

LOCAL NOISE

Brethren

22/01/05, Riverside Theatre, Parramatta.
Mistery, Wizdm, Tony Mitchell, Nick Keys.

Summary:

“The way to look at it is that the next generation is just going to add to the whole hip-hop culture. It’s just going to die if we act like dinosaurs and keep it for ourselves; I mean obviously there will be new people that spring up. But I’d prefer for people to have an understanding of the whole culture. Say for example, a young graff writer, all they know is their mates from school who they write with, they don’t realise there is US history, there is Australian history and there is the global community. And the same with rhyming, if we’re doing rhyming workshops we’ll quite often bring along French hip-hop, German hip-hop, African hip-hop and say, ‘Listen man, it’s not just Eminem and Tupac’. ” [Mistery]

Backstage at the Parramatta Riverside Theatre we spoke to Mistery and Wizdm, both long-serving hip-hop artists, community workers and dedicated (but not preaching) Christians. Mistery and Wizdm worked their memories hard to recall the early days of hip-hop in Australia in the 80s from Sydney (Mistery) and Adelaide (Wizdm). Having just released their first LP *Beyond Underground* after years of compilation tracks and EPs, they talked about the process of making the album. They also spoke about their faith in relation to hip-hop, and avoiding being pigeon-holed as ‘Christain rappers’. In a wide-ranging interview led mostly by the loquacious Mistery, almost all topics were touched on, including graffiti styles and working with local government as graffiti advisors, family heritage and locality, the influence of British MCs on the first Australian to rap ‘in accent’, the global nature of hip-hop, the music industry and hip-hop’s DIY answer to it, and being custodians of the culture.

About:

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Local Noise is an ARC-funded research project from the University of Technology, Sydney. Its focus is on Australian hip-hop, and the localisation of hip-hop in different cultural, societal and educational contexts.

M: Mistery

W: Wizdm

TM: Tony Mitchell

NK: Nick Keys

TM: There seems to be a really kind of strong element of second-generation migrant identity being expressed through hip-hop. And I'm really interested in hip-hop in other languages too.

M: Oh, man, I've travelled heaps. I've hooked up with hip-hoppers all round the globe. Even last week, I was in New Zealand and hooked up with some dudes over there.

TM: Oh yeah, whereabouts in New Zealand were you?

M: I was there for the Body Rock Festival in Wellington. My brother used to live there.

TM: When you've travelled abroad, is it mainly to write, to do graff stuff?

M: Everything, everything. Because I do a bit of everything, sometimes I know an MC is one country, a DJ in another. Like in countries, say like South Africa, it was really cool 'cause it was like Australia. Pretty much, the guys that were the MCs also did graff, broke, DJ'd and stuff like that – not that you have to do that. But in the States for example – maybe it was just the people I met – but graff writers didn't really listen to hip-hop or MCs that didn't know that breakin' still existed, they're just involved in the rap industry now. Maybe it was just the people I met at the time I was there, or something, you know.

TM: Whereabouts in South Africa where you?

M: Cape Town. I've been over there twice. The fourth member from my other crew Bounty Hunters is South African, yeah.

TM: Yeah, OK. 'Cause there's a big East Cape hip-hop movement over there, Black Noise, Profits of the City.

M: They're my friends. I know all those guys, man. They're the guys that brought us out, yeah. So I toured around with them, I did stuff in prisons and townships – it was dope man. It was really interesting actually, not that I want to bag America, but like when I went over there for this thing, African Battle Cry, like I made my own way there, just like guys from France, Germany, Belgium and England, and there wasn't anyone from the States. These guys are like Zulu Nation, you know what I mean, but over there they are called Universal Pot Nation, because there are real Zulus, you know what I mean. But it was just interesting, coming from their mouth, like you know, we hear 'Africa', 'motherland' in heaps of US hip-hop, but where are they? We've got all these Ayrian Germans here, who are representing, travelling around, a whole bunch of them, at their own expense.

TM: Claude [Wizdm], can you tell me a bit about your background, were you born in Australia?

W: I was born in Chile.

M: Son of a country singer.

W: Yes. In 71, we came to Australia. My parents fled the Pinochet regime; we had a few relatives that were locked up.

TM: Right, and how old were you when you left?

W: I was six-years-old. And we lived in a hostel for about six months, and my dad studied in the hos-

tel for like six months, studied English. And we lived off the really bad food at the hostel. We just knuckled down...

TM: Which hostel was it?

W: Villawood. And yeah, I mean, the living was OK and the rent was cheap, but the food was awful. Or so they tell me, I was six-years-old. And then from there we moved to Campsie and started school and my dad got a job at AWA and he worked there for years.

TM: And you two guys met in a pizza joint, in 89 or something?

M: Yeah, I was working at a pizza shop, and pretty much everyone in the shop was hip-hop related, like MC D-man, he used to work with us, and also some of the guys from one of the original breaking crews, the Autocrats, they used to run it. And also Oroni, who was a b-boy in Blaze's breaking crew. And most of us were Christians as well. D-man was only there for a little while, but it was kinda cool the environment, and Claude just came in one day and we started talking.

TM: And was this in the days when there was still breaking going on in the park?

W: Yeah.

M: Nah.

W: Wasn't there?

M: Nah, nah, think about it, when we met was in 89.

TM: So it was all over.

M: There was hardly anything. There was pretty much – I don't know, what year would it have been – maybe 86 or something like that. There was very little, I reckon the only breaking crew, in 87 or 88 was the Superstars which was myself and Sereck, and a few other old school mates, Legend and that. Yeah, and then Superstars developed into another group, The Soul Brothers, which was just like a big posse of dudes, you know what I mean. And later that developed into Brethren, So.

TM: Right. You said in another interview, the first gig you ever went to see was Sound Unlimited at Kinsellas.

