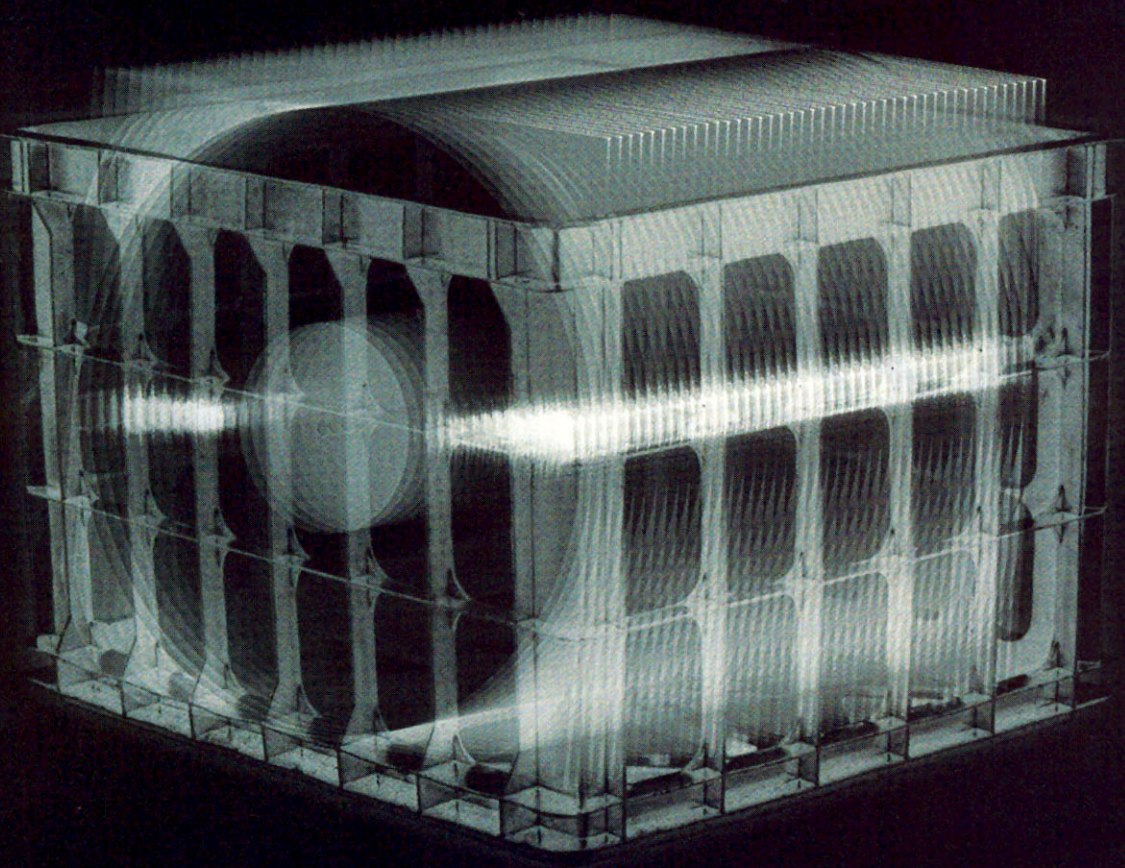
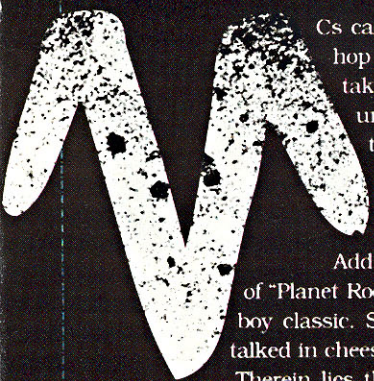


ANATOMY OF A *CLASSIC* ALBUM



WHAT EARNS AN ALBUM 5 MICS?
MCS ARE BURNING IN SEARCH OF HIGHER LEARNING,
TURNING IN EVERY DIRECTION, SEEKING DIRECTION.
TAKE NOTES.

WORDS BY JERRY L. BARROW



Cs can learn a lot about making good hip-hop from the Transformers. For instance, take Soundwave, the Decepticon Communications expert/boombox, whose tapes were as lethal as they were cool. In battle, they would fly from his chest tearing apart the competition (Ravage) or breaking new ground (Rumble). Add to that his digitized voice straight out of "Planet Rock" and it's clear Soundwave was a B-boy classic. Sure, his Autobot counterpart Blaster talked in cheesy rhymes, but Soundwave had *style*.

Therein lies the difference between being good and being classic. It's not a wannabe or a clone. Classics set trends, they don't follow them: Hip-hop is no different. Classic albums define an era while transcending it. They are timely as well as timeless. But you're thinking, "Yeah, that sounds good, but what are the tangibles? How do I make a 5-mic album?" Simply (or not so simply) it is a bionic combination of lyrics, beats, innovation, sequencing and breadth that the Wizard of Oz and Dr. Frankenstein would sell their souls for. But the key is to approach it as a work of art, not simply a means to a financial end. Sure, it's great to sell millions of records, but the *true* mark of a classic is when, in the process, you're not competing with the label, the critics or the fans. You're only competing with yourself.

"Lyrically, I'm worshiped, don't front the word sick/ You cursed it, but rehearsed it."

