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Raising the Roof on a New Sound

Determination Helps Bring an Aspiring Hip-Hop Artist's Unique Electronic Music Out of the Attic and Onto the Stage

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By **ANDY BATTAGLIA**

On Monday, at the beginning of a significant week for him, the budding hip-hop hero known as Clams Casino was cruising the streets of Nutley, N.J., on his way home to check on the two guards charged with minding his house when he is gone. His hands gripped the wheel of a black BMW while Hot 97 played on the radio, churning through a set of recent hits—none of his own making, but a few he professed to like just the same.



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Natalie Keyssar for The Wall Street Journal

Mike Volpe, a.k.a. Clams Casino, in front of his Nutley, N.J., home, where he first created his unusual recordings on a computer in the attic.

Casino parked on the street and strolled up to the door. There, on the other side, stood his two guards: a pair of dachshunds named Frankie and Darla. The dogs share space in the house in suburban Nutley, where Casino—also known as 24-year-old Mike Volpe—lives with his mother and fashions a unique kind of hip-hop currently on the rise.

As a producer, he has made beats and backing tracks for significant rappers including Lil B, Soulja Boy and Havoc from the storied New York group Mobb Deep. A song issued under his own name was recently presented for online perusal on Jay-Z's "lifestyle site," lifeandtimes.com. Another was featured in a series of singles commissioned by the popular Cartoon Network programming block "Adult Swim."

On Saturday, Mr. Volpe will perform his first high-profile concert at MoMA PS1 in Queens, marking a move from recorded anonymity to the spectacle of the stage. It stands to be a significant moment for a hip-hop artist on the make. Or will it?

"I don't know," said Mr. Volpe. "I'm still working all that out."

Unique to the Clams Casino sound is its unusually high threshold for strangeness, to the point where some of his work hardly sounds like hip-hop at all. His tracks draw on distinctive modes of digital abstraction and all manner of moody ambience. One includes a sample of Björk and others, nearly all of them, sound intriguingly grainy and textural, like digital files opened up and turned inside-out for inspection.

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Accordingly, his coming-out performance will take place not in the context of a hip-hop showcase but something much different: a day of arty noise and electronic music fit for the audience at MoMA PS1's eccentric music series "Warm Up."

All of which remains a bit bemusing to Mr. Volpe. "I always thought of it as hip-hop until some people started saying maybe it wasn't," he said of his work. "I never thought of it as anything else. I don't know what else it could have come from."

Mr. Volpe started making music when he was 14 in the house where he continues to live and work, upstairs in the attic on a computer. A few years later, having impressed some of his fellow hip-hop-loving friends, he assumed the role of the precocious teenager and started barraging artists with beats online.

The unorthodox Bay Area rapper Lil B was one of the first to bite. "It took him a few weeks but he got back to me with an email address to send beats to," Mr. Volpe said. "I was a big fan of his, so I couldn't believe it."

Lil B, who has been in the news of late for mischievously titling his latest album "I'm Gay (I'm Happy)," remembered: "I would check my mail and his beats were amazing. It was all really over-the-top and crazy. Some people got it, some don't—Clams got it."

Although he has produced a number of Lil B's most notable tracks, Mr. Volpe has never actually met the rapper, nor many of the characters he has come to associate with as his music has charted its own idiosyncratic course online. It started with his unsolicited queries and then moved on to Mr. Volpe, last year, posting a collection of instrumental versions of his tracks for free downloading. After that came attention from a realm he knew nothing about until recently.

"His music is very blasted-sounding," said Robin Carolan, whose boutique electronic-music label, Tri-Angle Records, put out "Rainforest," a shape-shifting five-song EP that marks Mr. Volpe's first official release. Mr. Carolan learned of Mr. Volpe while listening to rap songs by Lil B at his home in London and finding himself bewitched by what was happening in the background.

"It's not as clean as a lot of hip-hop," he said. "It has this fuzziness and this messiness to it, like he's trying to figure out how to do something while he's doing it."

At 24, Mr. Volpe has more to figure out than just his sound. He recently earned a certification degree to work as a physical therapist's assistant—a plan he intends to stick to for now. "For 10 years I made music for fun," he said. "I never thought I could or would make money off of it. Now it's more possible, but I worked hard for everything else. But now people are starting to come to me rather than me just sending messages around, so who knows."

As for his big show in the city on Saturday, Mr. Volpe maintains a mix of curious uncertainty and confidence. "I wasn't ever planning on doing a live event before people starting asking me," he said. "I wasn't really sure how to do it at the start. But I've been working it out."

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