

LOCAL NOISE

Hermitude

14/4/2006, Great Escape Festival, Homebush, Sydney.
Luke Dubs, Elgusto, Tony Mitchell, Nick Keys, Astrid Lorange.

Summary:

“It’s pretty much the only form of music that I have come across that you can kind of workshop in that particular way, and that it also benefits your culture and your background. I mean, of course music is universal with instrumentation, but with hip-hop and lyrics it allows people to learn more about their own background.” Luke Dubs

Hermitude are a two-piece instrumental hip-hop crew from the Blue Mountains, with Luke Dubs on keys and Elgusto on beats. They have performed with MCs such as Ozi Batla and Urthboy from The Herd, and Joelistics from TZU. Their style of production – passing old sounds through new technology – is richly layered and complex. This interview, conducted by Tony Mitchell, Nick Keys and Astrid Lorange at the Great Escape Festival in 2006, is a general catch-up before Hermitude headed off to play in Japan, Norway, the UK and the US for the first time.

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.

LD: Luke Dubs

E: Elgusto

TM: Tony Mitchell

AL: Astrid Lorange

NK: Nick Keys

TM: Have you been with Elefant Traks right from the very beginning?

LD: Yeah. From the get go.

TM: How did you hook up with them, being based in the Blue Mountains?

E: Well, Urthboy [Elefant Traks administrator and member of The Herd] grew up in the Blue Mountains as well, and we played in a band with him before Hermitude called Explanetary. I was playing drums, Luke [Dubs] was playing keyboards and Urthboy was rapping. We started doing our Hermitude thing on the side and we showed him a bit of it, and he was really diggin' it, and so he showed it to the rest of the Elefant Traks crew and they were really diggin' it as well. So they decided to put out our EP, so that's how it all began.

TM: So right from the beginning you were into doing hip-hop with live instruments, to a certain extent.

E: Kind of. From the beginning both me and Luke played in a lot of different bands, we were into jazz and funk and stuff like that, and we still play in a band together. We were definitely into the idea of doing a hip-hop band and so we dug that, but the Hermitude thing was more sampling based, and electronic based, though we still record with live instruments as well. It kind of just blended up in there somewhere, I don't know how it happened, but you know, I wanted to write some hip-hop stuff so I bought a sampler and started sampling.

TM: OK, what sort of influences did you have in the beginning, in terms of hip-hop at least?

LD: In terms of hip-hop, we listened to heaps of instrumental hip-hop through the 90s, like Ninja Tune and Mo Wax stuff. What else did we listen to? We listened to a lot of UK hip-hop, so like Roots Manuva and that scene. Pretty much everything though, I was into Wu-Tang when I was a kid, and True Live Crew and N.W.A – so it was kind of broad. And that was only hip-hop influences, we both grew up listening to blues and jazz and funk and Afro-Cuban stuff and soul...

TM: Did the [name] Elgusto come from the Afro-Cuban side of things?

E: Kind of, yeah. I went on a trip to Cuba when I was younger and that had a massive influence on me, especially for music, and the whole Spanish language side of things, I guess. Which I've forgotten now, unfortunately.

TM: What sort of jazz influences apart from Afro-Cuban?

E: Well, plenty. Miles Davis, Grant Green, just a whole lot of different stuff. Charles Mingus.

TM: Have you had much interaction with the Sydney jazz scene?

LD: I was in the Sydney jazz scene for quite a few years. I moved down to Sydney before Hermitude, we were doing Explanetary and that was all good, so I was just working on the side. I went and studied for a couple of years at the Institute of Music and was playing with Aaron Flower and Ben Waples, just the kind of guys who are in the scene now, in Vince Jones's band, doing well in their own right. But I kind of got out of the jazz scene a bit, because I didn't practice enough and couldn't keep up with them all.

TM: What were you playing?

LD: Piano.

TM: Have you any contact with Downsyde from Perth? Because they sort of came up through a similar scene in Perth, I think. They used to play at this pub called the Hyde Park, which was pretty much a jazz pub, and they have got sort of Latin influences as well in some of their stuff.

E: Yeah, we met those guys a couple of times. They are really nice lads.

LD: Yeah, really nice.

NK: And they have the whole instrumental hip-hop thing happening as well, and that seems to be a crucial development for hip-hop, in general but particularly Australian hip-hop, to grow and become more diverse and absorb more influences.

LD: Totally.

NK: And it seems to be slowly sort of catching on, and as Tony said, you guys are at the forefront of it, but there is now others coming through, True Live from Melbourne, Downsyde, The Herd...

LD: And then there was Metabass 'N Breath back in their day.

TM: So do you think there is anything about the Blue Mountains scene which gave it distinctive characteristics? Obviously, it's outside of the city, it's much more isolated, more peaceful...

