rapper or flash car comes up. He is like a 12-year-old boy let loose for the first time; the reason he is such a good DJ is that he is such a good fan. As we pull up at the club, he is swiftly inside to arrange security for his guests. He embraces everyone he meets, one of five white faces out of a thousand, and the only one to climb up to the slim DJ platform at the front of the narrow room. He has a torch in his mouth as he lines up his opening records, and the warm-up DJ slinks away with a defeated look. It is 12.20am. Westwood says, 'Let's fucking ride out to THIS! We got the prime fucking JOINTS! Let's GO! This is WESTWOOD! All you other DJs FALL BACK!' And everyone in the crowd looks delighted and blessed, as if they've just been anointed with holy water.