—NOTORIOUS B.I.G., "KICK IN THE DOOR"

IT WOULDN'T BE HIP-HOP without the lyrics, so superior content and technical skill set a classic opus apart from a producer-driven hodgepodge. But there isn't just one preferred way to spit. With its mere nine songs, Nas's *Illmatic* left little room for error and remains a benchmark in lyrical mastery that to this day shadows Mr. Jones. In contrast, OutKast's *Aquemini* was a conceptual masterpiece that took us to space and back, blending astrology and philosophy with cryptic street tales in 16 tracks. Stylistically, the 19 year old from Queens obliterated the standard AABB rhyme scheme, chaining the double and triple rhymes in a single line: "My mic check is life or death, breathin' a sniper's breath I exhale the yellow smoke of Buddha through righteous steps." Certainly ain't hard to tell. But when Andre 3000 spits on "Synthesizer," "Marijuana illegal but cigarettes cool/ I might look kinda funny but I ain't no fool," his simple truths speak volumes.

After flow and philosophy, the third dimension of lyricism is disclosure. In the ego-driven world of hip-hop, informative, confessional lines score big like Yao Ming. Teach the listener about yourself or the world around them. When an artist shares him or herself with the listener, it acknowledges the symbiotic relationship between them. Jay-Z only hinted at what he was capable of on the *Reasonable Doubt*'s "Regrets" and the revealing "This Can't Be Life" on *Dynasty*. So by the time *The Blueprint* came around, the masses were floored by his personal revelations on "Song Cry" "Never Change" and the banana-puddin'-smooth title track. Likewise, Scarface's *The Fix* found the geto boy's gangsta parlance tempered by spirituality and advice disguised as clever narratives. In short, reading your lyrics in 2050, future generations shouldn't mistake them for greeting cards, shopping receipts or a Chinese food menu.

"Polyrhythmic with a big fat boom/ You have an eargasm as you start to consume the ghetto beat...."

—G-TIP, "RHYTHM (DEVOTED TO THE ART OF MOVIN' BUTTS)"

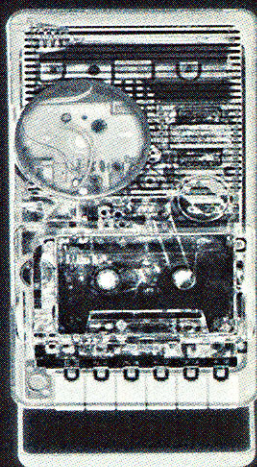
Time has proved that it's almost impossible to gain an audience for your classic verbiage if your beats are wack (insert your favorite unsung MC here). But don't think that just throwing a bajillion dollars at the "producer du jour" will win you accolades. When it comes to sonic innovation in hip-hop, A Tribe Called Quest and OutKast set the standard. With *The Low End Theory* and *Aquemini* respectfully, Tribe and 'Kast took hip hop in new directions while adhering to the basics. Rim sizes may go up every three weeks, but hip-hop is not about reinventing the wheel. It's about respecting the old and making something new.

OutKast's live musicianship wasn't as technical as The Roots', while Tribe's bottom-heavy ensemble gave boom bap crossover appeal. OutKast's Organized Noise production camp made it cool for a Brooklynite to nod his head to the harmonicas and handclaps of "Rosa Parks," while Tribe took the jazz-hip hop marriage beyond the honeymoon stage by enlisting Ron Carter to play live bass, instead of relying on samples alone.

Those who chose to dig in the crates had to be creative. Brand Nubian sampled rocker Edie Brickel for "Slow Down" on the classic *One For All* and Eric B. spawned a legion of followers when he flipped Bob James's "Nautilus" for the nickel-earning "Let the Rhythm Hit 'Em." More recently, Jay-Z's *The Blueprint* reworked a proven soul sampling formula, which ultimately altered the direction of hip hop production for the last two years.

"You gotta come provocative, nigga, shil gotta be spine tinglin' with mad styles and crazy dangerous, bust-your-shit-open beats."

—RAEKWON, "SKEW IT ON THE BARBIE"



So, you've got your beats, got your rhymes, but something is still missing. This "X-factor" is what separates a rapper from an artist. The hit man is the brother with charisma and an album that has the breadth to successfully embody a variety of moods,

styles and sounds is well on its way to being a classic. One of the best examples of this is The Notorious B.I.G.'s *Life After Death*. Frank White seamlessly assimilated a variety of styles into his own lyrical DNA while remaining distinctly B.I.G. The dancefloors got a rise out of "Hypnotize," while "Kick In the Door" strong-armed the streets and Big Poppa's musical and lyrical dexterity made it all work together. He had a supporting cast that would dwarf most artists' but Biggie retained ownership of his musical real estate. And aided by near-flawless sequencing, the lengthy project had a continuity that made it much more than a collection of hot singles.

Of course, there are some albums that weren't rated 5 mics that contained classic elements. For lyricism, see Big Pun's *Capital Punishment* or Organized Konfusion's *Stress: the Extinction Agenda*. For sick instrumentals see Diamond D's *Stunts, Blunts and Hip-Hop*. And under "groundbreaking" in the hip hop dictionary you will find the Pharcyde's *Bizarre Ride II The Pharcyde*.

Hey, no one said this would be easy. You do have options. If you just want to spit, ghostwrite or join the army. If you just want to talk over hot beats, learn how to DJ. But if you are truly dedicated to making *music*, we'll be waiting to hear from you. Y'all know the address.