M: That was one of the first ones that we performed at. I went to gigs earlier. The first gigs that I went too were the Bondi Def Jams, yeah, and there was a rap competition in it. And Roger G, who was like this roller-skating Afro American dude – there was a Michael Jackson film clip with him on it – and Sereck was in the b-boy comp. I met him at the next jam, and I remembered him from then. But the way we actually met was kinda a cool story: I was in a b-boy crew and – what year would that have been, maybe mid 80s – and some of the guys from my school were in this other crew, but we decided to go form a crew, and whoever wanted to step up, we'd battle 'em. And then when we went to this jam they met up with their old crew and they go 'Oh, nah, we're going to leave and go back with our old mates,' and so it was like me and this other guy, Tito, 'Fuck man, there's only two of us,' and for sure, they wanted to battle us. And then I'd seen Sereck, or Unique, at this other thing, and I said 'Listen dude, can you and your two mates join us to battle these guys so we've got the numbers', and we took em' out. The first time we seriously talked was when they [the other crew they were battling] came out and popped and I said to the three guys, their crew 'Who pops amongst you guys?' and Sereck said 'I do,' and I said 'Oh, I do too'. So our first sort of interaction, in a pure heterosexual way, was that we danced together.

TM: Great. You've [Wizdm] have been involved in breaking as well haven't you?

- W:** Yeah, yeah. Well during this stuff I was down in Adelaide. I was in Adelaide between 80 and 85. And in 83 when hip-hop came out, I was in Adelaide, and myself and a few other key members were the first ones to start a breaking crew.
- TM:** Did you know Quro in Adelaide?
- W:** No, I didn't. He would have been like nine or ten at the time.
- TM:** OK, so he was in the next generation.
- W:** Yeah. So we started a few crews and stuff and started to get notoriety, winning dance competitions and getting our photos in the *Adelaide Advertiser*. Just stuff like that, it was really good, really good times. And the first gig we went to, Rodney O performed, because Rodney O had moved to Adelaide and he was working as a bouncer at this club we went to. And then, across the road from that club, there was a rollerskating rink called Downtown, and every Thursday night they would close the rollerskating rink down just for breakers. And so, all the kids would come down and break, and teach each other and stuff like that, and Rodney O would DJ, drop tracks and do a little rap here and there, 'yes yes yo' and 'to the beat yo' and all that stuff. And then, they organised a gig at another venue, and it was just like non-stop b-boying all night, and Rodney O got up and did a rap.
- TM:** And did you get into MCing and DJing while you were doing that?
- W:** I got into poetry when I was in school; I did a lot of poetry. But I never really pursued it all that much, every now and then if the teacher didn't feel like teaching, she'd say 'Just write in your journals for the rest of the period,' and I just wrote poetry and stuff like that. And I really got into stuff like Sugar Hill Gang and Grandmaster Flash. At that time Run DMC's *King of Rock* came out, and at first I found it hard to get into because it was all slow, it wasn't electro, and I was really into electro 'cause I was a bomber. And that came out and I forced myself to appreciate it, and it just grew on me. And then I started to write semi-rhyming sort of poetry, loosely related to hip-hop. And in 88 I started writing rhymes, and that was just before I met Matt [Mistry].
- M:** Yeah, my brother and a few of us who used to break, how we started was just around the cardboard, we'd just do these lame-arse four-line rhymes, you know what I mean. So the beats would be playing and we'd go 'blah blah blah blah blah' and we acted like it was all freestyle, but it wasn't, it was all pre-written the night before. And they were lame as. One of the guys in our breaking crew, Gas-M, he had older brothers, and they had Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five and stuff like that. 'Cause, like same with Claude, we were just breaking to breaking music which was much quicker, and then we heard slower hip-hop and we were like, 'oh right', it has more rapping in it. And so we started to write little raps, you know. And then when I moved into the city, because I was originally living out around the Bankstown area, it was like hip-hop world. There was a few of us out there, but when I moved into town it was like something out of Good Times, you know. And dudes were like seriously into hip-hop and I was like 'far out man' and I started to write, like, almost verses, and practice them off by heart. And that guy, Tito, who I was breaking with, we formed a crew called The Assassins – 'cause we wanted to be big rap superstars with all our bling bling and all that sort of stuff, big rope chains...
- W:** Did you have Assassin sneakers like Homer [Simpson] did?
- M:** [Laughs] But we had matching jackets back when that was actually cool, or was it and I never really knew? And we actually performed a little bit, as Assassins, and then I met Sereck. And we actually used to rap together before Def Wish Cast and before Brethren was formed. We met a guy from England who was a DJ, and he introduced us to a lot of the UK hip-hop: Demon Boys and Hijack, London Posse, and he showed us a documentary called *Bad Meaning Good*. And that really was one of

the first times we actually started to consider rapping with the Australian accent. So it was the poms who actually triggered us with the idea. But at the same time, the Melbourne guys were already doing it, as far I know.

W: A.k.a Brothers.

M: Yeah, the A.k.a Brothers, *The Straight Up* 12-inch, which we'd already heard. So we were kicking around the idea of doing it, and we were like 'Far out,' but it was still really new to us.

TM: Sereck and Def Wish were into the English stuff too?

M: Hardcore man, you can hear it in Def Wish Cast's early stuff. But it was initially Sereck and myself who met this Pommy DJ, G-wiz, Tac-0 at the time, but he's actually a techno DJ now. And um, yeah, he used to DJ for the two of us, and then I stopped doing clubs and got involved in church more. I started rapping at church, and Sereck used to rap with me, just over these instrumental tapes. And they weren't the best rhymes but it was the beginning of learning how to perform, and different things like that; structuring verses within a certain amount of bars, and leaving room for chorus and bridge. Just really taking it seriously on a musicology level.

