

# LOCAL NOISE

## Joelistics

24/01/05, UTS, Sydney.

Joelistics, Tony Mitchell, Nick Keys.

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### Summary:

“At the same time as reading Tao’s text, I was listening to lots of hip-hop. Early hip-hop for me was Ice-T and N.W.A and Public Enemy. In a way it was really simple rhyme schemes, it was all about the aggression of it, which I enjoyed. I liked the kind of sing-song – not sing-song – but the simple rhyme patterns and the dumb, bold aggro male sentiments in it. That didn’t relate to Taoism at all, but then I started to get into this West Coast stuff, Freestyle Fellowship and The Pharcyde and all this freaky stuff. And I didn’t even know for like two or three years what freestyling was, but when it clicked, and I knew what it meant, it was so similar to Taoism and the concept of flow, and the concept of being in the moment, surfing through your mind, through the universe in just the simplicity and design of being able to move with the rhythm of everything around you – which is just a poetic way of saying what freestyling is. At its best, at its finest – it unlocks some other. You become a backseat passenger to your kind of conscious connection to everything.”

This 2005 interview with Melbourne-based TZU MC Joelistics took place in Sydney while he was taking part in a Sydney Festival hip-hop event bringing together artists from The Herd, The Bird, Resin Dogs and TZU. In a lengthy conversation, the ever-articulate Joelistics covered a huge range of issues. He spoke about the early influence of Eastern philosophy and its splicing with the influence of hip-hop and free-style rapping. He also talked about hip-hop as a form given to political polemics and Empty shows (held in empty warehouse and industrial city spaces where artists would converge). Joelistics spoke of the influence of Terrence McKenna on his ideas about language, both in the way that the world forms language and how language forms and structures the world. He talked also of hip-hop workshops, the influence of Jack Kerouac, the orthodoxy of hip-hop and Curse ov Dialect, music labels and the industry, the history of hip-hop and appropriations of the form in terms of aesthetics, identity, place and self-pride.

### 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.

**J:** Joelistics

**TM:** Tony Mitchell

**NK:** Nick Keys

**TM:** So, the gig tomorrow night is with selected members of The Herd and Resin Dogs and people like that?

**J:** Yeah, there's Shannon from the Herd – Ozi Batla – and then Andrew from Good Buddha – who's the bass player and also MCs – and then the drummer from the Resin Dogs and the keyboard player, and then there is another set being played by the two guys from The Bird and the two guys from Hermitude. And I'm going to jump up with one song with them, so it's been a kind of splicing of two bands basically out of five crews all up.

**TM:** So, is this just a one-off that you've got together for?

**J:** Yeah, totally, organised by the promoter for the Sydney Festival, and I guess he's got some concept of it being Australia Day eve, so he'd get some Australian hip-hop – but I don't know, I don't really know what's going on. I'm a little bit dubious as to – you know, these things are great as ideas – but they need a bit of time to come together with lots of communication. Sometimes they just get broken down to the lowest common denominator idea. But, it should be fun on the third set, which will be all improvised, so that will be the good bit.

**NK:** Are you recording it?

**J:** It's being recorded by FBI.

**TM:** So, you've been rehearsing for that?

**J:** I went to one half an hour session this afternoon. And I've got a rehearsal with the main set I'll be playing in, which is with Shannon, and Andrew and Dave from the Dogs. And it's weird because myself, Shannon and Andrew have written a lot of tunes together which have never seen the light of day because they're kind of too dirty. They're just for us when we're coming down off drugs, just for fun basically. But we thought we'd just try and perform them anyway, which is kind of weird, I guess, we're known for conscious hip-hop and our social politics and what not, and the music we're going to be performing is straight down the line club tunes.

**TM:** So, it's party time.

**J:** Yep, party time. Half piss-take, but half serious, you know, we'll see how it goes down.

**TM:** You're Eurasian aren't you? From a Chinese background, hence the name TZU, it comes from Lao-tzu doesn't it? And so, I know you've said things like Lao-tzu was the first b-boy and stuff like that, but there is obviously a serious element to that too. I mean you're into Taoist philosophy. How does that kind of effect what you do in TZU?

