

It's 1:00 a.m. at Andy's Bar & Grill and everyone is spellbound, transfixed by Kind Beats as he hunches over the flashing green and pink and yellow pads of an APC40-MK2, his hands like feverish propellers dicing through fog. His head bobs to the melody, to the beat. He nods, he nods, he smiles, he nods—a red shock of hair scattered through his hat. He steps back, then paces forward, leans into pulsating light, fingers leaping from pad to pad just as the horn blast cascades into a snare hit. A sweeping, intermittent sound. A laidback celebration.

Beside him, Andrew Waldie prods at the coils of a saxophone. The music is loud. The perfume of beer hangs like a mist as soulful melody washes over everyone, and Kind Beats starts rapping, a surge of percussive language. Suddenly he hurls into a whirlwind of phrases all sped up too fast to pry apart, then stops his cadence abruptly: “too long—singin songs, sittin back, so here we go . . . Shout out to Andy's, for hosting me a show, shout-out to the people for payin' five bucks, you know. I hope you like the flow, and I hope you like the beats, and people up in here they call me Kind Beats.”

This is Denton. Nowhere else on earth captures melody like this.

“The scene in Denton is flourishing right now,” says Mike Williams, a 20-year veteran of the local scene. And Mikey LaCroix, who records, produces and performs as Kind Beats, has emerged as an essential part of that movement. “Mikey has been coming up pretty quickly,” says Williams. “He's making a name for himself here in Denton. He's getting out there, shaking hands, talking to people, getting himself involved.”

When you listen to Kind Beats, you can hear the sounds of Denton. It's refracted through the whorling snare pops and sculpted jazz vocals, the drone of passing trains reshaped by deft

hands. LaCroix represents a budding and vibrant scene within the city, a subterranean movement too new to have a name. And the beauty of Denton is that the underground never has to hide.

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Mikey LaCroix hosts three radio shows on DentonRadio.com. His show “Off the Record” features LaCroix in crate-digging mode, as he runs through vinyl on-air. For “Sound Values,” he interviews local musicians. He always leads with the same question, “What is your first musical moment?” Today, it’s “Sunday Brunch,” his take on the collaborative music session he started years ago with his best friend, Jared Jackson.

I ask Mikey why he has stayed in Denton. He nods, mulls it over quickly: “Denton has a culture of people who are interested in music. They’re into music. They like music. They want to hear new music. People are willing to pay for music. And I think that comes down to providing an experience and people are coming to see it. There’s a lot of good musicians.”

It’s a blustery day. Wavering chills stern through noontime sun.

As he talks, Mikey rushes around the glass-box room that houses DentonRadio.com. The studio faces the town square, framing the courthouse lawn: Perched on a blanket, a middle-aged couple lounges into plastic cups of wine. On the courthouse steps, unkempt guitarists pluck out a Wes Montgomery song. Churchgoers stroll pavement toward lunch, with the austerity of collars and neatened dresses. Canopied by trees, five or so women meditate through yoga, a synchronized dance reaching toward heaven.

Mike glimpses out for a moment. “I love the setup of this town,” he says. “We have a square, it’s not just like a bunch of random streets and a shopping center. Plenty of places have a town square, but it’s not like this,” he points out at all the people, “where you feel like you’re in a community.”

As he talks, he's digging through a box of plugs and cables. He speaks in long, windless bursts, interwoven phrases, leaping from one idea to the next with the dexterity of an auctioneer or a hummingbird or a veteran East Coast rapper—yet always able to loop back around: “Denton in general has a great music scene. As far as jazz goes, as far as rock goes, as far as country goes—there's so many kids and older people in this town playing music that you have a very eclectic bunch who are constantly out and about. You can be out on a Thursday night and, if you are in the South Lake, the town that I grew up in, there would be nobody out—if you go out on a Thursday night here, there's people of all ages out and about, there's people with toddlers at 11:30—” Midway through his sentence he abandons what he'd been saying, mentions that the Denton Arts & Music Award were held last night. “I was nominated for a DAM Award but I had to play at NYLO in Dallas.” Toward the end of his set, he tells me, a woman stumbled up to him, waving a jar full of margarita as she demanded that Mike play “The Wobble” by VIC, a song that repeats the word “wobble” 70 times.

“I've already played ‘The Wobble’ twice,” he told her. “It's the last ten minutes of my set, people are starting to clear out. People are leaving. I'm trying to vibe what's going on for everybody.” She jabbed back with her oversized cocktail—\$2,000-worth of equipment in her spill zone—then frowned in confusion: “Are you *sure* you're a DJ? You don't *dress* like a DJ. Like, you don't even *look* like a DJ.” He stared back at her, half-amused by the irony of it all: Only an hour earlier, he'd been awarded the DAM Award for Best DJ, but he wasn't at Campus Theatre to accept it because he had a DJ gig, where he was accused of not being a DJ.

Mike's friend Leland Kracher, from electro-funk band MOJO, accepted the award for him, and the belligerent heckler wandered off into the night.

As he tore down his equipment, he thought about the way that music makes people feel. About the way the music he plays makes people feel. He wants his show to epitomize happiness. “It’s about an experience for people, kind of like, let’s say every day, you left the house and some DJ was in the corner playing the track you wanted to hear, he’s setting you up for that, ‘Yeah, I’m walking out and I’m feeling it.’ That’s the job of a DJ: to provide an atmosphere, to provide a feeling.”

The room is humid, and the monitor’s whine stifles the air. People stroll by the window in a constant flow of nodding awe. A small girl with a tiny pink backpack stops to wave at Mikey. He smiles, waves back—he includes anyone who happens to be around—then ramps back into his motoric haste.