TM: [To Wizdm] And you've always been involved in the DJ production side?

W: Yeah, yeah. Like in Adelaide, after b-boying, I started getting into DJing and doing mix tapes for my friends. They were like 'We love those electro beats you've got there, can you do me a mix tape?' And then I slowly started getting into the 80s funk, the 80s dance music, doing mix tapes all over the shop. And through that I really started to get interested in producing live music.

M: And when we started, like we were using the most rudimentary, MacGyver-style equipment.

W: We had a four-track recorder, one turntable...

M: And just a pause button for looping.

TM: And that is when you put out your first tape?

M: Just a little bit before.

W: We put together a couple of roughs. We actually performed to those instrumentals, they we really not properly looped at all.

M: We did a lot of shows actually. There were three other members in Brethren then, so it was a five-man crew.

W: And so we took those elements, and we took them to Evene and...

M: DJ Soup. Soup produced us.

W: And DJ Soup. We met DJ Soup and he introduced us to Evene and we just went over there, and he just loaded the sound straight into his Akai, S-950 I think it was, or S-900, and just looped them straight away. And we were just like, 'Ah!' we cried, like half a day's work, and he does it in ten minutes. Unbelievable.

M: And the thing is too, that was when we started to realise that – 'cause we were doing a lot of live shows – but we realised that recording was a whole other world, you know, you've got diction and pronunciation and all that stuff you've got to consider, like your delivery has to be a different sort of method. But it also meant – 'cause we were dealing with sound equipment – that we realised, 'OK, this is not unattainable'. We always thought that you had to be signed to a big record label to get

equipment to record, you know what I mean.

W: We got a lot of help from Trent Rhodner, he was managing us at the time. He was doing stuff for *Crank* magazine and *Slingshot* magazine and he was also managing us for a while. He was always saying, remember when you record, it's a different world. Have a listen to albums and have a think about echoes and overdubs and doing different stuff. It was a real big learning curve that was fun learn.

TM: Yeah, and you did a track called 'Slingshot' didn't you? Was that homage to him, in a way?

W: Yeah, that's right.

M: That was through MDS, and that's when we got signed to Mushroom. But we got signed before that, with Big Brother, we brought out a tape first, which was made with our own money, just so people could hear us. And then we got signed with Big Brother, and that was basically Mushroom experimenting with Australian hip-hop and they didn't really know what they were doing, and neither did any of us, really. For us, it was just an excuse to get a CD released, and after that we did 'Slingshot' as well, which was part of the compilation *Homebrewz 2* – which we were just listening to it a couple of months ago, like we haven't listened to it for years, and we just put it on an pretty much 90% of the groups are still like rockin' it, and are like the mainstays of the Australian hip-hop scene.

W: And we were listening to going 'This is a good track. This compilation is really good to listen to'.

M: It had Mother's Funksuckles, it had Quro back when he was with Fingerlickin', it had Def Wish Cast, it had Nervous Savages, Urban Poets, things like that you know. And most of everyone is still doing something, in some capacity, amongst those groups.

TM: Yeah, I mean, it is a pretty decent compilation, but I suppose technically it – well for the time it would have sounded good – but perhaps now it's a bit dated.

M: Oh, yeah, yeah, stylistically.

TM: And so in fact, *Beyond Underground* is your first album, I mean, you've got lots of tracks on compilations and you've done the EP, but this is the first long player. And it sounds like and looks like it was a huge amount of work put into it – years of work.

M: Yeah, well we thought if we were going to do something we better make it bigger than Ben Hur.

W: Yeah, we wanted to really give the audience more than they expected, give them something that they'd be like 'Oh, it comes with a comic book as well'.

TM: Which we've got here. Actually I wanted to ask you, why does Wizdm get wiped out?

W: It was one of those things where I said to Matt, 'Why don't you just kill me off?' 'Cause I'd love to die. If I was ever in a movie, I'd love to have a heroic death. One of those ones where you tell half your life as you're dying.

TM: Well, it sort of sets you up for a comeback.

W: It could, it could. We're still debating the idea of doing a sequel, 'cause the first one was such an arduous task and I don't know if I want to put myself through that again. You know, I'd like to get it out quick – not rush a project – but not have too much of a gap, because...

TM: Because there was a huge gap before *Beyond Underground*.

- W:** That's right.
- M:** One of the things we wanted to do with *Beyond Underground*, why we made it bigger than Ben Hur is because we're not just into hip-hop, like we do other things. Like, I draw...
- TM:** And you also do a Spanish track on the CD as well don't you?
- W:** Well, I don't really do a Spanish track, but I have Spanish little phrases here and there that I might have dropped in.
- TM:** And you've also done a solo project?
- W:** I'm working on a solo project at the moment, which I've finished the pre-production for, and now I've started doing the vocals. And it's very different to *Beyond Underground*, it's more of up tempo, more lighter, more happier – not so much happier – but more of a sort of party vibe, something that's a bit less dark.
- TM:** OK, and this is *Words of Wizdm* isn't it?
- W:** This is *Unrelenting*. *Words of Wizdm* was the first solo tape that I did, and this is a follow up to the cassette, which is kind of weird.
- M:** Yeah, but the album I'm going to be working on is actually the exact opposite, it's probably going to be darker than *Beyond Underground* again.
- TM:** Ah, OK. Well, that will complement each other.
- M:** We'll be yin and yang.
- TM:** Any other Spanish language on the new stuff?
- W:** Well, I'm also working on a project which is going to be a Latin, instrumental breakbeat album, and it will have a lot of cross beats in it, salsa and samba, and some up beat styles with a lot of Spanish rapping in it and vocals as well. So, I'll be playing all the percussion on that as well.
- M:** I'm here for you if you ever need any Spanish verses.
- W:** Yeah, thanks man, thanks. No, but that's going to be an exciting project, and the groups called So Locos which is myself and another DJ. That will be good.
- TM:** So you're obviously familiar with Maya and Ila Familia and those sorts of people, it seems to be quite a Latin community in Sydney.
- W:** Yeah. I've never actually met Ila Familia but I know about them and they know about me. I'd like to hook up with them.
- TM:** I heard this incredible compilation recently called *Sonic Allsorts*, which was a whole collection of tracks in languages other than English by various people around Australia. There are about 20 tracks. And there are all sorts of languages on it – French, Spanish, Chinese languages like Mandarin...
- NK:** Macedonian.
- TM:** Yeah, Macedonian from Curse ov Dialect. And it's amazing how many people around the country are doing stuff in languages other than English. I think it's great.
- M:** I'm going to rock a full verse in Yiddish one day man. Only thing is I can't say five words of it.