**J:** It was early influence on my philosophical understanding of the universe, which hip-hop was as well. I wouldn't have said it at the time, but I guess I grew up in an atheist family from two very alternative parents who broke up when I was two. So I never really got the whole religion thing, I used to question it, and I've been interested in it always, even since I was a little kid. I remember my Mum took me and my sister to China when I was nine, and we were walking through the Forbidden City. At the time I was so young all I wanted to do was play video games in the hotel room, but, we went through the Forbidden City and I remember being completely utterly astounded and overwhelmed by the statues and the history and the density of culture there...

**TM:** It's an amazing place.

**J:** It's incredible, and it's embedded these amazing images in my head. At the time, my mum started to talk to me about – not like lecture or anything like that – but just about Zen. She introduced a lot of Asian philosophy, from Japanese and Chinese, like haiku and Zen Buddhism, Taoism – and it stayed there. So when I got into smoking pot at the age of 14 or 15, I kind of revisited all these things that I guess she'd be getting into while we were in China – all these books. She had this incredible book called *The Art of Tao*, which is just pieces of art that had be influenced by the Tao, and the Tao teaching. And there was a Chung-tzu volume of poetry, and he was a punk, I actually really like his writing a lot more than Lao-tzu. So I'm reading and it and thinking, 'Man, this shit is so cool', because it's philosophical and it has a deep spiritual resonance and I really understand it and it's from my culture, yet it's so... There's no presence of it, even in modern China, but definitely not in western civilisation. You know, I'd never heard about it, like in movies or anything. So as a kid, I was like 'Wow, this is something special'. So I investigated it a lot.

**TM:** Did you speak any Chinese?

**J:** A little bit. My grandma spoke Cantonese, and my mum studies Mandarin, she's been studying it for 15 years now, so, I've got snatches of language, I can understand a lot, but speaking it, I'm not so tight. And it's a particularly hard language.

**TM:** Incredibly hard. Both and Cantonese and Mandarin.

**J:** And both Cantonese and Mandarin are very different as well. My dad's side of the family is Cantonese-speaking Chinese, from Hong Kong Island. So my mum learning Mandarin and taking us to mainland China, it meant that there was, I guess, no unified language for me to pick up on, as well. But yeah, it's funny, at the same time as reading Tao's text, I was listening to lots of hip-hop as well. Early hip-hop for me was Ice-T and N.W.A and Public Enemy. In a way it was really simple rhyme schemes, it was all about the aggression of it, which I enjoyed. I liked the kind of sing-song – not sing-song – but the simple rhyme patterns and the dumb, bold aggro male sentiments in it. That didn't relate to Taoism at all, but then I started to get into this West Coast stuff, Freestyle Fellowship and The Pharcyde and all this freaky stuff. And I didn't even know for like two or three years what freestyling was, but when it clicked, and I knew what it meant, it was so similar to Taoism and the concept of flow, and the concept of being in the moment, surfing through your mind, through the universe in just the simplicity and design of being able to move with the rhythm of everything around you – which is just a poetic way of saying what freestyling is. At its best, at its finest – it unlocks some other. You become a backseat passenger to your kind of conscious connection to everything.

**TM:** And you've got quite a reputation as a freestyler haven't you? I mean, that's one of the things you're really noted for. I get the impression that freestyling is really your main activity in some ways.

**J:** Yeah, I guess so.

**TM:** Just because I've seen you in cyphers – well, mainly in Newcastle, the year before last actually. And you've done stuff with The Herd as well, but that's more stuff that's been written, is it?

