



## XV TALKS 'ZERO HEROES,' LIVING ON 'SQUARIA' -- EXCLUSIVE VIDEO

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*Donovan Johnson, otherwise known as XV, is a prolific rapper hailing from suburban Wichita, Kan. And though the Midwest city doesn't necessarily breed hip-hop extraordinaires, XV hopes to change that with his decidedly geek-friendly culture rhymes and a high-power live show. After releasing numerous mixtapes to broad appeal, XV's latest, 'Zero Heroes,' examines the Michael Scotts, Luke Skywalkers and Doc Browns of the world while preaching video-game logic and comic book heroism. The BoomBox recently spoke with the up-and-coming MC about his Midwestern influences and what it means to be square.*

### **How did growing up in Wichita shape your sound and who you are today?**

I think that growing up in Wichita allowed me to realize there's this small town aura that's never been perceived or owned in the hip-hop industry because it's like everybody that has been a big artist is from L.A. or from Atlanta or from New York. So you only get that piece of the world in hip-hop music. But there's this small town called Wichita, Kans. that has this guy who just plays video games and reads comic books, and loves hip-hop music who knows how to rap kinda good, you

know. And it allowed me to be a lot more personable.

We don't have a sound, we don't have a certain demographic that we have to cater to, so all we have is ourselves to present in our music. It allowed me to just be myself and not try to shape myself to whatever the sound of the city was or what everybody thinks is hot, because I'm away from everything. I'm away from Wichita... Right in the middle of the map. I'm not close to Chicago, I'm not close to St. Louis, I'm not that close to Houston. I'm not close to any big music scenes, so all we have is what we listen to and what we create in our own minds and that allowed me to have an imagination and just create that with my music.

**Do you feel like you're making a name for Wichita?**

Yeah, What I feel like is going to happen is my music comes out and they find out there's this kid, who's from Wichita, Kans. Then their like "What's Wichita, Kans.?" and people will start going and seeing Wichita and seeing what else it has to offer. And in reality I want it to be bigger than just Wichita, I want people to be going to all the small towns. The Lincoln, Nebreskas or the cities in Utah or Idaho or Iowa or even small towns in Indiana. What I am, there's people in all those small towns like it and I feel I can create that by just showing them that there's awesomeness everywhere.

**You describe yourself as "nobody begging to become somebody." Tell us what you mean by that?**

You know, when I first came into the industry, I had the name XV because I started rapping when I was 15 years old, so I made my name as a 14-year-old. So when I came in the industry I had so many problems with my name -- people would call me VX, people would call me 15. So I ultimately felt like the new kid in school. I felt like the kid that nobody paid attention to, but what I want to do requires a huge platform, so whether it be for fame or just for the ears, I'm that nobody, the kid with the green backpack that nobody even knows his name, that's yelling, screaming to be looked at, to be that somebody that people look at and people listen to and relate to and people just go to for their music and that get away.

**You started songwriting when you were 15. In what ways has your style matured since 15?**

When I was a 15-year-old I was just listening to music and I wanted to be basically like the artist that I listen to, so I emulated it. I didn't have an idea of my own style. I had no idea what XV should rap about. I was just a big fan of **Jay-Z** and **Notorious B.I.G.** and I just said exactly kinda the same things they said with my own words. As I grew up and learned more about songwriting and learned more about being an artist, I basically took that whole ... All the lyrical skills that I learned listening to a lyrical artist like a Jay-Z or a Big or a **Tupac** or **Eminem** or **Andre 3000** and

I took that and I started finding out how to be myself with music. Then I realized "OK, if I were to take out a magnifying glass on my personality what would it show?" This all just came from evolving as an artist, it would come from stage shows, it would come from people telling me what they like about my music.

Somebody came up to me and said, "That one song, I relate to so much." I would do more of that because there's no telling how many people there are out there that can relate to that one song and that one characteristic of my personality and just my song writing basically went crazy and I started knowing how to be myself in my music and it just so happened that myself was awesome and it worked in the music.



**Continuing on about your particular influences and what influences your songwriting, you are a connoisseur of video games, comic books, nerd culture. How do you fold that in your music?**

Well, when I first started branding myself it was actually from a long night of video games with my producer Seven. We were playing Rock Band non-stop and we were playing all these shooter games on Xbox Live and I was just like, "We should incorporate this into the music."

My actual first record, first single that got played on any radio station -- actually it was first played on Hot 97 in New York -- was a record called '**Mirror's Edge**' and it's based off a video game called 'Mirror's Edge.' The concept of the song has nothing to do with the video game but it says, "I feel like I'm running on walls/ And I don't want to touch the ground." This all came from me listening to the beat and at the same time I'm playing the video game and I'm running on walls as a character, and I came up with the melody and it worked. A lot of people would just be on YouTube searching for 'Mirror's Edge' and come across me and that's when I realized I can incorporate all these themes.