TM: That's what Reason was saying.

M: Did you talk to him about it?

TM: Well, briefly. He just said as a joke, 'Well, I'll start doing some stuff in Yiddish'.

W: I like talking to Reason about Jewish culture. I don't know, it just intrigues me, it's fascinating.

M: He's taught me a lot man, because I've got a Jewish background, but I wasn't really raised with it all that much, like I was aware of a few things – not that all my background is Jewish, the majority of it is Irish – but when I hooked up with him, he explained a lot. Like I asked him a lot of questions, like what about this, and where did this come from, because he's pretty cluey, and his wife as well, she's really into it. But we've been hitting around the idea of doing a track together: me, him and another friend of ours who is Muslim. But it won't be all new age let's all hug and get along, it'll be more 'Well, I disagree with your philosophy, but we can still be mates', you know what I mean.

TM: Well back to *Beyond Underground*, what's your impression of the response, because it seems to have got a fairly muted response in a way?

M: It's really weird man. It was something really new to do anyway. As far as we knew, when we were kicking the idea and getting it together, it was the first of its kind. And then there were a few albums that came from overseas, from the States and I think there's one from France that were concept albums, and we were spewing that they released it before us. But we had written ages before them.

TM: Mustard is your own label isn't it?

W: Mustard is a label that was started by a friend of ours called Darren J Paine. And we hooked up and sort of became part of the board and that sort of side, the direction and that – well, up until last year. Last year we decided that Mustard Records was not going to be a record company, that's sort of fallen through at the moment.

M: Basically because initially we had financial backing and the financial backing has sort of gone. So then it became us really releasing independent things under an umbrella. And a few people had to work really hard. Mustard Records, what it is now, it still exists, it is basically a distribution for hip-hop artists with Christian content, or a certain amount of Christian content, you know. So it will be in distribution with Christian outlets. So with other projects we might sign to another label, but we might go to Mustard to reach the Christian community.

TM: Has Mustard released any other artists?

M: Um, Soul Keepers – which is good stuff, they did a verse on our *Underground* LP. And also DJ Higgs who was doing some stuff with us as well.

W: And *In Da Mist*, a compilation called *In Da Mist*.

M: And the *Headcleaners* mixtapes, two of them. So there will be a few little things, but it will be like more showcase-type albums.

TM: I guess it's an obvious question, but how do you find negotiating between the hip-hop community and the Christian community?

M: Well, I mean, we don't really see ourselves as being any different, you know what I mean, and we've quite often said it. And even last night, an artist from the States was saying 'Yeah, like no one says Jewish-Buddhist rappers The Beastie Boys, or Muslim rapper Rakim,' you know what I mean. And we don't really want to be pigeonholed with the same sort of thing just because we have a religious

belief.

W: There are MCs out there who are Catholic, but no one sort of says, he's a Catholic MC, he's just a MC.

TM: You just have to look at someone like KRS-One, he's a fervent Christian.

W: And he's a real seeker as well, he really wants to know the truth. But no one seems to say that, they just say he's a positive MC, which is cool.

TM: So it sounds like you tend to play it down.

M: Definitely, definitely. But, on the other hand, like, we still are involved in a community where dudes would still say 'I'm a Christian MC and that's what I do' and we are in contact with them. But we both consider ourselves to be underground MCs who happen to be Christian.

TM: Sure. I always remember on that film *Basic Equipment*, when you appeared on that, you said you were Christians.

M: I think that was something that Paul wanted to focus on, just because it was something that made us different, and also it sort of broke down the stereotype that people have, that hip-hop artists are all gangsters...

W: And Christians are dorks, that was the other one that we wanted to smash as well.

TM: Which is important.

M: No, but we are dorks, because we do like *Star Wars*!

TM: But this I guess leads onto another thing. You've done a huge amount of educational work, in the sense of teaching the skills. I've read your interview on the NSW Government graffiti site which is a really long and serious interview about the ethics of graffiti writing, which I think is terrific and I think it's great that they've got it up on their website. So there's obviously a very strong degree of serious involvement in hip-hop as an educational project, as a way of dispersing knowledge, as a way of teaching people, that kind of thing.

M: Well, the way to look at it is that the next generation is just going to add to the whole hip-hop culture. It's just going to die if we act like dinosaurs and keep it for ourselves; I mean obviously there will be new people that spring up. But I'd prefer for people to have an understanding of the whole culture. Say for example, a young graffiti writer, all they know is their mates from school who they write with, they don't realise there is US history, there is Australian history and there is the global community. And the same with rhyming, if we're doing rhyming workshops we'll quite often bring along French hip-hop, German hip-hop, African hip-hop and say, 'Listen man, it's not just Eminem and Tupac'.