**J:** Yeah, all the stuff that has been recorded has been written. They've been a group that I really like, I like their aesthetics and the way they go about their music; politically and creatively. And I think I've known Shannon [Ozi Batla], in some vague form, since we finished high school, whenever that is, 10 years ago now. It's weird, I kind of knew him as a freestyler early on as well and he was kind of coming from a really poetic element as well, and I think TZU and The Herd just connected because we both liked to rap a lot, and keep it Aussie, and to freestyle as much as possible. And It's funny be-

cause a lot of groups I come into contact with don't actually freestyle much, and if they do, it's not something they'd perform, it's just something they would do around a couple of beers at a barbeque. And we pushed that shit, you know, particularly last year touring relentlessly, if we didn't have our three or four freestyle moments in the set then we wouldn't even be a group anymore I don't think.

**TM:** There also seems to be a shared political perspective I think, 'cause there is a lot of stuff on *Position Correction* that is very politically oriented and highly critical of all the sort of crap that's going on in Australia, like racism and John Howard, and stuff like that, which is something The Herd do as well. And I mean, do you think hip-hop has a certain obligation to try and present a kind of political perspective.

**J:** No, I wouldn't call it an obligation; I think anyone can do what they choose. I don't necessarily subscribe to that traditionalist view of what hip-hop should be; I'm constantly about making it into what you want, and in fact break boundaries and borrow something else and create something new. I think it does naturally lend itself to serious social commentary and political rambles and rants, because it's refined wordsmith, and there's only so many times you can say throw your hands up and say 'ho'. You know what I mean, there are only so many party tracks you can do before anyone who gets deep into rhyming and rapping wants to say what they think and feel and I guess it attracts people who feel a lot politically, or how about just feel a lot, full stop, dot dot dot...

**TM:** Yep. I know, tracks like The Herd's '77%' and 'Burn Down the Parliament'. And you actually quote 'Burn Down the Parliament' in one of your tracks here.

**J:** I thought that was a really brave track. I was really into it, I thought that whole album – for me they had two songs which I thought were brilliant, just great and really brave as well.

**TM:** And had quite a bit of impact, through airplay on triple j and through the videos that they released.

**NK:** The first one on that CD 'The Plunders' is also a really good track, talking about global and corporate plunder. It's just another good example of just how on the money Shannon [Ozi Batla] is, he's particularly clever with inverting the orthodoxies of language, like "We used to ride the sheep's back now the sheep rides you". Inverting these things, playing with them, like you said, wordsmith.

**J:** Yeah, he's on it man.

**TM:** I mean 'The Horse You Rode In On' [from TZU's *Position Correction*] is quite a political track, attacking rednecks and racism and so forth.

**J:** Yeah, that for me is much less an informing song, it's much more of a deadset emotional thing, it's based on personal experience and based on wanting to – rather than educate – just throw up a finger a people who I just can't stand, basically. It's a song borne from frustration rather than....

**TM:** ...making a political statement.

**J:** Yeah.

**NK:** A little bit like Urthboy's 'Come Around' maybe?

**J:** Yeah, definitely.

**TM:** I also saw one of your videos, which was on the *Stealth* compilation, I think, it looked like it had been done in an underground car park.

**J:** Yeah, that was for 'Dambusters'. That wasn't an underground car park, that was made in – in Melbourne they have these shows called Empty shows – where someone will source out an abandoned

warehouse and then they'll put the word out to get as many street artists and stencil artists to bomb the fuck out of that warehouse for three days, have a renegade, ambushed art exhibition, and then leave it. So, they're great exhibitions, you know, there is quite an element of secrecy because the cops can't find out about it. And the three days of art making incorporates everything from the stairwells to the broken glass, to the walls, to the window spaces, to whatever kind of furniture has been left there. And it all just becomes this giant, morphed, grafted up, maze. And so, I went to one of these exhibitions, and we'd just finished mixing 'Dambusters' I think two days before. I got in touch with two guys with cameras and TZU, and so it was shot the next morning. So it was shot in about an hour and a half on a cold winter's morning. It went to post-production, and Anto, who made the video, managed to do an incredible job with the visuals of it.

**TM:** It looks great. So these things sound like temporary autonomous zones, everyone moves in and forms the environment and then moves on.

