

## ~ Return of Funky Fresh ~

### Independent hip-hop music offers alternative to radio rap

ROBERT CROWE  
The Battalion

Just about every music genre has an independent, underground scene that loathes mainstream music.

Punk is an obvious example. For every Blink 182 fan, there is a snout-nosed gutter punk ready to burn Blink's albums.

Hip-hop music, like punk, has origins in the underground. However, hip-hop became mainstream long before MTV popularized Green Day and Blink 182. While hip-hop was blowing up boom boxes across the country during the 1980s, punk maintained a low profile.

Much has changed in hip-hop culture since the old-school days of hip-hoppers Doug E. Fresh and Slick Rick. For example, back in 1984, there were probably no drunken Aggies freaking to booty anthems at the local pick-up bars. Today, however, booty-shaking playa rap has taken control of the local clubs frequented predominantly by white college students trying to "get their drink on."

**Underground producers are concerned with maintaining the art of creative sampling ... the lyrics tend to be more complicated than the money-making anthems by kingpin players Master P and Juvenile.**

This phenomenon mirrors what is happening across the country: MTV is playing more rap music; white people are using black slang, and hip-hop fashions are influencing clothing retailers.

Another side to hip-hop's current cultural revolution is somewhat harder to find in Bryan-College Station: the revival of underground hip-hop.

The new crop of underground artists is helping bring back hip-hop's old-school, organic flavor, said Adam Brown, a hip-hop producer and senior sports management major. Two new-school groups, Los Angeles' Jurassic 5 and Dilated Peoples, combine the old and the new into an especially vibrant form of hip-hop. Hip-hop fans can catch them when they join the punk bands on this summer's Vans Warped Tour.

Brown prefers the jazzy beats traditionally found in East Coast, underground hip-hop.

"I've always been into funky beats — the beats that are nasty and ill," he said.

Brown said he gravitated toward underground hip-hop after hearing groups like The Roots, De La Soul and A Tribe Called Quest. He said he learned to appreciate the music's origins.

"I didn't get into the underground until I really got a grasp of the music," he said. "The underground is pure. People are there to hear the real art form of hip-hop."

Underground hip-hop focuses on the same artistic and political issues found in other forms of independent music and art, said hip-hop enthusiast Byung Chung, a senior industrial distribution major.

"Indie artists cater to a specific audience," Chung said. "It's like independent films. Only John Waters and David Lynch fans are going to support their work."

Underground producers are concerned with maintaining the art of creative sampling, introducing sounds into their songs, Chung said. The lyrics tend to be more complicated than the moneymaking anthems by kingpin players Master P and Juvenile.

Underground MCs use irreverent wordplay to rhyme about everything from partying to politics and philosophy, Chung added. The underground also celebrates the four elements of hip-hop culture: MCs, DJs, break dancing and graffiti.

The hip-hop underground never disappeared; it just stayed close to its roots, said Russel Gonzalez, producer of Houston's independent hip-hop crew, K-Otix. Gonzalez and K-Otix have independently produced and released underground hip-hop for eight years.

K-Otix has five independent releases — mostly on vinyl. The crew has also played the South By Southwest Music Conference and opened for groups like Hieroglyphics, Artifacts, Ras Kass, Outkast, The Roots and Common. As independent artists, Gonzalez said he and his crew write rhymes and produce beats that represent the purest form of hip-hop.

"Being independent gives you freedom," Gonzalez said. "There are no boundaries. You're free to do whatever you feel and not make a record just because you want to sell a million copies."

Gonzalez said DJs and college radio stations are the biggest supporters of underground artists. They help artists build a loyal fan base of hardcore hip-hop fans. K-Otix began promoting music on Rice University's radio station in 1993. Like techno DJs, hip-hop DJs are responsible for buying and playing independently produced records, he said.

"Indie DJs are important," Gonzalez said. "The first thing we release is vinyl. Only the indie DJs are buying vinyl. College radio is also important, because it's open to play whatever it wants. They are the only stations playing the

indie, underground stuff."

Using independent distribution companies helps independent producers to get their records out to DJs around the world. Gonzalez said K-Otix and other independent artists focus on distribution rather than building a local fan base because the Houston scene is too small for them to sell records.

Gonzalez is also promoting K-Otix with a Website. The hip-hop curious can learn more at the K-Otix page at [www.k-otix.com](http://www.k-otix.com). There are more links to Texas' underground hip-hop scene

at [www.stinkzone.com/regional/texas.htm](http://www.stinkzone.com/regional/texas.htm).

Gonzalez said his ultimate goal is to sign a contract with a major record label that will allow K-Otix to maintain the integrity of its underground sound. Being independent has its drawbacks, he added.

"After being independent for so long, things become stagnant," he said. "You don't have the large budget to press and promote large amounts of records. You can't run magazine ads. You must live within your means."