E: Yeah, yeah, I think for us it had a big influence in the music we write. We are kind of in the right genre of music to suit the Mountains in the first place, writing instrumental, down-beat hip-hop stuff. But it had a massive influence because of the isolation and space. Where we wrote both our albums is a studio on the edge of a valley, overlooking trees and wildlife...

TM: Hence the [title] *Alleys To Valleys*.

E: Yeah, yeah. And at the same time, we were going back and forth to Sydney the whole time. I think it does have an influence on the way we write. You can just go into the studio and forget about the whole daily grind situation, turn off your phones, and just sort of create.

AL: I always thought that with *Alleys To Valleys*, because a lot of Australian hip-hop makes explicit reference to place and areas. I thought *Alleys To Valleys* had a really strong sense of place musically, the whole Mountains vibe. You get that totally on the album. I just went up there recently, and the whole cinematic scenic train trip up there, and I thought about you guys.

NK: The Hermitude train ride.

LD: You can just sort of see us popping up from behind a tree somewhere.

NK: But it's not just about the place itself, it's about the train ride, the movement between the two places.

LD: Definitely.

NK: And the title of the second LP, *Tales of the Drift*, has got movement implicit in that as well. I mean is there some symbolism to that which carries on?

E: Well, we do a lot of moving around.

LD: Yeah, fully! I don't know if it was intentional.

NK: But drifting around, these are the tales of you drifting around as people in the world ... or is that too

literal?

- E:** Nah, well ... maybe. It's kind of like another realm of where we are from. We think of the drift as a sort of mystical, magical place in a way, and its tales from the drift.
- LD::** So it's different stories from a particular place I guess.
- E:** Yeah, but there is that sense of moving with the drift. But I guess when listening to the music, people will make of it what they will. And also the name of the album is kind of descriptive and you can think about a place in your head.
- NK:** I think that's important, because digitally produced and recorded music doesn't necessarily root itself to a specific place, it's more about whatever place you can put into it.
- LD::** Yeah, yeah, wherever you go when you listen to it.
- NK:** Because digital music is no place in a sense. I mean, if you record with live instruments in a room with a microphone, that is sound with echo and reverb coming off the walls, so there is that particular space involved. But when you are working with, say, ProTools, and all its compressions and affects – it's the digitisation of sound that doesn't really have a physical space.
- LD::** Yeah, well, we try and mix it up. We are not strictly electronic. There is a lot of live playing, and it is recorded in the studio – it's not all totally digital. But I know what you are saying.
- NK:** Well I guess that's my question, when you write beats do you use software?
- E:** We use a sampler, an outboard hardware thing – an MPC basically. So we will sample beats off a 1970s record where someone has been playing drums, with a microphone, in a room that has its own sound in there as well. And they say if we put down a synth line – coming out of digital synthesizer – we'll add reverb to it and put it in its own place within the mix as well. So it's kind of mixing in a whole other world, we mix things in together so all the reverb and delays sit in there nicely.
- NK:** Totally, I dig that.
- TM:** But you guys are also a live band, and seeing you live at the Metro supporting The Herd, there was a huge audience response.
- LD::** Yeah it was a great gig.
- TM:** That was a fantastic gig. But it must be a hard thing to do, instrumental hip-hop live, because it's normally the sort of thing that people listen to in headphones.
- LD::** Yeah, it has taken us a couple of years to hone the show, to make it interesting for people listening. Because a lot of the stuff we write is pretty chilled, we've got a few songs not on the album that we do live that are a bit more upbeat. But not only that, the chemistry between us two has taken a couple of years to build on, and we are kind of bouncing off each other and bringing improvisation into the sets – just like if you were seeing a band.
- E:** We try and talk on the mic a lot, to see how people are going during the show, and just generally try to communicate with the crowd – with our voices, but also with the music. And also to try and keep it visually cool, with Luke playing keyboards and me tapping out samples. We didn't want to just have it as a DJ set. Like a lot of instrumental hip-hop sets come out to Australia and play DJ sets and it is kind of...
- TM:** No, it is much better than that. And a couple of guest MCs help as well.

E: Yeah, that's great, because they are a lot better at talking to people than we are. Sometime we can be a bit shy.

NK: And now that you have added the section where you [Luke Dubs] do the free jazz section – I saw you guys at the Evelyn on Brunswick Street – and it kind of works as a nice break in the tempo of the show. But speaking of acts that come to Australia and just do DJ sets – and you guys played this gig – The Herbaliser. That was insulting.

LD: It was disappointing. Because for us, that was one of the first group we listened to in that genre that we really fucking got into. And it was the first international support slot that we scored, so we were really 'Man! The Herbaliser!' And then they just did this DJ set and we were like 'Man'.