I feel like video games, popular culture, TV shows, sitcoms everybody grows up with no matter where you're from, no matter what lifestyle you have, no matter what. We grew up on '**Rugrats**' and '**Fresh Prince**' and 'Battle Toads' and 'Number Munchers.' No matter where you're from in your life, you know about that. Or if I mention 'Oregon Trail' in a flow you'll be like "Dang I remember 'Oregon Trail'" and you relate to that, no matter what part of life you're in. When I realized I could do that, like tap into that you know... It's actually just a part of our personality. I love comic books and I love video games and I'll rap about them here and there but at the same time I'm giving you a piece of who I am and if that happens to be a piece of you as well it allows me and that listener to relate.

**You claim to be from a different planet, the planet Squaria. Can you describe what it's like there?**

Planet Squaria, there's not a lot of people there ... They're called Squarians. When you're there, you got your own house. You live in this house all by yourself and it has video games, it has comic books and you know there's beautiful robot women around to keep you company. If you want you can call them; they don't have to be there, it's whatever. But you're there by yourself. You're in your own world. It basically allows you the creativity and the imagination to create whatever you want. Without the news, without the media, without what's cool right now being displayed to you like this is what's cool, this is how you're supposed to dress, this is what people listen to, this is what's on the radio, this is what's on TV. It's not that; its just whatever you want it to be.

Squarians know that world because they, like I, live there. It's a life you create on your own so you like whatever music you like. If I want to listen to Andre 3000 at one point I can and then I can switch to **Radiohead** right after that and nobody will call it weird because I'm in my own world. So that's Squaria. If you ever want to visit, let me know; I can get you tickets or whatever, you know. It's not an easy place to get to but if you get there it's beautiful.

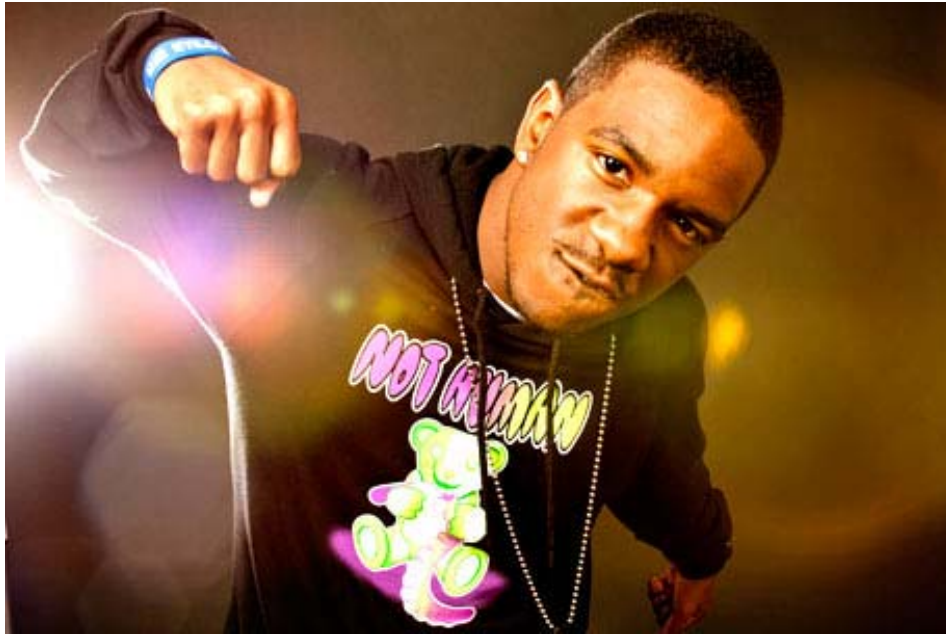


**So what advice do you have for all the other square kids out there, especially kids that are trying to get into hip-hop?**

The advice I give to anybody that wants to do music or wants to do whatever their passion is, is first off, pursue it. That's where everybody fails at. The world will make you think its not that easy to get to where you're at so just be regular and go get that 9-to-5 job and make sure you pay your bills on time and pay your taxes and be just a human being. But I would say to anybody who you know [to] not even be a square, just be yourself and don't allow what's cool and what's hot and what everybody thinks will make you that popular or whatever be reflected into your personality because that's how you become them and not yourself. The best part about us is that we are all created different and a lot of times we just try to blend in because it's easier to do that.

When I first started rapping, I had a picture when I was playing with action figures and I sent that out with my press pack. People were like, "What is this, what is this? This is the dumbest thing I have ever seen in my life." So I went harder and I said, "Good, because that's what I do," and the more and more I did it the more genuine you realize it is of me. So I would say to anybody, just be yourself no matter what it is. Even if you're the most gangsterism guy in the world, be the biggest gangster ever because, if that's what you are, as long as people see that it's genuine, people will attach themselves to it because people attach themselves to genuine people and they attach themselves to whats real, so that's all I can say.

**On your newest mixtape, 'Zero Heroes,' you have a few personal heroes on there. Can you name a few?**



Michael Scott from '**The Office**,' Luke Skywalker, Doc Brown from '**Back to the Future**' who I met at a show one time and he gave me a Flux Capacitor to go back in time one time -- it was pretty cool. Michael Jordan, who actually influenced the whole concept -- the biggest hero. I mean the guy could fly. How can you not want that? That's just a few of them.

<http://www.theboombox.com/2011/05/17/xv-talks-zero-heroes-living-on-squaria-exclusive-video>