



THE ATLANTA HITMAN

words **ASHLEY CISNEROS**



Georgia was not always the Dirty South mecca that it is today. Just ask DJ Mafioso, real name David Rodriguez, one of Atlanta's kings in underground hip hop. The ATL titan built a reputation for creating ill mixes of hip hop and Latin; he even mixes in poetry from greats like Willie Perdomo. Born in Corona, Queens to Dominican immigrants, the DJ moved to Atlanta when he was 10. "It was like going from the city to the complete boon-docks," he said. "It was a whole other world."

He described the landscape as a mix of red dirt, hills, mountains and trees, far different from his stoop back in Corona. In New York, there were all types of people. But, in Georgia, you were either white or black, "I used to catch stares like crazy," Mafioso remembers. "People used to always come up to me like, 'Are you white or black, man? Oh, you must be mixed, but got that good hair.'" Being away from home made him appreciate the Latino culture and encouraged him to represent who he was, to the fullest. Music was always a part of DJ Mafioso's life mostly because his mother played it for any occasion. "She washed dishes to it, cleaned the house to it, and danced to it," he said. "It was no big deal." Seeing her happiness just listening to music was what inspired DJ Mafioso the most. "It didn't matter how broke we were, she would put on a record, and peace was restored," he says.

Being away from New York made Rodriguez yearn for things from home. He would get his cousins to send him the latest mix tapes. Growing up, Rodriguez said that DJs were more respected because they were the ones who got to hear music first. It was tough being the new kid in town and, at first, he resisted Atlanta and everyone in it, "In my opinion, back then if it wasn't from New York it was garbage. Now over time, Atlanta has become my home."

It started out very simply. The Rodriguez family had a record player for parties and a good collection of music. Rodriguez would practice scratching and even mixing his own mix tapes to make a sound that was all

his own, Before long, the DJ became engrossed in his music.

"I would save up my lunch money for the week, and every Friday my mom would go grocery shopping, and I would come home with a new joint," he recalls. Rodriguez started to DJ when he was 12 and ended up blowing tape decks and breaking turntables, because he practiced so much. Annual trips to visit family in Miami also taught Rodriguez about other genres in music. Miami is where he learned all about booty, freestyle, and house. He had a cousin who had his entire room filled with music. Rodriguez used to take some of his music since he had so much of it, and his cousin unknowingly gave him a start in becoming a DJ. "From an early start, I always took my samples from Latin classics," he said. "It was kind of my way to teach the youth about our roots."

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Almost two decades later, Rodriguez has continued to leave his Latin legacy through his innovative mixes of hip hop and Spanish tracks. Playing music as a DJ is not the only thing Rodriguez has done. He has his own studio, his own equipment-repair business, and holds a "regular" job. He has also completed several internships in studios around the ATL including Outkast's. He has fulfilled his definition of hip hop: making something from nothing.

While some hip hop heads have their opinions of Dirty South rap, Rodriguez argues that even rapping about "Cadillacs and hoers" is hip hop. He argues that they did the same thing that the pioneers in New York did. They rapped about what they knew, but they did it in their own country-fried style. "The South has stayed true to its culture," Rodriguez said. "They never tried to put on a fake accent to try to fit into a mold." The *La Bodega Vol. 1* CD showcases Rodriguez's own evolution. "When I was little, it seemed that the ultimate in accomplishment was having your own bodega," Rodriguez says. "So this piece represents a true accomplishment for me. The fruits are my rhythms and my beats. This represents my music, on sale, available for everyone to enjoy." 🎧