

Who were some of the artists and producers that influenced you when you were beginning to create music?

I was always influenced by the actual artists. I was influenced by Al Green, James Brown, Luther Vandross when he was with Change, Mtume, Kool and the Gang, Kashif, Prince, Rick Rubin, and people who made the music themselves. I had a chance to meet James Mtume, Kashif, Rick Rubin, Royal Bayyan from Kool and the Gang, Narada Michael Walden, Nile Rodgers, Larry Blackmon, and Jimmy Castor. Jimmy Castor was the first person to bring me around and wanted to manage me. As soon as they heard this little kid was doing music, they used to all come to the projects and sit with me. It was kind of a mentor relationship. One of the guys who won my confidence and trust was Royal Bayyan. I wish I would've stayed with him back then. I don't know exactly what happened, but he was the guy who started me out producing. He made me want to become a producer and a writer. He is the cousin of Ronald Bell—[aka] Khalis Bayyan. Him and his brothers were my mentors. To this day, they're still very, very talented and gifted older brothers. They taught me the ropes.

How did you begin producing records for popular artists? I've heard about how much time you spent creating music at a rooftop skating rink. What is the backstory?

The rooftop skating was created by my uncle Willie. He used to own a lot of the clubs and spots in Harlem. If you've ever seen the movie *Paid in Full* [about the 1980s drug trade in Harlem], the guys who [the screenplay was based on]—Aziz Faison, Alpo Martinez, and Richie Porter—used to hang there. I went to school with Richie Porter. If you look at a scene in the movie where the guys drive by a hamburger stand called Willie's Hamburger Stand, that was my uncle's stand. He used to own most of the [clubs] and after-hour nightspots. He owned this one spot called the Rooftop Skating Rink. When I used to hang out, I used to be at his after-hour spots until wild things started happening. He told me I had to stay away from there. He told me he would get me a job at the skating rink with Gusto. Gusto is one of my good friends as well.

We collaborated together to form Rooftop Records with two other guys. Gusto saw my talent, and he wanted to build a studio at the skating rink for me. He used to let me take a segment out of

one of the skating rooms. They used to have different sessions, and I used to take one session and turn it into a musical performance session where I would have performances in the middle of the skating rink. That's where I developed the group Kids at Work. For all the fans, please don't go look at that picture. [laughs] I developed Kids at Work at Rooftop, and I was part of the development in developing Kool Moe Dee. When he first became a solo artist, he came through Rooftop Records. We had him signed to Rooftop Records. This is where we did the record "Wild Wild West," "Go See the Doctor," "How Ya Like Me Now," and all those records.

How did you become a member of the group Total Climax?

Well, that was in the process of me performing between my uncle's rooftop skating rink and one of his nightspots called Jock's Place. I would perform there with Total Climax. But how Total Climax developed was they were the band at a community center down on 127th Street and Seventh Avenue. I didn't have any band to play with after learning all the things I learned. I started playing music in church at the age of nine, and it made me want to do more. It got kind of boring to me. I loved playing at church, but I wanted to play with a band. When I played at church, it would be just me and another organ player or drummer. That drummer was Jazzy Jay who is the DJ for Afrika Bambaataa. After doing all of that stuff, I wanted to do more, so I went down to this community center and I asked the guys if I could play, and they asked me, "What kind of keyboard do you got?" I said, "I have a Casio." They told me to get out of there with that toy. I told them I could play though. And I knew they didn't have a keyboard player. They told me I was too young. I told them they should let me play, and they said, "We'll let you play, but if you're wack, we're going to take your keyboard and kick you out of here."

