



30 Seconds: Reflections on Guru, creative collaborations and inadvertently inventing *Mumble Rap*¹.

Artistic collaboration is never easy! The pig-headed ego of the artist makes compromise difficult; at times impossible. Once you start mixing your mediums, the difficulties can escalate. However, when it works, the product is way more than the sum of the totals! Here lies magic!!

When Ashwan hit me up with a chilled out instrumental sometime in the mid noughties, I was initially less than excited. I wanted boom bap, boom bap and nothing but boom bap. I wanted clattering snares and horrific industrial sfx filling the spaces. I wanted hard and I wanted masculine! I wanted Hip-hop!

Despite this, the beat was dope. A kind of Cafe Del Mar meets Mo Wax vibe with a beautiful Robocopesque sample informing the listener as well as the MC that they only had '30 seconds to respond'. And so was born the title of the track - 30 Seconds. I wrote to the theme and crafted a couple of verses, aimed at matching the mood of the instrumental. The verses were short so I wanted to pack in the words, but the delivery had to be smooth enough to sit comfortably on the sparse and melancholic soundscape. I hit the booth; take after take. The verses were tight but they just didn't fit. I reflected on Guru's advice as I went about my own daily operation - *It's mostly the voice*, were the words that guided and scared me. Perhaps, I just didn't have the right voice for this project; perhaps not for rap at all. This wasn't the first time I had felt this. My softer; higher than desirably pitched vocals had caused me angst right through my MC 'career'.

I sent the vocals off the Ash. This was always a nervous time. Ashwan had been as much a mentor to me as he was a collaborator, contemporary or friend. His opinion counted; even if I didn't always agree with it! I don't often agree with much, unless I've thought it first myself. This is not a strength.

At some point during this anxious time, Ashwan hit me back with a suggestion. "Try whispering it," he said. Now, I was used to Ash pushing me to try new approaches and styles; perhaps he was as aware of the shortcomings of my less than street crafted vocals as I was. At first, I was reluctant, as usual, and then agreed to give it a go, as always. In there is the key to successful collaboration - try what you don't want to do, if the other person thinks it's worth it. Respect each other's knowledge and creativity.

I spent an evening hoarsening my voice whispering loudly into an over-ramped condenser mic, desperately trying to manage my plosives and maintain some clarity within my new guise of the heavy-breathing MC. After several takes were ruined by coughing and wheezing (nothing to do with smoking obviously) I sat down and disappointedly scanned through the multiple takes. None worked right. However, they all nearly worked. The next task was to begin adding weight back to the vocals that had been lost in all that breath. I recorded a dub track that was more of a mumble than a whisper. Once

done, I layered the various takes until they sounded like a verse; rather than a strange experiment in supernatural communication. I sent the vox back to Ash and awaited the results. Within a couple of days, the track was back, mixed, reverbed and condensed. The weight was there as was the subtlety and moodiness the beat demanded. The hook shuffled far enough towards sing-whispering to provide a lift into the chorus and a drop back into the verse. There was movement. We had lift off.

The track did the usual rounds of the Internet sites that we always shared to; the ones where people liked our shit and where we were able to ignore the unqualified nature of the adulation and feel, every few weeks, just for a few days, like rap stars! Time passed and the track slid down the 'newly uploaded' list and further back into memory.

Years later, now transformed from wannabe street MC into respectable spoken word poet, I am reminded of the track as I trawl through nearly-forgotten recordings and rediscover the one-time sure shot game-changers that never quite changed the game in the way they promised. I listen to 30 seconds. It isn't what I came trawling for. I wanted the older stuff; *Believers*, *Blaze*, *Cuss Ya Claat* and all the other 'anthems' of our mid-noughties forays in rap. As the instrumental gently reintroduced itself I was reminded, warmly, of the whole process, all that I've said above came back to the light of my mind in the moment of that intro. Then the drone of the vocal sample; a roll of the drums and into the verse. I'm surprised at how much better it now sounds. Perhaps it is a sign of my lessened personal criticality; perhaps a sign that these tunes really were as far ahead of the game as we secretly wished. Whatever the case, this was a tune now; more than it ever had been. Reflecting on the delivery, I decided to return to the whispering style for a poem. *My Beauty Remains* is my ode to the clandestine world of the graffiti artist; perhaps the last real painters left. The whispering delivery, now more controlled through experience of voice control and a greater comfort in front of the mic, falls easier from the tongue and retains the punch that needed to be reinserted into the original experiment.

It has been all too easy over the last decade to downplay the enormous amount of vocal development that took place during my 'hip hop years'. However, much in the same as Guru cited on his 1992 album track; and as I often find myself reciting in response to the slam poets, MCs and public speakers I now help to develop through my work as a Hip-hop educator and slam poetry promoter, it is indeed,

*Mostly tha voice, that gets you up
It's mostly tha voice, that makes you buck
A lot of rappers got flavor, and some got skills
But if your voice ain't dope then you need to chill...ⁱⁱ*

Not all of us can be blessed with Guru's unique and distinctive tone, but where there's a will, there are many, many ways. And I'm sure Guru would agree that without a critical, creative collaborator to compliment his voice, he may just have been a guy with a dope voice uploading to share sites for the adoration of uninformed and grossly biased fans, rather than being one half of Hip Hop's most revered collaborations!

Guru was right; it is *mostly* the voice, but when it comes to music, it's a lot more besides.

ⁱ *Mumble Rap: The rap style associated with Trap music that prioritises a melodic, drawing flow over clarity, cadence and lyricism.*

ⁱⁱ *Mostly Tha Voice* by Gang Starr. From the album *Hard To Earn* (Chrysalis Records, 1994)