TM: Which is really important. Like we've seen today [at the all-day *Throwdown* gig], we've seen the younger generation coming up. Events like today I think are great, in that they have that continuity there, there's senior people and the junior people coming up.

M: I found that in Perth, for example, the b-boys over there – like, I've never been a full-time breaker, I've always focused more on writing or rhyming – and some of the guys over there, Hi 5 and Laze and that, they've been breaking non-stop. And I found that a lot of the guys I met in Perth had a really good grounding in what b-boying is all about, you know. And when I went over there with Def Wish Cast, in 90 or 91 maybe, the b-boys there were excellent, just great all-rounders. But now the younger generation of hip-hop artists are really starting to seek out that knowledge. And I was

talking to someone about it the other day actually, saying that ‘Hip-hop has really helped me become a seeker of history’. Like for example, when I was a kid my family used to have albums, and I was like ‘What do you listen to that for, I want to listen to the top 40’. And when I got into hip-hop, you know, I hear artists talking about James Brown and this and that, and I was like ‘Far out, I’ve got to find out who these people are’ and then I’d go through my dad’s records or my mum’s records and I find Quincy Jones and Chick Corea and Mongo Santamaría, all these dope people who have been sampled by hip-hop. It was like ‘Far out hey! You did have good taste in music’. And same with breaking, you know, we’ve been breaking for 22 years or whatever, and we had Little Caesar come out from LA and we were just quizzing him, ‘Alright man, what is this?’ and he’s telling us all the different categories. Strom from Germany came out as well – and we all pop – and he was explaining popping stuff we hadn’t even heard of, and we were like ‘Far out man!’

TM: Right. And you still teach breaking courses as well?

M: Yeah, yeah, breaking, rhyming, writing.

TM: Are you involved in the teaching side as well?

W: Not as much as Matthew [Mistry]. But every now and then, a project will come up that we can double-up on. And in the past we’ve done a lot of festivals where we’ve done workshops. Just teaching all the basic things, hip-hop 101, that sort of thing. History of hip-hop, where it came from, where it should be going, stuff like that. Explaining the difference between the commercial side and the underground side, just letting kids choose which direction they want to go, you give them the option if you explain it to them, pros and cons.

TM: I know that you’ve [Mistry] said that you are a full-time b-boy, that you can make a living off hip-hop, but are you [Wizdm] also making it full-time?

W: No, no. I would like to be a full-time producer though. I’m looking at doing an audio engineering course this year, so that will be something I’m really excited about. And that would be something I really can see myself doing for the rest of my life.

TM: But you [Mistry] are more or less able to make a living out of hip-hop teaching?

M: Yeah, I’ve got to be pretty versatile. Sometimes it will be more community-based things, like negotiating with councils, and boring stuff. And sometimes it will be doing a commission and getting paid serious money, as opposed to doing another job and getting meal deal money.

TM: What is your view on illegal graff?

M: It’s all part and parcel of the same thing. The way I explain it to councils is that I don’t want to sell out the culture and say ‘Nah, everyone should go legal’, because it’s not up to me to judge a person’s motives for doing their art. But what I do is provide education on how to do legal stuff if they choose to. But I mean, it’s all just as valid as the next man. I’m working inside of a mainstream structure, so I do legal stuff, and I’m an older man, I couldn’t afford to get locked up. So, yeah, it’s all the same thing.

TM: And some of the councils seem to be taking an intelligent response to it now, unlike Rail Corp, who put out all those letters like ‘dob in a graff writer’. Yeah, and they are really kind of punitive about it, which is the wrong way to go about it.

M: Most of my job is actually educating the mainstream public, it’s not working with the graff writers, that’s the easy part. You know, like going to conferences. Like, I went to one conference, and someone from law, from somewhere, had this list of what a graffiti artist is: ‘he’s from a broken home, a

non-English speaking background, drug problem, charges', and all that sort of stuff. And there was a few youth workers there who knew me, and there was an opportunity for me to speak and I just got up and said 'Listen, I'm from an English speaking background, my parents are still together, I'm qualified in a mainstream sense, but graff is my chosen medium'.

TM: Before we were talking about the response to *Beyond Underground*, you started saying something...

M: Yeah, it was quite ambitious, but sonically it's not a normal album that you just put on and bob your head to. But the tracks individually are just straight up hip-hop tracks; you could listen to them independently of the concept of the album. But it's quite a bit darker than what we normally do, or what people perceive us to do.

TM: Yeah, and it does seem to go very much hand in hand with the comic. Like, you can follow the comic as you're listening to the CD, they interrelate quite closely.

M: Yeah, we needed to do that to sort of be more specific with the story. We didn't want to have like 30 seconds of narration in between each track, we tried to keep that to a minimum so the album fully flowed. But the comic sort tries to take over that part of it.

TM: Australian hip-hop has changed enormously since you guys started out hasn't it? There's this sense that when you started out, things were relatively simple in lots of ways, and there seems to be an incredible diversification now, not only of styles and approaches and ways of MCing and all that kind of thing.

M: In hip-hop in general, we've got so many more things to draw from. And the thing is, when you become stable enough to feel that you can view your own viewpoint, and then you've got a million different viewpoints. If we were all just mimicking what we heard from US artists, then it would sound the same from artists all over there world. And that's why you hear artists from South Africa talking about something that we can't relate to, but it's like 'Yeah, that's dope, now I know about South Africa from a street view point, or from France, or Belgium or wherever'.

TM: Certainly there's been a global diversification, but just within the Australian scene there has been incredible growth and diversity, not only in quality of production, but in styles of MCing, approaches...

M: Well, quality of production I'd say that would just be people getting experience, everyone else had to pretty much learn the hard way. And most of the people who you speak to at the forefront of production in Australia have taught themselves how to use everything, you know. And then stylistically, say with graffiti stylistically, people look up to their local person, or a person on the other side of the country, you know, and that will be their style until they develop their own style. And that's the same with rhyming as well.

