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Title: Rapper's talent manifested early

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WARREN -- Marshall Mathers moved to Warren from Missouri when he was 14. He lived with his mother and his brother, Nathan, who is now 16, in rundown trailers, homes, duplexes and apartments. It was then that the young performer who would become Eminem wrote his first rhymes. Lisa Lisa, a disc jockey for WDRQ-FM, is credited with providing his first break.

In the mid-1990s, Lisa Lisa ran an open microphone night on Fridays for about 20 rappers on the former WHYT-FM. Dozens of interested rappers were screened over the phone. Material had to be original and clean.

"He was probably one of my top five rappers," Lisa Lisa recalled. "But his style was nothing like it is now. He was kind of comical. He would always have a lyric or two that would make all of us bust out laughing."

Marshall Mathers was polite and shy back then -- "but very serious," the deejay added. "He was like a perfectionist. He would work with the producer mixing the track right up to the last minute before he would have to go on."

Kids relate to Mathers because he's talented and because millions of them can relate to an urban white kid who grew up poor, Lisa Lisa said.

He also made an impression on teachers at Lincoln High School in Warren, where he was a ninth-grade dropout.

"He was a nice, quiet kid who had a group of friends and blended right in," said Bob Blair, Mathers' drafting teacher at Lincoln. "I knew Marshall Mathers. I never knew Eminem or Slim Shady (Em's alter ego)."

Blair, now Lincoln's principal, remembers a rap Mathers did at the school talent show.

"I would give anything to have a tape of that," Blair said.