**J:** Yeah, totally. And it's funny, 'cause you can go back after the first exhibition opening day, where everyone meets at a designated meeting zone and then gets led to the venue, but after that it's open fodder, the cops come and people start ripping artworks from the walls. It's funny going back there over the course of two weeks, you know, I just go there with friends to hang out, you can see it slowly start to decay and morph again and again and again. You know, it's a living breathing work, and because no one is selling work, it's done out of the pure joy of making art out of our debris. It's good, I love it.

**TM:** You also said in another interview that I read that you are influenced by Terrence McKenna and his ideas.

**J:** Yeah. It's in a lyric even, "we four fellas are Terrence McKenna storytellers". And yeah... I took lots of acid, I read lots of Terrence McKenna, I think he's amazing.

**TM:** He's a bit kind of like a psychedelic hippy...

**J:** Well a bit – yeah! He wrote the book on it, he suggests you take lots of acid and sit in a dark room, mind-altering things. He's excellent, he's got some really interesting ideas about language as well, on a much more I guess intellectual basis, not so drug-fueled. I saw him do a spoken word performance I think about seven years ago, and he played with some electronic artist and that was really amazing. And I thought that was hip-hop as well, just hearing Terrence McKenna...

**TM:** Where was that?

**J:** Down at the Harbourside Brassiere. He came out on a tour and he basically just sat there on a chair – and I think he smoked a cigarette and drank some wine – and spoke in this really slow American drawl. There was some synth wobbles behind him and it was all very ambient – but it was the presence that he had on the mic and I went 'Man, he's an MC, he totally rocking the mic'. And he's got these theories of aliens, and mushrooms being aliens and they inhabit your body and you can communicate with the other, and I fully subscribe to that.

**TM:** What in particular about language that he said struck you?

**J:** I'm sort of paraphrasing, but if I kind of tied it to some of the stuff I've thought about and developed, it's [that] language is quite an amorphous, external part, that can live outside of the human consciousness, and words become – I mean you can use them in so many ways – but words do become a form of magic, if you will. You can have the power to yell 'Fire!' in a crowded room, which is a sound essentially. And the formation of language and how it grows and mutates in a society and how words take on a life of their own, and become tools of power and tools of persuasion. It's something that I think we're not maybe taught or people are really not kind of educated on how to

take responsibility for language as well and to steer it in a direction where it's... essentially it's the first baby steps towards telepathy and towards the higher consciousness you know. Language is the essential building block for evolution, for community and society and it's the glue between people. And it's not just vocal, it's physical language, it's communication, it's love, it's everything. I don't know; it's good to occasionally remember that, for me even, and not to be wanker about it, but to give respect to it, it's an incredible tool that humans have developed.

**TM:** You're involved with teaching. Are you still doing part-time teaching in Footscray City College?

**J:** Yep. I do it less at this point in time. I did work at Footscray for two years, that was my main bread and butter. This last year I took time off to follow TZU stuff, and ease off being a facilitator and doing hip-hop workshops because I found it quite... I just needed to distance myself from that. But I still go back. I've kind of built a relationship with maybe ten MCs from around the Footscray areas, which I regularly call on and hang out and cypher, or they support TZU at gigs. So it's been interesting watching them from going into hip-hop workshops at high school to watching them now perform gigs and get paid and take it seriously. And I got a grant last year to basically produce a CD of all the students I'd worked with for two years. By the nature of Footscray, but also what I'm interested in, there's a lot of second speaking language MCs on there: African, Koori, Vietnamese, Philipino, Greek. And I think my idea for the CD was to really showcase hip-hop that's kind of felt on a different level by kids who are coming from the inner west of Melbourne, and are from a lower socio-economic background and that are coming from first generation, or are themselves first generation Australians, and they're still fuckin' around with English, and finding how hard it can be to use. Then they can also rap in their own languages, so I was really excited about that.

**TM:** Great, so when's the CD going to come out?

**J:** Well I finished it last year, and we've released it. But because it came at the end of the year, I'm kind of sitting on it until we've finished recording the TZU album and then push it a lot more.