TM: Talking about graffiti, your style seems to be very much based on characters, you seem to have developed a distinctive style of doing graff with characters, which seems to have become associated with an Australian style.

M: I wouldn't have considered my stuff to be an Australian style. Maybe people look at my stuff and go, 'Oh, that's Mystery's stuff,' you know. But my style of characters is pretty classic New York. The inspiration for me was the Rock Steady Crew album covers by DBS-Doze. And then I was influenced by UK graff writers the Promangels, so I've just got a hybrid of their style and just then the other things that I have gotten into over the years, manga, or Disney, and just bits and pieces. But one thing that I've always tried to really emphasise hardcore, is that graff is not about characters, it's about letters, that's what the art form is. And the reason that I end up painting characters a lot is that I do more mainstream jobs for most people, and I can do characters, where as others are not

really comfortable painting characters. But, yeah, if I had a choice, I'd do characters here and there, and spend more time emphasising the letter form. And I've said it before, the reason being that we're pretty much in a western country where art is considered to be portraits and landscapes, you know, and the letter forms aren't really considered to be a pure art form. Whereas in Asian culture, Islamic culture, Celtic culture, letter form is important.

TM: Another interesting thing was that Mass MC was a guest on *Beyond Underground*. Has he not been doing a lot recently?

M: He's been mainly working on his website.

W: Yeah, he's been a busy boy, *Ozhiphop.com*.

M: Because I think the way he sees it – because we were talking to him about it – is that he would like to be doing his music, but he's sees it [the website] as a way of expressing the hip-hop culture, even if it's not him personally doing the music. If I was to give up rhyming, I'd still probably get some projects together and get some young MCs. You know, get some tracks out for them, or do some stuff for some graff artists.

W: It's falling into that trap where if you spread yourself too thin, then everything you do is just not very good. So I think he's kind of at the point where he's really going to focus on *Ozhiphop.com* and really get that off the ground. I think he's slowly working on projects as well.

M: 'Cause things like that have always been the mainstay. I would say that one of the most unifying things of the Australian hip-hop community has been the community radio stations. They've been the backbone. And the hip-hop stores as well, they have been a point of contact for everyone. But yeah, radio stations, and now websites, it's all very accessible. Actually, that's one thing I was going to touch on, was production and equipment, just how accessible it is now for computer programs and sound equipment, it is just unbelievable. Our studio really only cost us a few thousand dollars and that is chicken feed. Back in the day that would have been one piece of equipment, you know what I mean.

TM: Yeah, things like ProTools.

M: Yeah, any kid can make beats in his bedroom. And old PC and a duped copy of a program.

TM: So you do guys see yourselves as being senior figures in the hip-hop scene?

M: Yes and no. One thing I've always not wanted to be is an old school artist. Like, the music that we make – even though sometimes we do an old school medley, which is dedications to old tracks and people – but we don't rap in a old school style, our beats aren't like an old school crew. We try, not even to be contemporary, but just to make new stuff all the time. Not to copy whatever is trendy at the time. And one thing that I've always been fearful of is being like one of those cultural puritans, like someone dad's who's Elvis fan and still rocks a pompadore and a big belt buckle and still lives in the days of 'Viva Las Vegas'. You know, we'd be like a hip-hop equivalent, rocking Puma Clydes everyday and a Kangol. I mean, we do own those clothes, and we do rock them from time to time, but we don't live in 1984, you know.

TM: There's not much chance of that happening surely.

M: But on the other hand we do feel like artists who have been doing it for a while and we can sort of impart something for a younger generation, make them feel part of a whole culture, part of a timeline and that's cool. But when people say to me that you've been doing hip-hop longer than I've been alive, which I actually heard last night, it makes me want to cry. And one time I was doing a

workshop, and the guy I was teaching, I used to do graffiti with his uncle!

TM: What's your [Wizdm] view on the whole thing?

W: The old school? At one point I really dug the fact that people said I was old school, 'cause it kind of gave me a bit of respect. But after a while, I kind of got bored with it, I didn't want to be known as old school, I want to be known as a hip-hop artist and up with the times. In my rhymes I really push myself to not sound old school, to try and be futuristic, so that people listen to me and say 'He's taking it further, he's not going backwards, he's going forwards'. And that's the thing; I'm constantly fighting with time, in that sense.

M: One thing we were talking about last night was we never want to be compared to another crew, 'Oh, Brethren are good, they sound just like so and so'.

W: 'They're Australia's answer to such and such'. We don't want to be Australia's answer to anything. We want to be us.

TM: No, it's a dangerous sort of thing, those comparisons. And it's not really productive anywhere, you've got your own distinctive Australian style that is not the same.

M: But that's another thing we could fall into, wanting too hard to make a distinctive Australian style. We just want to make something that is us, because otherwise you too easily fall into cliché.

TM: Yep, I think that's an important point, and there are a few crews around who I think are trying a bit too hard to be Australian, sort of refer to Australian icons and obvious culture.

M: Well, from time to time we will say something because we are from here you know what I mean. But, it's not something that we're going to talk about all the time. And that's the thing, the area that I've grown up in Sydney have always been so mixed. Like when I went overseas my brother and I were hanging out and when we speak there would be like a Greek word in there, an Arabic word, a Samoan word, and people would be like 'Do you speak all those languages?' And we would go 'Not really, but we just grew up in that environment.'

TM: Cause you are from Marrickville aren't you?

M: I was born in Bankstown, and then we moved into the Marrickville area and I was living in Petheram, and went to Newtown high. And now I'm back out in the Bankstown area, out in Auburn.

