



DJ putting his spin on urban music

By NICHOLAS DAVIS

When Mike Zafiris was 8 years old, he would ask his parents to pick him up something when they went grocery shopping.

But unlike most kids, who would ask for candy or cookies, Zafiris asked them to buy him the latest 45 single. This was the beginning of his love affair with vinyl records -- a love affair that continues to this day.

"I love music so much," Zafiris says. "I love all varieties of music and I love turntables. When I first saw the Technics 1200 turntable, I thought it was the coolest piece of metal I had ever seen."

Zafiris used to get a regular glimpse of Technics 1200s when he was 16 hanging out at a nightclub behind the Eaton Centre called Focus.

Most young people who liked urban music back in the '80s and early '90s had limited places they could go to hear their favourite hip hop or R&B records. Focus was one such place. And the best thing about the club for Zafiris was the DJ.

"The DJ's name was Devon Webley," Zafiris recalls. "He would mix and blend new wave, hip hop, house and reggae together so smoothly and effortlessly. Other club DJs were playing the same kind of music, but they weren't blending it like Devon."

Webley's technique on the Technics inspired Zafiris to become a DJ himself. "My parents bought my first turntables," Zafiris says. "They weren't 1200s, they were belt drive turntables. But they looked like DJ turntables because they had a curved arm."

Zafiris became DJ Zed. He practised in his basement for months perfecting his DJ skills. But it wasn't until he was asked to play his cousin's 19th birthday party that he was able to showcase his talents.

"I remember taping my full set in case the turntables broke down," he says. "The turntables never did break down. In fact, it went pretty well and people were complimenting me all

night. I don't remember getting any other gigs from that party, but at least I got paid."

Zafiris has worked as a DJ ever since. He now makes a living running the Flavor Pool, Canada's largest urban/hip hop music pool. Zafiris started it in May 1993 with 15 DJs in Toronto. Flavor now boasts a roster of close to 150 DJs across the country. The record pool services the DJs with new releases.

"When I first decided to start the record pool, not every label was down with the idea of giving free records to hip-hop DJs except Sony, Attic and Electra Records in New York," Zafiris says. "They didn't believe that hip-hop DJs helped sell music. The irony was that at the time, hip hop was becoming the most popular music in North America. And not on the backs of radio stations because hardly any mainstream radio stations played rap music at the time. It was on the backs of DJs, who were banging the music in clubs and at house parties and on community radio stations."

Every major label in Canada now has an urban music division, but Zafiris still doesn't believe DJs in Canada are given their proper dues by the record labels.

"Radio stations and video shows are still treated better than DJs," he says. "I don't think artists like Usher and the Fugees would have broken big here if it wasn't for hip-hop DJs playing their music years before they became mainstream stars."

To recognize urban music DJs for their value and to start documenting their successes, Zafiris created the DJ Stylus Awards -- Canada's first nationwide DJ awards show. He also wants to use the event to raise awareness of the dynamic urban music scene in Canada.

"I also want to bring corporate Canada in the picture," Zafiris says. "Corporate America understands the value of a DJ to help market its products. Pepsi in the U.S. has a DJ division, American DJs host their own TV shows and some have label deals. We still can't legally do mix tapes here in Canada."

The DJ Stylus Awards take place on May 29 at the York Event Theatre, 101 Eglinton Ave. E. For more information visit stylusgroup.ca.