“I’m always like this in the mornings,” he says. “It takes me a moment to slow down.” As Mikey speaks, his hands move constantly—*he* moves constantly, he constantly moves, never motionless, never uninvolved. A livid breeze slaps the giant bay window, Mike adjusts the shoulders of his checkered long-sleeve shirt. He dons the clunky headset, with its adjustable Garth-Brooks microphone, then tweaks levels and prepares for his set. A biker wearing goggles but no helmet roars past the studio, revving his Harley into a chaos of guttural burps. Families stroll by. Mikey buzzes with the casual stage-glow of a performer about to face his audience.

“So here’s a beat I’ve been working on.” He taps a button and a warped saxophone bounces through waves of percussion. For the first time all morning, he is relaxed, at peace.

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At one show, leather-jacketed bikers told him, “I like this playlist, son.”

He's performed everywhere from garage frat socials to sober living-house fundraisers. He got his start with the grind of house parties, then quickly became known for his ability to transform any room into a den of light and head-bobbing music.

Part of his job as DJ is reading the audience, reading their feel, and it's a challenge to find music that is universal. "I want to play those songs that you can play for anybody and they'll like it, and enjoy it, so you don't have to worry about the clash of 'how do I do it?'"

For Mikey, it's a matter of persona. With every variation, his presence brings something bright, something familial. Ask about Mikey LaCroix and people often say, "You mean Kind Beats?" Ask for Kind Beats and people often say, "You mean Mikey"? In other words, his occupations and hobbies and talents all intertwine, irremovable from his personality, from technique and performance. He's a DJ, yes. But he's also a musician. He raps, he composes, he plays piano and bongos and guitar. He sews together samples with the precision of a surgeon.

LaCroix's first proper show, after years of frat parties and house gigs, was in 2015 at Oaktopia, where he caught the eye of Todd Little and Francisco "Diggo" Leal, whose record label Real Rad Records is known for its output of hip-hop, electronica, and general weirdness. Real Rad collects the artists that don't make sense anywhere else.

Mikey considers himself lucky to have been embraced by the community so fully. "Denton is an amazingly eclectic place and a really good place to reach a broad audience. And meet all different types of people and show your music to a lot of different types of people."

When Mike began, he felt something—something was missing. "I knew there was hip-hop music," he says, "but there wasn't a beat scene, there wasn't a scene for kids who made beats in their bedroom to come show you what they can do." Slowly, a group of beat-makers emerged, all devoted to reshaping the structure of the music of a music town.

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Outside the studio, a rainy Sunday broods. Cold March breezes whip at the town. It's noon, but the sun is nowhere, smothered by dark clouds that leak sideslung rain. People stroll by, hunkered. The rain falls for a bit, then wheezes into mist, then stops altogether, then pours down once again. A blank fog presses against the studio's window, peering in at the "ON AIR" sign.

Mikey leans back on the heels of his polished leather boots (brown), a blue t-shirt slung into jeans, a perfect-white hat with the letters "KB" in pink. He nods as he tinkers with the soundboard's buttons, readying for his hour-long set.

"I didn't move to Denton to find myself," he says. "I chose Denton because there's a lot of inspiration, and if you can go somewhere and make an impact, that's what matters. You shouldn't be looking at the town and hoping that it will make you better, you should be looking at yourself and how to make the town better."

The rain plashes down in rhythm. Walk around Denton at any given time and music is playing. It surrounds you, it encompasses you. Music fills the streets, it drives the town, it echoes electric jazz through the parks and throbs the ground with Tejano. Flutes, trumpets, cellos—reverberating through traffic. Acoustic punk on the sidewalks, sung to passersby, classical piano at Thai on the Square. Synthesized choirs peak up from hundred-year-old basements. Each unrestrained song blends into a person pitch. In Denton, it's something you feel, something you breathe. It's part of the air.

The APC40 is synched with AbletonLive on his laptop.

"What you have here in Denton is history," he says. "And we might not even pay attention to the nostalgia that these buildings create. But if all these were these stucco buildings,

it wouldn't have the same feel. We wouldn't have the same vibe. I think a lot of times we forget that architecture can really affect the way that we feel in an area.”

He's testing the levels, tilting the camera into place.

“Architecture and surroundings can create a lot of the way we feel,” he says. “So this town—or this city or whatever you want to call it—for me, literally created Kind Beats.”

It makes perfect sense. Kind Beats exudes an infectious positive energy. His beats, his samples, his melodies, are all designed to produce good feelings. His music is bright, resplendent, yet it never gets corny, and that's a tough thing to accomplish.

He turns the microphone on: “Thank you for tuning in to DentonRadio.com, we're happy to have you with us on ‘Sunday Brunch’. I'll be playing some chill music today. We'll call this episode The Feels.”

Do you want to know Mikey LaCroix's first musical moment?

He was four years old and the music was blaring and he was dancing all around the room and everyone loved it and he knew he was happy. And everyone there with him, they were happy, too. He mutes the microphone. Nods into the pulse of the song. Kind Beats. Warmth, happiness. His music will make you nod your head, nod your head and you've got this beautiful smile.

The song glides along behind him as he talks. He stares down at the flashing pads, glimpsing over occasionally to look at my eyes, quickly, the way actors do when they have to pretend to be driving: “I make this music because I like the way that I feel to be here—especially in the summer: people are out and about, they're laughing, there's families, people having a good time, they're remembering why it's fun to be alive. And you're surrounded by that all the time.”