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Top of the Year: Sussex Smooth, The Selector Mix and Artist Profile

Sussex Smooth, The Selector and E-Man Bates

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It's no question that there are a lot of eyes on Detroit's growing entertainment scene. A city that's rich in musical culture, from being the birthplace of Motown and Techno to revolutionizing Rock and Roll to being responsible for some of the greatest Hip Hop and RnB the world has seen, Detroit's influence is prevalent worldwide. Why does this matter? Because some journeys are more unconventional than others, and all journeys have their share of challenges. This one takes us to the Westside of Detroit with Sussex Smooth the Selector, who is growing into a prominent tastemaker in Detroit's music scene.

Sussex Smooth, the Selector is a prominent DJ, promoter, emcee, and radio personality. He is a former member of Coalition DJs, and a founding member of Street Certified DJs and the Paid Artist Showcase. The Selector's journey into music began in middle school band circa 2003.

“I never knew I was musically inclined until I joined band. I’ve always been an athlete, always been into sports. The only reason I didn’t stay in band was that by that time, I had my growth spurt, and when high school came around, you can’t do both band and football. My parents were church singers. Most people who grow up in a gospel background go from church to secular music. I went from church to classical, I didn’t really discover rap or hip hop until i got around street niggas, normal guys and all that stuff. That’s when I got into rap. It was also around the time I discovered parties.”

Josh B. Smooth—The Selector's first alias until he was encouraged to change his name to Sussex Smooth from his rando—started to make a name for himself in the house party scene. He began to develop the skillset of knowing the audience and playlist curation, which is what started to build his reputation as a tastemaker for the Detroit music scene, but the defining moment that sent him on this journey was yet to come.

“One day, I bumped into my uncle, Mike ‘Agent X’ Clark, and he was one of the first people who told me to pull up on him. It didn’t necessarily hit me there and then, but this is the day I go back to.”

Mike Clark's musical resume is long, a Detroit native who is dubbed Detroit's *ambassador to the underground music communities*.

“I went to Movement the same year Rihanna had that song with Calvin Harris (We found love, 2011). Playing that year was DJ Godfather, Gary Chandler, my uncle (Mike Clark), and this other artist that headlined...I’ll tell you the name in a min...Godfather is going, everybody get to Jit. Gary (Clark) starts going, all the real niggas get to going, and the artist that’s headlining, Benny Benassi, is deep house. When Satisfaction came on, niggas turned their heads and were like ‘Wait a minute, that’s his song?!’”

Satisfaction by Benny Benassi is regarded highly in the dance battle community.

”He did a beat build where he rebuilt the beat live and played it for everybody. In the 2010s, it’s one voice that a black teenager is going to recognize and that voice is Chris Brown. Benny Benassi debuted Beautiful People and my face melted. I said, ‘I know that ain’t Michael Jackson Jr.’ I always go back to that day, seeing the people’s reaction.”

When asked about what makes a perfect mix, he answers:

“I don’t think that there is such a thing as a perfect mix. You could have perfect technique and still not know what to play. If I were to give advice, I suggest getting a lot of records people like to dance to, and figure out how to line them up, learn how to hit ‘em back to back and see how long you can hit it for. The club ain’t always rocking, I’ve seen a lot of fire DJs who had no people in there, but the little amount of people there were dancing because the music was good. But, I’ve seen situations where the DJ ain’t shit, and there’s 400 people not doing anything, and the bar is fucked up because my man can’t play. The best thing you can do is figure out your goal for how you wanna play and go from there. Find your most potent set of songs, and play them back to back.”

Life always comes with its set of challenges and adversities. Everybody in pursuit of something has faced some sort of rejection, failure, or setback, but sometimes, a rocky road makes a better driver.

“In 2014, I was between a rock and a hard place. My mom had to leave her job due to disability, I didn’t have a job, and we lost our house on Sussex, so I had to figure shit out. Carlito Forgiato, but those who knew him back in the day went by Stunt, was working for a booking agency, and one of the strip clubs was looking for a DJ so he told me to check it out. The first day I DJ’d there, I got the job that night and I’ve been DJing ever since. That’s been 70% of my background.”