W: And I went everywhere, from Campsie to – the longest place we lived was Mt Druitt – then moved to Adelaide and then came back, and always living out west, Bonnyrigg and places like that. Now it's Seven Hills.

TM: Do you have any views on this western side versus inner city thing?

M: Yeah, we're pretty much a Labor family, blue-collar styles and all that originally. And I always used to be like, 'Ah, north side blah blah blah', but I work over the north side and people are the same. I think that some people use a poor area as a badge to do hip-hop. And there are a lot of excuses that people use as badges to do hip-hop, but really, hip-hop is what you bring to the table, not like some excuse. Yeah, you don't need an excuse to do hip-hop, as long as you do it well. But I'm a westie through and through, you know, I've got a mullet at the moment, actually. Nah, I love the western suburbs, that's my area.

TM: And that is really where Sydney hip-hop originated?

M: A lot yeah, a lot of the artists. Actually, a lot of the graffiti writing started around eastern Sydney,

around Woolloomooloo and that. But it wasn't like a high-class area or anything, I mean Woolloomooloo is pretty sketchy.

TM: I remember Morganics saying that he used to go out to some of the early jams out in Penrith, and he described it as being very intimidating.

M: Parramatta was an area where a lot of writers came from, Newtown was, and the Marble, you must know, the Marble steps. The b-boys were first and then the graff writers used to hang there went the breaking scene started.

TM: So, there's a follow up coming to *Beyond Underground*?

M: Yeah... I'm not sure. We'll do our solo projects, and then we'll take it from there.

TM: Right.

M: Because if they are not ready for *Beyond Underground*, then they won't be ready for part two. One thing that I've always dug is cult movies that didn't really get the props, *Dark City*, *Blade Runner*, things like that.

W: *Never Ending Story!*

M: That's why we used *Mad Max*. *Mad Max* was one of the things that we used, not to sort of cash in on the Australiana aspect of it, but we wanted to make something that was associated with Australia overseas that wasn't beer and footy. You know, we're mad science fiction fans, we're into *Star Wars* and all that – I've mentioned that five times, that we're into *Star Wars* – but *Mad Max* is like our Aussie *Star Wars*.

NK: I was going to ask you something along those lines, 'cause, on that whole tip of Australian national identity, it really being restricted in the mainstream to the beer and footy thing...

M: And the bush, it's all about the bush.

NK: And the bush thing, that's right. It seems to me that hip-hop and how it has localised in Australia is a much better vehicle for explaining and giving people a way to show 'this is our Australianess', not this cheap stereotypical export that you get.

M: One of the cool things is – like we were saying about production and easy access to computers and this and that now days – there's MCs all around the country, they are on chat lines and on the hip-hop websites. Like, I was out somewhere random, where was I, in Yass, and there were these hip-hop heads and they were saying 'yeah, we do it, and we talk about what we do in Yass' and stuff like that. So it's good.

TM: Yeah, it's spread everywhere.

M: But the funny thing is to, like, no one would ever say to Troy Cassar-Daley, 'You're doing American culture', but country and western is just as American as hip-hop, so is rock n' roll, so is heavy metal, you know.

TM: Well yeah, you get more Australian country artists who sing like American country artists than you do Australian hip-hoppers rapping in American accents, by a long way.

M: And a really pronounced twang too. Like, who have we got that sings with an Australian accent, really? Peter Garret, and Missy Higgins sometimes.

W: Missy Higgins, yeah.

- NK:** And the whole way that the mainstream music industry is set up is another import of Americanism. You might just say it is imported capitalism.
- M:** Well, that's one thing that is cool about the Australian hip-hop industry. There is all these artists who have paid for it themselves, and they've just got it in some stores that their mates run. And we've started, and we've got a community now. When we are doing workshops for rhyming, the kids are all like, 'I've rapped in my bedroom for six months, I want to be signed, I want to be a big artist'. And we're like, 'Dude, that is not how it works man'. I mean, you might, but look what happened to Fig-gkidd; he got signed, they were going to put millions of bucks into him, and what?
- TM:** Does it ever frustrate you that there has been so little by way of industry support in Australia?
- M:** Hardcore. Hardcore, but when things like Koolism winning an ARIA takes place, we rejoice and dance as David danced.
- W:** Yes. We danced a merry jig. That was fantastic.
- M:** 'Cause that was like, 'Told you so', to the rest of Australia. No one could believe it, especially themselves. We were talking to Hau the next night, man, and he was 'I couldn't believe it!'
- NK:** And what Danielsan said at the awards was great.
- M:** That was a killer, that was the thing that everyone wanted to say. And if we won it, I probably wouldn't have had the guts to say it, but he said it.
- W:** I think Danielsan did get away with it cause he's a DJ, not an MC. And so he was like sticking up for other MCs, and the other MCs were like, 'You tell 'em'. Need I say more, sort of thing.
- TM:** Is it still that the Australian music industry still hasn't understood what hip-hop's about, where it's coming from and...
- M:** Yeah, I think so. It's still the whole thing of when we first talked with Mushroom. It's like, 'Do we market you as American 'yo, yo, homie' style of rap, for those kids that hang out in front of Westfield, or do we market you as indie-Aussie yobbo stuff?' And we said 'Well, we're neither man. We're inner west dudes from a multicultural neighbourhood, and that's our flavour'. But a rapper from, you know, Coonabarabran, he's got his own flavour. And he might not even be yobbo; he might be all rural and stuff about nature. Like Reason! Reason's a full-on a city boy and he's always talking about nature and environmental issues. I mean, I like that in his album, he says something like, 'They call me the hip-hop Peter Garrett'. I thought was great.
- TM:** There wasn't a convenient pigeonhole, it seems, for the industry, for Australian hip-hop.
- M:** Yeah, and we've just gone 'Stuff ya, we'll make it ourselves'.
- TM:** Yep, and I think that's great. And things like Koolism winning the ARIA is acknowledgement of that achievement, the hard work of everybody. And the thing that I constantly get the sense of is this incredibly strong sense of community amongst everybody. Everyone's supportive towards one another...
- M:** Generally, yeah. There's a bit of politics here and there, but generally, it's probably because we're a bit oppressed, you know what I mean. And it's like anything, the people get together when they've got an enemy, you know what I mean. And at the moment the enemy is the music industry.
- TM:** Yeah, yeah, well it has been for quite a long time. It doesn't show much signs of changing.
- M:** One big thing I reckon that's influenced the scene over here and all, just mentioning dudes like

Trant Miller and that sort of stuff, is dudes that weren't necessarily artists of the culture. You have to have people who are keen to manage groups, to put on nights, to do promotion, things like that...

