

ear TO THE street

DECEMBER 2003: THE ROOTS GET ORGANIC—AGAIN (PG. 58), GRAFFITI BRIDGES THE GAP (PG. 64), TONY MONTANA RETURNS (PG. 66)



BEST OF BOTH WORLDS

ARE SINGING RAPPERS A SIGN OF HIP-HOP'S GROWTH OR A DEATH KNEEL FOR THE MC? **WORDS BY JERRY L. BARROW**

Biz Markie is a troublemaker. Though groups like Nice & Smooth and the pioneering Cold Crush Brothers dared to harmonize their lyrics, it was never considered the norm for a rapper to sing. But over a tinkling piano melody on the song "Just a Friend," Biz ambitiously—and comedically—stretched his vocal chords. The song became a huge crossover hit and the damage was done: Rappers were given the green light to sing.

Today, Busta Rhymes is crooning alongside Mariah Carey, and André 3000 cantillates for an entire album. But the question remains: If an MC sings, is he still doing Hip-Hop?

In the beginning, what Hip-Hop fans loved about MCs was that they *weren't* singers. As fans and creators of the anti-

establishment music, we thumped our chests in defiance of R&B. But over time it became the creative manipulations of flow and use of voice that made an MC stand out. Groups like Bone Thugs-N-Harmony pushed the threshold, adding melodic delivery to their rhymes and blurring the line between singing and rapping. Though MCs like Tupac drew out certain syllables when they rhymed, the fluid delivery of Bone Thugs (and later of Nelly and Ja Rule) put melody at the forefront of lyricism.

It was female MCs like Queen Latifah, however, who were among the first to actually sing an entire song on a rap album and be taken seriously (check "How Do I Love Thee" from *Nature of a Sista*). Unlike Biz and Smooth B, Latifah wasn't viewed as a novelty. For one,

Dana Owens sang quite well, but beyond that, Hip-Hop was no doubt more comfortable with this kind of crooning coming in a female package.

This ultimately led to the stylistic variations of Missy Elliott and Lauryn Hill (who truly complicated things!). No longer relegated to just singing hooks, these multitasking ladies sang and rapped with equal aplomb. Few could deny their skills as MCs, but the fact that they sang just as well (and just as much) raised the ire of purists. Were their albums in fact Hip-Hop? If we put *Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* on equal footing with *Ready To Die*, where is the line drawn?

"I didn't see her as an R&B artist," Fat Joe says of Ms. Hill. "When Mary J. sings, we consider it Hip-Hop. We

can't say it's not Hip-Hop just because [it's] singing."

At the heart of this debate is a fight for ownership of the culture and gender identification. The bravado that defines the MC is devalued in a market that embraces harmony and sensitivity. But digressions into love or melody sell records. So they are countered with copious amounts of testosterone for image control. 50 Cent asked the ladies 21 questions but all the media seemed to remember were nine bullets. Busta's duet with Mariah was followed by a call from the ambulance.

Thug passion is used to dilute hip-hop's masculine spirit to the point where there is no room for a singing MC.

"I was waiting for a dude to put out an album like mine to see if he would get mic'ed," says Oakland MC and songbird Mystic in reference to THE SOURCE's practice of not mic'ing hybrid albums. "There is a desire in the hip-hop community to be able to pin-point it. But should I feel more responsible for hip-hop than for my artistry?"

"WHEN MARY J. SINGS WE CONSIDER IT HIP-HOP. WE CAN'T SAY IT'S NOT JUST BECAUSE IT'S SINGING."
—FAT JOE

In the effort to preserve norms, we are denying the innovation that made Hip-Hop what it is. Most rappers grew up listening to singers like Stevie Wonder and Prince, so it was only a matter of time before Hip-Hop reflected those influences beyond sampling. Wyclef Jean has tapped into his vocal mojo for the majority of his new project, and dead prez manipulate their voices to good effect on their recent work. In fact, it looks like we may soon see the day when a respected MC makes an album on par with Bilal or D'Angelo and Hip-Hop will have to claim it. "Mos Def and Pharoahe Monch may not be technically good singers, but it's the feeling it creates," offers Phonte of Little Brother, who sings and spits on their debut *The Listening*. "Hooks sell records, [but] I think cats like André 3000 get the art side."

So maybe Biz wasn't such a troublemaker after all. For daring to be different, we may owe him a debt of gratitude.

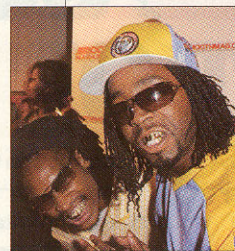


(Top to bottom) P.Diddy & Da Band throw it up; Ying Yang Twins go pop; C Murder gets life; Posh Spice down with the Roc?

RUNNING THANGS: Normally, P. Diddy sends someone else running around for him. But on Nov. 2, he'll be running himself at the New York City Marathon. He hopes to raise \$1 million for charity, including one that benefits HIV-positive children. He will be sponsored by a group of stars including Jay-Z, Derek Jeter, Sarah Jessica Parker and Calvin Klein. But while Diddy's training, someone's gonna have to keep an eye on the kids in Da Band. They're blowing up after releasing their debut album *Too Hot for TV*, but their growing popularity has led to some friction within the Bad Boy camp. The Hoodfellaz, who are also signed to the label, have released the song "Taking the Band," which refers to the fact that Da Band's album is out while the Hoodfellaz's album has been pushed back. Sounds like Hoodfellaz won't be running for Diddy's cheesecake anytime soon.

WRAPPED UP: Rapper Corey "C-Murder" Miller has been convicted of second-degree murder, which carries a mandatory life sentence in Louisiana. The charges stem from a January 2002 incident in which 16-year-old Steve Thomas was beaten, shot and killed in a Louisiana nightclub. Jurors convicted Miller, despite his defense presenting nine witnesses who said he was not the shooter. Miller's family, who were present at the trial, said they would appeal the verdict.

DO IT YOURSELF: Keith Murray's unceremonious departure from Def Jam hasn't slowed him down—he's announced plans to launch his own label, Head Rush, and will release an album in 2004. In other industry news, **Trackboyz**, who are known for their production on Nelly's "Air Force Ones" are rumored to have signed a deal with So So Def/Arista and will be releasing a compilation in the near future. Speaking of compilations, the **Track Masters** are also slated to release their own album.



POP LIFE: If you thought the Ying Yang Twins collaborating with Britney Spears on a song called "I've Got That Boom Boom" was a bit much,

wait till you hear Roc-A-Fella artists like M.O.P feature Posh Spice on one of their tracks. Word has it that the former Spice Girl sports a Roc-A-Fella chain around her hips. According to the Roc's CEO Dame Dash, Posh will not be rapping on her

album because he has "never done anything corny," but she will be given "a hip-hop influence." On the other side of the game, rapper Queen Latifah is recording an album of popular standards. But at least she can sing.