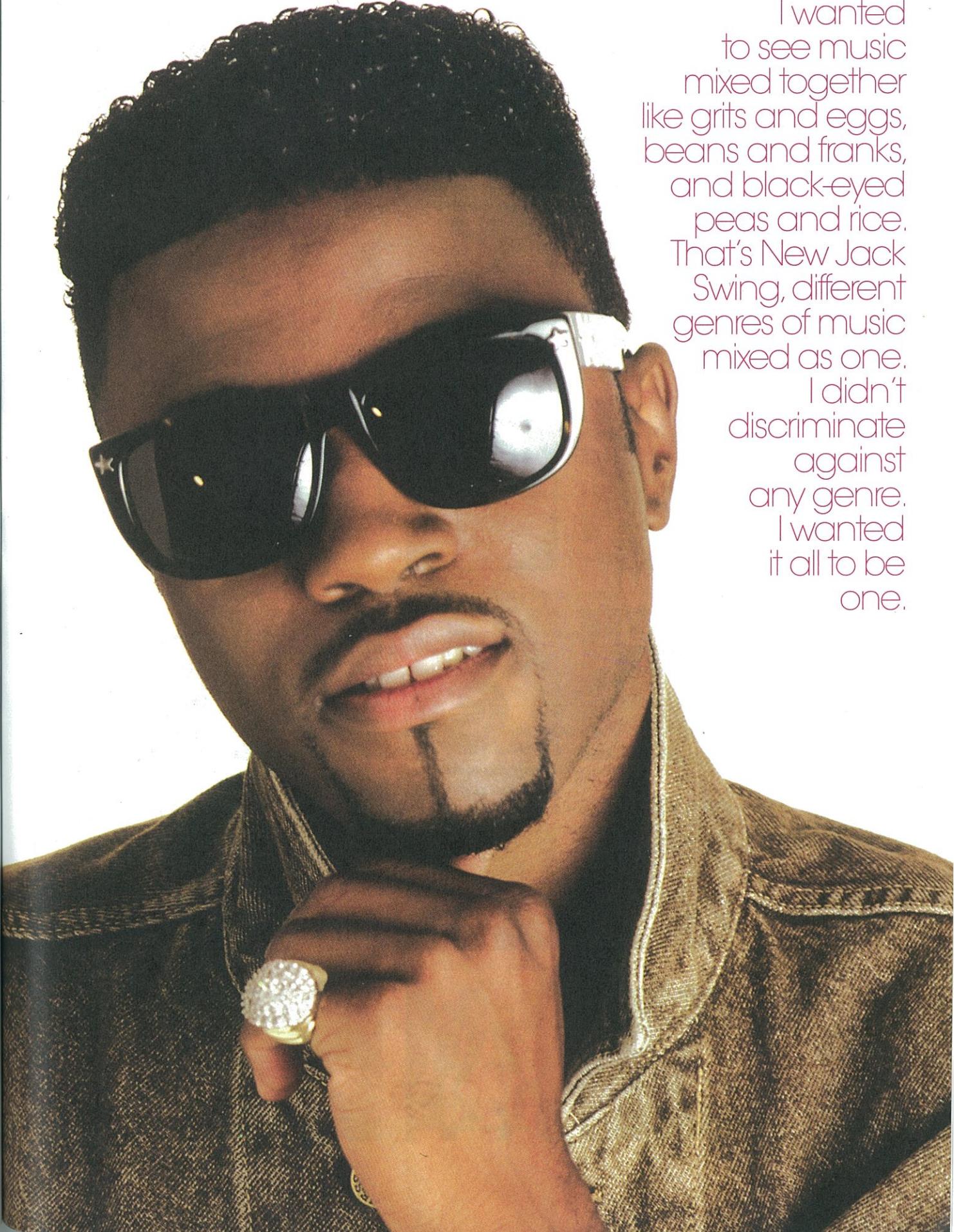
So I actually played, and they had a bigger keyboard there. When I played, they looked at each other and said, "This little n-word knows how to play." [laughs] They were up there whispering, and I thought they were going to kick me out of there. The leader said, "See if you can play this with us." They started playing Earth, Wind & Fire's "Reasons." They gave me two minutes, and I remembered those chords. Then they started playing, and I joined

right in. They said, "Shorty is nice." They told me they were going to get me a keyboard and that I was down. They said, "We need you to be at rehearsals and be at gigs." This is when they brought me into the band. They didn't even think about my age. I was thirteen at the time. I was also playing with Kids at Work, but we weren't called Kids at Work then. We were called Fame like the TV show.

How did you start producing records for Doug E. Fresh, Big Daddy Kane, and Rob Base?

Doug E. and I went to the same school, but I never knew him. We were introduced by a mutual friend. Our mutual friend told him, "Teddy Riley is the kid who made the beat to [the Classical Two's] 'New Generation.' He made this beat and that beat, and his uncle owns the Rooftop and I work with him." So I asked our mutual friend, "Who is Doug E.?" He said, "Doug E. is the guy who does the beatbox." And I'm thinking that Doug E. was Larry Love. [laughs] Larry Love was the dude I knew who did the beatbox, but back then Doug E. was just the cat. I was thinking that Larry Love went to my school, but the whole time it was Doug E. Fresh. I've never told Doug E. this either. [laughs]

I got to meet him, and Doug E. came to my house. When he got there, I was like, "What are you guys trying to do?" He said, "We have this track of this song." Back then, we had cassette players, and they had a boom box. They played what they had on the cassette, and I told them it was a little too much. I told them they should break it up a little bit, but still keep the beat going with the shaker. This is when I had my old DX Oberheim drum machine. [In 1985,] I helped them structure the song "The Show." We became really good friends after that. The same thing happened with Big Daddy Kane. He knew I was this little kid making beats in Harlem. He wanted to work with me. I took on the job of working on music with him. The same thing happened with Rob Base. Rob Base's manager actually hired me to work with Rob Base on "It Takes Two" [in 1988] along with my nephew's father who sang on "Joy and Pain," and his name is Omar Chandler [who was tragically murdered in March 2013 after this interview—Ed.]. We performed together on [Showtime at] the Apollo against David Peaston. And God bless him. This was my first time performing at the Apollo.



I wanted to see music mixed together like grits and eggs, beans and franks, and black-eyed peas and rice. That's New Jack Swing, different genres of music mixed as one.

I didn't discriminate against any genre. I wanted it all to be one.