With prior experience curating playlists for house parties, people started to trust The Selector’s taste. In 2017, The Selector found his way to the 88.1 WHPR building in Highland Park, starting as an on-air DJ. One day at the station, a technical issue happened with one of the guests that led to the removal of all music from the computer. The Selector took it upon himself to recreate all the music for the station back into the system, curating the playlist. This ultimately led to his promotion to program manager at 88.1. As far as the station goes, RJ Watkins Jr. ran the show and was the namesake. Sysko Lavon, who came in around 2018, handled the business for the station, and The Selector handled anything artist/music related. This led to radio plays, promotion, and mixes for a lot of local artists around the city.

“To learn how to read, you gotta go to general places and gotta play a certain type of music, and then you put in your flavor from there.”

The Selector responded to how to read the room as a DJ. I followed up by asking, “What is the biggest difference between Josh B. Smooth and Sussex Smooth the Selector when it comes to knowing the audience? The Selector responded:

“I didn’t use to care. I knew just about everybody liked my taste in music, so I played all the sweet songs my boys and I liked, and all the twerk songs for the girls. I realized what I was doing for a long time at house parties was popular and took that to the club, so I went from house parties to dance clubs to strip clubs to where I’m at now...If you know what you’re doing and are cerebral about it, it’s not hard to curate. Niggas are scared to play music, but you have to have your own sound to break records. There are two types of DJs, there’s DJs who play records and DJs who break records. I’m not the tree, I’m not the roots, I’m the soil. I’m going to be here regardless of whether you put the seed or the soil here or not. I’m going to fertilize regardless. Are you gonna plant your seed and grow or nah? There are a lot of records I broke, the biggest being HeyHey by Polo Frost feat. BFB Da Packman. The biggest record that I had my hand in was Tyga’s song Taste; I got a plaque for that one.”

The mission of his project Coalition DJs is to find the hottest music on the streets and give it a platform for the world. After a while learning about the business and community side of the entertainment industry, and observe how cities such as Atlanta move in terms of camaraderie within their creative scene, The Selector and a group of other DJs left the Coalition and created Street Certified DJs with the mission to do something similar but on their own terms; The Selector wants to bring this mentality home.

To bring it back to my opening line, there are a lot of eyes on the city of Detroit’s growing entertainment scene...

“It sucks, there’s no structure, we need to build a structure so people don’t pirate all the money. At least when Motown Records was pumping, they were in the city and the city benefited from all the artists. There are so many different people doing different things in different places, but the entities that put people on don’t benefit the city they’re from. You’d think there would be more give back on their end, especially from the artists. That’s just my opinion.”

The Selector said on the topic:

“This is the most fertile the game has ever been. I never thought that gentrification would feed into this. I didn’t think that our music would still be downtown making the money that it’s making, but you gotta make that type of money to stay in the game. If you really look at what’s going on, it’s a lot of artists in the city eating, but it needs to be a structure, we need structure badly. At least in Atlanta, all that stuff that Waka Flocka used to rap about, I saw it in front of my eyes.”

There is a deep connection that Atlanta's Rap and Hip Hop scene has with each other, where an artist, manager or DJ from an earlier generation would be willing to work with a newer act, having a hand in developing talent from their city.

“These guys are multi-millionaires, these guys made it, they already did it, and they are still pulling up on the same DJs. You gotta understand what’s going on, the Presidents of Coalition Djs are Goodie Mob’s DJs. What’s Goodie Mob’s DJ doing with Metro Boomin? The old heads set the foundation to break their own records. I’m still blown away by what I saw there, and I know Detroit can be that, but it’s too many gangs, cliques, and beefs to get the structure together. Why Trick Trick made the no-fly zone was to keep the money in the city of Detroit.” I think that somebody needs to step up and do the Trick Trick to build the structure of the game. I do think, if we build the right structure amongst the gentrification in Detroit, we can build an industry that looks like Atlanta. We got culture, we need to industrialize it before it gets pirated.”

Street Certified DJs recently landed a sponsorship with Exotic Pop out of Houston, TX, which supports them to host “The Paid Artist Showcase” on a regular basis, which runs throughout the Midwest, East Coast, and the South. The showcase plans to head west this year, giving up-and-coming artists a platform to get exposure in different markets, develop their sound, and put money in their pocket. Being within this creative community myself, I agree that structure and camaraderie is needed within the city of Detroit. Not too long ago, I heard a statement that said, “Your own city is the last to show you love.” While there are many examples of this, I am optimistic that Detroit's entertainment scene can develop into a community that can develop and break new artists to the world, with just a bit of gatekeeping to keep the integrity of authenticity here in the city of Detroit.

Check out Sussex Smooth, The Selector's mix *Top Of The Year* [here](#).

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