NK: To run magazines like Mark Pollard.

M: Yeah, yeah – to start up record labels, because if everyone just MCs then you're never going to release anything.

...

M: Earlier you mentioned the New Zealand scene. I travel there a lot, I just got back there from last week. And I was talking to one guy – 'cause he knows where the Australian hip-hop scene is – and we were listening to some MCs and he was like, 'So what do you think of this group? And where would you put them in this class? And how does Scribe fit into the scene over there?' And stuff like that. And I was like, 'Well listen. This is how I think, and this and that'. I said, 'I think one of the big issues is that you've got cultural identity – not everyone, but a lot of Polynesians vibe to the hip-hop – but one way that we do it is rap with a real accent'. Or I shouldn't say a real accent, but with our own accent.

TM: And actually a lot of people in New Zealand think that's wack, they say 'Oh, I can't stand those Australian accent'. In fact, Reason again, he said he went over and hung out with some of the Dawn Raiders.

M: Yeah, I found that so weird man.

TM: And they told him, 'Dude, you sound like Paul Hogan'. But he actually has got on well with them, and got to understand them I think.

M: It's changed his opinion quite a bit. Because we remember he was one of the most outspoken people about the American accent issue, but this week being there – and I'm really cool with the scene over there, they know me, I'm probably one of the dudes whose most lived with NZ scene out of everyone – and a lot of my friends are MCs over there. And I have to just go, 'I'll ignore the accent and take the music for what it is'. I'm not going to just draw the line and go 'Everything you do is crap because you have an American accent'.

NK: Hau said the same thing, when he went over there, 'Accent doesn't exist, I'm just here for the music'.

M: Yeah, I listen to the metaphors, the flow, the beats, the delivery, stuff like that. And they've got some things that we can take note from, as far as professionalism is concerned, and just support for like local artists. They are just celebrities there, amongst local New Zealanders.

TM: Oh yeah, they are in the charts. Someone like Scribe has been top of the charts, which is amazing, like that would never happen here, not unless there is major revolution.

M: Yeah, but I never thought that an Australian group would get the props that Hilltop Hoods got, you know. And then the ARIA, I thought, no way would that ever happen. So you never know.

TM: Yeah, so there's little bits of progress.

M: The thing that is surprising me as well is, like you [Wizdm] were saying with your brother in law, dudes that are not really into US hip-hop but are getting into Oz hip-hop. They don't listen to US stuff at all; they just listen to Australian stuff, because they relate to it. They dig it, like, 'We understand what they're saying'.

W: Yeah, because when I first met my brother-in-law, when I married my wife, he said, 'So what do you

do?’ and I go, ‘I’m a rapper’, and he hated all that stuff. So I just introduced to him to all this stuff, I said, ‘Listen to these guys, listen to this’, and I lent him *Culture of Kings* and *Homebrewz 2* and he went out of his way to actually go to a shop and buy *The Calling*. And now he’s one of the biggest fans and is starting to make his own little collection of Australian hip-hop, it’s music he loves. And it’s been great seeing that.

TM: That’s great. And I think that’s also one really good influence that triple j’s had. I think it has got kids all around the country into Australian hip-hop. Because that just suddenly gave people exposure around the country that they never really had.

M: We just found that performing at the music festivals with punk bands and all that stuff, sometimes we’d get up on stage and they’d be mocking us, like ‘yo yo yo’. And then after they actually listened to us they were like, ‘Well you guys aren’t really American at all’. It’s like, ‘We might be wearing sneakers, but as if that’s an entirely American thing’. And last night a guy came up to me and goes ‘I’m not a hip-hop fan but I really like what all the Australian groups said because you didn’t talk bling-bling or derogatory stuff about chicks’. Ha ha, listen to the way I say it, ‘derogatory stuff about chicks’.

W: I guy came up to me last night and he shook my hand and he said, ‘I’m converted, I’m fully converted’. It was great.

TM: Well, it’s great that kids are starting up hip-hop groups rather than heavy metal groups. I mean there is a whole culture there now I think, it’s growing and expanding.

NK: Kids are being born into the culture: Trey’s kid, Tunz One’s kids.

W: My kids, my three boys.

TM: And it’s going to have to reach a point where the industry takes note in a serious kind of way.

W: Yeah, I just hope it doesn’t take too long.

M: Because we’ve been doing it for a while, man.

TM: I mean, 1200 Techniques are the ones who have just signed up and broken through to a certain extent.

W: Because they walk a real fine line.

TM: Well, they combine rock elements don’t they?

M: Well, it’s like Sound Unlimited were doing back in the day as well. They were like, ‘we’re going to play the game, but we know what the game is’. So they were aware of it, and Sound Unlimited, they used to use us and Def Wish Cast to support them. And no one would have heard us if it wasn’t for them doing it. People dissed them in retrospect, but we were like ‘nah, man, we’ve got mad props’, and especially because some of those guys were the guys who started the whole scene in Australia.