E: And it was a wack DJ set too. I think maybe they weren't sure what the Australian crowd were gonna want to hear. But on that same tip, we supported DJ Krush and he did a DJ set but that was amazing. He is able to put his own sound into his DJ sets; somehow, I don't know how he does it, with his delays and scratches.

TM: And are you guys about to go to Malaysia, is that right?

E: We just came back from Malaysia, which was really good. And we are just about to head to Japan, the UK, Europe and the US. And we are playing a few shows, which is good!

AL: Where are you playing in the States?

E: Well, we haven't hooked that up yet.

TM: What about in the UK? Are you hooking up with people in the UK?

E: We are heading to London. So we've been talking to Braintax from Low Life, and hopefully he'll manage to get us a few shows. It's kind of all in the works at the moment. But we've definitely got a festival in Norway, which will be really interesting, and we're playing a couple of shows in Japan. Also trying to hook up a show in Berlin. We're doing it off our own back because we just want to try and get our stuff outside of Australia as much as possible.

AL: How was the response in Malaysia?

E: It was cool. Basically we were playing at a promotional gig for Hennessey – pretty much. And it's called *Explore Music*, and they get different, more sort of abstract artists out from all places in the world and bring them over. They basically wanted to promote Hennessey to a younger audience, and bring out different music as well, because a lot of it is very mainstream over there. So it is kind of cool in a way. We played a show and it took them a while to warm into it, but once they got going it was really cool.

AL: Did you see any other South East Asian hip-hop acts?

LD:: We wanted to. But we were only in the city for two days, so we didn't have enough time.

E: We managed to score a bunch of CDs off this guy Juan who was writing for a street rag over there. He brought in all this Asian hip-hop which was good.

TM: So in Japan, I guess you are playing Tokyo?

LD:: Yeah, Tokyo and Osaka. Really looking forward to that.

E: Can't wait to get there.

TM: We were talking to Resin Dogs the other week, have you had much contact with them?

LD: Yeah, for sure, we're mates.

TM: Because they are about to take off on a big tour as well, and they are playing various festivals in Scandinavia, so it seems that Australian hip-hop is really starting to make some impact overseas.

LD: I think for a lot of acts out here it is just a natural evolution. You work hard over here and you get a lot of love from the audiences and that is great, but you naturally just want to take it off shore.

NK: Because hip-hop is global.

LD: Exactly, and why shouldn't we, because our sound is killer, there are some killer acts out there and we should definitely be worthy of some global status.

TM: It's taken a while hasn't it?

LD: It has.

E: You can imagine how many time the Resin Dogs have been around Australia, playing at various gigs and festivals. Sometime you just want new places to play, and new audiences.

NK: The UK/Australia connection is really interesting, historically as well, because the scenes have lots in common. Pretty much zero industry support from the beginning...

LD: Absolutely.

NK: Ninja Tune and Low Life and these kinds of labels have the same equivalent here in Obese and Elefant Traks. So I think there is that same kind of culture, and that is part of the affinity. And now the UK is being supportive of Australian acts, you guys can call on Braintax, etc.

LD: Totally. I think that relationship will help both parties over the years to come, and hopefully see a lot more UK tours from Australian hip-hop acts.

NK: Actually, a really interesting historical connection between the scenes was told to us by Mistery from Brethren. He said that we he was in Melbourne in the 80s that they got the idea to rap in Australian accents from listening to the London Posse...

E: Yeah, right.

NK: So it was listening to UK rapping in UK accents that made them twig and go 'hang on a minute'. That's arguable of course, because everyone says that they were the first ones to rap in Australian accents, but that is where Mistery said he got it from.

AL: I wanted to ask your opinion – given you're in the scene – about groups like Local Knowledge, Morganics, Combat Wombat, Brotha Black and all these guys. Workshopping seems to be quite a prevalent aspect of Australian hip-hop, and especially getting out to the rural communities. Have you guys had anything to do with it, or how do you see that side of things?

E: I just generally think it's a really good thing. I just did my first workshop a couple of weeks ago.

AL: Where was that?

E: In the Blue Mountains, in Katoomba, at the Youth Centre there, and it's just a really cool thing, because you see a whole bunch of kids who don't have access to any of the equipment that you need for hip-hop. Because getting into hip-hop isn't cheap either. When you're 12 or 15 or whatever, and it's just good to see kids being shown how it's done and see their reaction. And with communities in the middle of nowhere, it might be the only time they get to do that unless they move to the city. I just think it's really good.

AL: So what was your workshop specific for?

E: DJing.

AL: Who organised it?

E: It was the Upper Mountains Youth Centre in Katoomba. They just called me up, because we both still live in the mountains. I ran into the girl, Mel, on the street and she just asked me and I said 'Yeah, it's cool'.

AL: Do you think it might be an ongoing thing?