He said artists like Eminem, Dilated Peoples,

Jurassic 5, Common and Black Star self-released their work before signing with bigger labels. Signing with a major label should not scare independent artists or upset their hardcore fans, Gonzalez said. It all amounts to maintaining the artistic integrity of the group's sound after signing, he said.

"Fans don't lash out on artists for signing major deals," Gonzalez said. "They lash out for the sound that's produced. If K-Otix signs a deal with Def Jam Recordings and starts to sound like DMX or Jay-Z, then that's a reason for them to be upset."



RUBEN DELUNA/The Battalion

**Jurassic 5**  
Quality Control  
CD Courtesy of  
Interscope Records

Now that the gun smoke is settling on the gangsta-rap era, people are starting to realize that Los Angeles' hip-hop scene is not just a gangsta's paradise. Jurassic 5's major-label debut, *Quality Control*, proves that Los Angeles is more than a just G-Thang, baybay.

On *Quality Control*, Jurassic 5 stays true to the underground fan base that



helped it sell 275,000 copies of 1997's independently released *Jurassic 5 EP*.

Jurassic 5 DJs Numark and Cut Chemist are notorious for their unorthodox turntable skills. Here they live up to the reputation by providing funky breaks with quirky samples, old-school snare hits and crazy scratches.

The good-time lyrical flows of MCs Chali 2na, Akil, Zaakir and Marc 7even fit in nicely with the innovative beats. The four MCs rap about everything from rocking parties to coming of age

and dealing with shady industry types. They trade flows and repeat choruses with precision and finesse.

The singsong delivery and chorus repetition bring to mind the golden era of underground groups like The Pharcyde and Native Tongues Family. Fans of A Tribe Called Quest, De La Soul and Jungle Brothers will become nostalgic for the days of Walkmans and backpacks.

Jurassic 5 is at the forefront of underground hip-hop; however, the group is not extremely innovative. Pharcyde and the Native Tongues developed cult followings after creating something new.

On *Quality Control*, Jurassic 5 provides quality beats and rhymes that celebrate the tradition of independent, underground hip-hop. (Grade: A)

— Robert Crowe

**Taproot**  
Gift  
CD Courtesy of Atlantic Records

the songs never get any worse.

"Smile," the first song on the album, is an amalgamation of dull power chords and out-of-key vocals punctuated by the odd scream. The only breaks in these constants are introductions to the songs, which often sound like a 12-year-old trying to copy Korn's guitar solos from tablature, accompanied by Stephen Richard's forever out-of-key vocals.

Music has no corresponding form for film's "schlock," a style of movie intentionally made badly to be humorous. *Gift* is probably the closest the mu-



sic industry will come. The difference is that Taproot did not intentionally make this album bad. Schlock is characterized by ridiculous dialogue, and *Gift* is filled with inane vocals that sound like a middle-schooler's diary. "Emotional Times" is the main culprit: "Life sucks sometimes, friendships turn to lies. It brings tears to my eyes."

Modern pop musicians are often criticized for not writing their own songs, but this band definitely needs a

professional writer. (Grade: D-)

— Jason Bennyhoff

**SR71**  
Now You See Inside  
CD Courtesy of RCA Music

"Right Now," the first single off of SR71's new album, screams with pop-punk energy. The opening cords mirror Blink 182's "Damnit" and Fenix TX's "All my Fault." Lead singer Mitch Allan's typical punk-rocker sneering and nasal vocals, stolen from The Clash and The Sex Pistols, make most listeners think SR71's *Now You See Inside* would be on the "punk" shelves at the record store.

While "Right Now" is a catchy and radio-friendly tune, SR71 really shines on the tracks where it drops the punk charade and breaks out the acoustic guitar.

Fenix TX would probably be too embarrassed to record a song like SR71's "Alive." But with its soft acoustic guitar strumming and touching lyrics about leaving an abusive relationship, "Alive" is easily one of the best tracks on *Now You See Inside*. Other slowed-down, pop-rock ballads like "Empty Spaces" and "Paul McCartney" give the listener something all-too-often missing in the punk-rock genre — meaningful lyrics.

*Now You See Inside* showcases a

variety of alt-rock sub-categories. "Alive" and "Paul McCartney" croon along much like mopey ballads by The Wallflowers, "Another Night Alone" is a noisy insertion of power-chord pop mimicking Third Eye Blind, and "Right Now" and "Politically Correct" complete the spectrum with the punk-pop of Blink 182.



Fans of any of these bands who do not mind exploring other genres will probably enjoy the whole of *Now You See Inside*. Likewise, those who stick to just one of type of alt-rock will find at least two or three tracks they can sink their teeth into. SR71's first single may give it the punk image, but the variety of songs within the alt-rock category that pop up on *Now You See Inside* makes the album worth the confusion. (Grade: B)

— Eric Dickens

**A = instant classic    B = a cut above    C = average**  
**D = don't buy it        F = burn in effigy**

News in Brief  
Student threaten  
eers with gun  
RENTON, Wash. (AP) —  
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