

Words: Daniel Swierdsiol

The Almighty Fifth Platoon's founding member, Neil Armstrong, makes good mix tapes. If you don't like them, then I do not consider you my friend. And I'm not kidding.

I wanted to turn it off at first. It was just too much for me to handle. It's not that I wasn't enjoying the experience; it was more that envy had gotten the better of me.

My face was smudged up against the window of a Nissan Pathfinder, heading down the

don't disturb this groove

New Jersey turnpike after watching the Nets make the Celtics look like an intramural Middle School squad and consuming quite a few margaritas. Okay, so I only had two, but that's really besides the point here, because this is a music magazine and I'm trying to tell you about Neil Armstrong. The margaritas were peach though, and actually quite delicious, but if you think for one moment that I'm soft for getting a peach margarita, well, hey, P. Diddy was also at the game with Ashton Kucher, and that's some sissier shit than pastel-colored beverages right there if you ask me.

As has since become de rigeur for any long trip in the car, a Neil Armstrong mix tape (yes, I still call them tapes, but you probably still call them "cell phones," you retard) accompanied us on the way back home. I knew who the Fifth Platoon were, I'd even heard of Neil before, but this was the first time I sat down and listened any of his mixes -this one being "Original" - and I didn't know what to think. I was audience to something so wonderful that it tore my self-esteem to shreds. I felt as if no matter how hard I tried, no matter how much time I spent hunched over my 1200s, that I would never be able to produce anything that even came close to Neil's project. I mean, I wouldn't mind being Aaron Williams, but damn, being Jason Kidd would be much better (and no, I'm not going to take this as an opportunity to talk about Joumana Kidd - unless you are reading this Joumana, then my e-mail is printed in the masthead, and I check it daily).

So to quote Will Smith, I took it home that night, and analyzed it. Rewound the tape over and over, and memorized it. And through

appreciation I was able to coexist with "Original."

Whereas your typical DJ will take a bunch of songs that sound good together and throw them down onto a CD, Neil does much more. His compositions have history and purpose, and while he has the skills to tear up most DJs in a battle, he demonstrates that song selection, timing, and thought are what really make a successful DJ more than anything else. Through precise blending and a turntablist aesthetic, Neil reaches back into his crates on "Original" (and it's sequel, "2Original") and creates hip hop lesson plans, merging songs with the originals that the sample or hook was culled from. Nothing is done by accident, and at times the listener is left wondering whether they are hearing the hip hop version or the original source material at any given moment. Explains Neil, "it is very planned out. ['Original'] took me about a year to make. If you listen to it, there are various threads connecting the tape. For example, it will go from Vanilla Ice to Eminem to Dr. Dre to Ice Cube. All of the artists are related in some fashion. This is not meant to be a "breaks" tape this is supposed to be a step up from that."

In fact, my obsession with Neil's sonic landscapes became so involved that I even began



to sit down and work out the relationships and links which make all the connections - and I don't even like mix tapes that much. It was like that time that I got sick of getting lost in Metroid, so I tried making my own map of the terrain (the creation of this map, however, only lasted for about twenty minutes before I discovered that I was much easier just getting lost while looking for bombs than to draw it out). So while you may ask yourself how the experience can be so immersive when Neil is not actually creating the music he displays for us, the dialogue between selections, the contextual elevation, and the interactive nature of the collages make any scepticism moot.

And just when "2Original" had me thinking that I never needed to hear another CD again, I heard "Bitter Sweet." After "2Original," Neil's next tape was a mix of love songs, entitled "Sweet," which was easily trumped by "Bitter Sweet," the first mix tape I've ever heard that actually tells a story. Through care-

ful arrangement, Neil creates a cohesive narrative in which the listener is taken through every stage of a relationship, from beginning to end, infatuation to heart-wrenching despair, the highs and lows that make love such a wonderfully horrible experience. And yes, it almost brought me to tears the first few times through. There's very little hip hop on "Bitter Sweet," though that is what frames the entire project and offers it a reassuring pat on the back.

"I think I finished ['Bitter Sweet'] in six months. I guess after I finished "Sweet" I thought about what to do for a sequel, and doing "Bitter Sweet" made sense. I had never seen someone do that, not just the 'good' side of love, but the bad as well, and have it all link together. I would like to think it [is intense] because all the songs are put in a certain context. I hope people understand what I was trying to do, and I hope people like 'Bittersweet.'"

The result is something that I've heard played to about as a diverse group of people

as possible and not one complaint has been raised, and the mixes just seem to get better and better. "I have this theory," says Neil, "when a director makes a dope movie they set this bar very high for themselves, and it's very high. Every project they make after that point has to hit that bar, or raise it, and if they don't do that, they get bashed. I feel like people expect the same out of me. Every time, I have to raise the bar, and I guess I don't want to let people down."

While Neil's crew, Fifth Platoon, has been battling since the '90s, and is the only major crew from that "era" to still have members actively competing, it's interesting to note that Neil is fundamentally a turntablist and not a "mix tape DJ." "I was a child of turntablism exclusively. I really couldn't mix until about two and a half years ago. I was only into the battle scene - beat juggling and scratching. But I was always a fan of music. I grew up on hip hop pretty much. There were three things I wanted to do with "Original." One: I grew up in an era where hip hop heads listened to hip hop and that's it, so I wanted hip hop heads to open their minds to different music. Two: Non-hip hop heads didn't listen to hip hop. It wasn't commercial back in the day. So I wanted non-hip hop heads to realize that hip hop was just music - not gunshots and violence and bling bling - just music. Three: I wanted to show people how creative pro-

ducers are, how much work they put into making hip hop music, and [also] give the original sources their due."

Perhaps, then, I was not used to making an effort when listening to hip hop. While Neil does not force his listeners to expend any energy to appreciate his tape, if you love music you'll want to put the time in. If you want to challenge your notions of hip hop music and what a mix conventionally is, then the option is there. And if you just want a really good cry, well then there's always room for that too. Just don't expect Neil to let you sit there in a puddle of tears for too long, because there's always something around the corner to change your whole perspective. It may sound like a bit much for a mix tape, but then again you didn't just have your summer rescued by the Fifth Platoon. So being Aaron Williams ain't half bad, especially when you get to have J. Kidd droppin' dimes on ya.

If you would like to hear one of Neil's mixes, you can come over my house because there's probably one playing right now. Otherwise, you can pick up all of the product listed here, including the new "Non-Stop - Original Live" at www.5thplatoon.com. So do yourself a favor and get it all. Oh, and Neil's a really nice guy too, I swear. Watch out for his genre-romping fun with "All Out Kings" in the near future.