E: I hope so. She said she might call me again. I mean it's just whether there are enough resources there. A lot of youth centres and organisations like that don't have a lot of money to spend around. It's just making sure there is gear there and a PA to put it through. But it was really good and hopefully there is more.

LD:: I was just going to add to that by saying 'big ups' to guys who pretty much devote all of their lives to going out to communities and doing that full time. Guys like Morganics – he makes records as well, I don't know how he fits it all in – goes out for like weeks at a time and teaches these kids, it's just such important knowledge and that there are guys out there like him is such a cool thing.

AL: There is some pretty incredible stuff happening. Like guys Munkimuk who encourage the kids to rap in their own language, and then also using hip-hop to help kids learn English. It's like the integration of languages through music, which is pretty incredible.

LD:: It's pretty much the only form of music that I have come across that you can kind of workshop in that particular way, and that it also benefits your culture and your background. I mean, of course music is universal with instrumentation, but with hip-hop and lyrics it allows people to learn more about their own background.

TM: Absolutely. And find their own voice.

AL: And tell their own stories. A lot of kids come out of these workshops rapping almost like a short story of their life – who they are, where they live, what they do, all those kinds of thing.

NK: And it takes on even greater importance in relation to threatened Indigenous cultures, whose traditions are oral are not documented in our way, which is to forget everything that is not documented.

LD:: Yeah, totally.

TM: The other thing I wanted to ask you about was your production work. I know you've done some production work with The Herd, do people kind of approach you to do production these days?

E: Yeah, we do collaborations with other people. At the moment a lot of rappers and stuff like that. But I've just started programming the drums for this lady called Kate Rowe, and is basically just working on her album. Her stuff is quite dark, it's slightly sort of Portishead-like, a bit sort of more abstract. So yeah, we work with other people, if we like it and there is the option there to be involved then we are always happy to. And coming from a wide range of different musical background, we are quite open to lots of different stuff.

LD:: We are pretty versatile.

E: We don't just write down tempo hip-hop.

TM: Do you have your own studio?

- E:** There is a studio up in the Blue Mountains called Sound Heaven, which my dad runs at the moment. So that's where we've done both the albums. Basically I just started mucking around in the front room when I was about 10 years old with an 8-track and a computer. Then over the years he gradually got more pieces and whenever he would get a new piece into the studio I'd sit down with him and he would be like 'oh, check this out, this is what it does' and all of that – because I was right into music back then as well. So I got to learn all of the gear as it came in over the years. When I was about 15 I went halves with my friend for a sampler, and that's where the hip-hop thing sort of came into it.
- AL:** So I guess you had to buy out his other half one day...
- E:** Yeah, I did! But it was cool you know, it was just amazing to learn to the basics of studio production over years and years, but sort of without knowing I was learning it. When we started doing Hermitude, we were working on a sampler and computers most of the time, and when it came to doing final recordings I knew what to do. 'Oh right, that's where that comes in,' and all that sort of stuff. But these days it's a professional studio and people write their albums there. I work there sometimes when my father can't do a session. I'll engineer a session for a 15-year-old punk rock band or something like that.
- NK:** That sort of makes a few things fall into place in my mind, hearing you say that. Because when *Alleys To Valleys* first came out it was just so mind boggling, because Australian hip-hop production values were still pretty low – and I'll say by and large they still are, across the board, as a general statement – but *Alleys To Valleys* was so well produced and so clean.
- E:** Thank you.
- AL:** That was the main distinction when the album came out. The production was like 'wow'. And I guess like Tony and Nick were saying, there's more and more instrumental hip-hop coming up to Sydney and getting played. People like Pasobionic and Unkle Ho, for example. And there seemed to be a more concentration of that side of things.
- E:** Plutonic Lab. That guy is amazing. But yeah, I think that generally we have a bit of a fetish for running everything through old tube compressors. We don't mix with plug-ins or anything like that, we just run it through old EQs and things like that, compressors and limiters. So we beef up the sound with hardware rather than plug-ins, because I don't really plug-ins sound as nice. And that's all digital replication going back to what you were saying before. So if you run it through real shit then it sounds real. But then it's got to go back into the computer anyway, so there is that whole thing between digital and analogue recording.
- NK:** But you're right though, the processes of putting it through the hardware is totally different from an entirely digitised composition.
- E:** Fully.
- NK:** And like you say with the sampling as well, that's a recording that was physically recorded by someone, in a space...
- LD::** At a certain time.
- NK:** Yeah. And on that note, I've been thinking lately as sampling as a form of experimental history. Isn't sampling really a radical form of history? You grab something from the past and then you...
- LD::** Manipulate it.
- NK:** Yeah, you chuck it back into the present and then on top of that you scratch it back and forth, so

its like you toggle over the past/present/future divide. So it's like fucking with time and also fucking with history.

E: That's interesting actually. I never thought of it like that.

