

Froo it all

Julian Owen salutes a homegrown rap gem.

One side of the sign on the High Street reads 'Welcome to Kingswood'. The other, 'Welcome to Bristol'. In part it's a definite line, marking out a territory where the hip-hop names to emulate are Transcript Carriers, Hairy Parents, Parlour Talk. More broadly, it's not a world of gangs and guns. "It's more like lager louts and punch-ups outside the chippy," says Cheyne, aka C-Froo. A world where "you're gonna see single mums and everyday British things going on – shopping in Iceland, getting your stuff from Wilko's."

In the wider scheme of things, though, the sign is just so much metal and reflective plastic. "It's not about Kingswood. It's not about Bristol. It's about hip-hop. More than that, it's about music."

In his immediate circle it's about Kali Mist, Ewan Hoozami, D-Melo, Social Conscience, Mighty Mandroid. Beyond that, the sharpness of The Small Faces, the beat of The Specials, the braggadocio and tight, rhyming couplets of albino reggae star Yellowman. It's about Doug E. Fresh. "Serious! I was five, and my dad bought me the single of 'The Show', because it's got that bit that sounds like 'Inspector Gadget'. And you had 'La Di Da Di' on the B-side with the beatbox, and that was it. All the storytelling, you're not too far away from fairytales."

His dad was a reggae-loving music nut, following a musical family line that includes granny, a former lounge singer. "We call her Nana Bling. Christmas day she gets changed three times."

Dad bought him his first bass aged eight. His band-driving job meant Cheyne got to meet Mani when The Stone Roses reformed in 1995. Pivotal, he told him: "Go out to a club, meet people, form a band. If I can do it, there's nothing stopping you." Within two months he'd formed Sugar Shack signees Moqsha and later joined El Pato Band, its multi-national membership meaning he learnt rhythms from four continents.

But, like Scott Walker said, first love never dies. NWA, 'Fear Of A Black Planet', MTV Raps. "When I was 11, I



C-Froo: lives a life of rhyme

started writing rhymes. Never used to tell anyone about it. If anyone asked, I'd tell them 'Just writing some little poems.'"

Doesn't that sound less cool? "Every hip-hop group I could think of, except for Beastie Boys, was black. I felt like I wouldn't be accepted. It wasn't until Eminem came along that a lot of white people saw it could be done, you could be credible - they were still under the Vanilla Ice thing."

Seeing a lot of white hip-hop at Glastonbury the same year sealed the deal. One night, Cheyne and friends headed to The Croft. "A friend asked 'If there's a battle on, are you gonna enter?' 'Yeah, course I will,' thinking there ain't gonna be."

Stakes were raised by the attendance of Kingswood idols Hairy Parents. Against big names, Cheyne made the final. "I don't know how I done it, but I was totally buzzing. I got back and my mates were like 'Where the fuck did that come from..?'"

Today you can hear C-Froo – and others in the Mad Method collective – freestyling on the first Saturday of every month at The Bank (except this one – he's on his stag do), at Native, and beyond. Recently they hosted Antipop Consortium and Sole, from Anticon, at The Croft. "I see us like buried treasure: bubbling under, got all this talent, just

about breaking through."

Soon, with help from Tough Touch Productions' Kali, you'll hear it on debut album 'The Script' (as in prescription – a smart doctor prescribed intensive freestyling, writing and recording as an antidote to bouts of depression). It's a gem, as you'll have guessed if you heard 'Proper Mint' from our SWS download issue. You'll find beat and hook aplenty (check out string-backed 'The Elemental Gentleman', a rapping take on Gilbert & Sullivan's 'The Major-General's Song'). You'll find local pride: 'Brought up in the one-five, best Southwest code/Kingswood, Bristol's filthy son like Steptoe'. Two things are more central still. The first is Cheyne's wit-fuelled speed rhyming: "Fantastically spectacular the way I use vernacular." The second is a track called 'Face The Dawn'. Cheyne took out three months from the year-long recording when the man who bought that Doug E Fresh single suddenly died. This is his son's epitaph: an affectionate, unsparing biography, but also a respectfully reggae-tinged, optimistic rallying call for those left behind. He wears his heart on his mic. "Doesn't matter the circumstance, it's only that you're gone/Guess you didn't want to face the dawn." Proper mint, that is.

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