**TM:** What's it called?

**J:** *Temporary Reflection Visas*.

**TM:** Great title. So it's got kids rapping in languages other than English?

**J:** Yes.

**TM:** Have you done any rapping in Chinese?

**J:** No, no. The closest I can do is pull a few rhymes off in French, and then fake it after that and it sounds kinda cool.

**TM:** There was a compilation that came out through Cyclic Defrost called *Sonic Allsorts*, have you ever heard of it? It's actually got hip-hop in 20 different languages, all people from around Australia rapping in languages other than English. It's really quite amazing. There's some Indonesian stuff, some French, Spanish, Mandarin, Cantonese...

**NK:** Vulk Makedonski [from Curse ov Dialect] does his track...

**J:** Oh, he does the Macedonian track

**TM:** And Hau [from Koolism] rapping in Tongan, which he said was quite hard because he doesn't actually speak Tongan.

**J:** Right, so he learnt a verse by rote, off one of his uncles or something.

**TM:** Yeah, he kind of learnt in phonetically.

**NK:** He said that when you made sense, wrote sense, and then when you went to rap it, the sound changes necessary for rapping changed the sense.

**TM:** Which is the same for the Chinese, particularly Cantonese because it's got nine tones.

**J:** Yeah, it's really hard. But it's a funny one, because when a Chinese rapper from mainland China grasps the musicality of that, it's a whole other level, you know what I mean, you could have these melodies, and then playing on double meanings of the tones and the words, and then being able to follow that, it could be the most incredible MC Escher style hip-hop you've ever heard. But we'll never know because most of us will probably never understand it.

**NK:** In 'The Travel Song' [from *Position Correction*] you talk about how you went on a road trip with your friend, and he was your Cassady to your Kerouac. So I was wondering about how much of an influence Kerouac is for you?

**J:** Yeah man, he's very, very, very much an influence. I read *On the Road* the year I finished high school, and then I started travelling three months later, and I'm still travelling as far as I'm concerned. I ended up hitchhiking from Tasmania to Cairns, so the whole east coast. And then I lived in so many cities and states in Australia. I just fully read that book, ate it up, that and *Dharma Bums*, and thought 'This is fully the way I want to live'. There was a point where I'd didn't want to do music, I just wanted to write, and to travel and basically base my life on Jack Kerouac for a while. And it kind of, you know, wears off when you start to find you're sleeping by the road again. Or you find a girl that you really like. But one big trip that I remember is John – this friend of mine from Sydney who I was with today – drove up to Brisbane where I was living, and we drove really slowly down to Melbourne. Just took off on these little tangents, and went places, and I've got these great memories of that trip, listening to Bob Marley and Bob Dylan.

**NK:** In a Kingswood.

**J:** Yeah, he had a fucking wicked old Kingswood. And we would just cruise down the highway. And he was cool, but I think he was really influential for me because I nursed these dreams of getting a band together and starting my hip-hop career and writing, but he was just totally happy to just travel and live. You know, that same way that Cassady was just in the moment of the thing and was not anchored down to any of that stuff ... It's funny, I also think I got over beat poetry and writing quite heavily as well, I have these points where I'm like 'I don't want to hear any more' and I'm sort of coming back around, I've been reading lots of Henry Miller and to me that's early seeds of beat. It's interesting to be not so naïve about it, cause I really romanticised the whole thing and loved it. And now I feel I can look at it as work, as literature, and be a bit more critical. Particularly Kerouac, 'cause some of his stuff is garbage...

**NK:** Yeah, total garbage.

**J:** It's hard to read.

**NK:** No, but it has to be for the honesty's sake, and that's one of the things I think, can you be honest enough to write shit, and Kerouac got to that point. That's honesty to the extreme when you can say 'Look, I just typed this out, it's full of my flaws, you probably won't want to read it'.

**J:** Yeah, which is what freestyling is as well. It can be really exposing, not so much on a mic at a party with a beat, but if you're hanging out and you're with a couple of mates and you just try to go there, it can be a real pulling back of layers, and exposing what lies underneath. I love that side of it. I don't see much of that side of it in performance, in modern hip-hop anyway. I think it's just that

there's – for me – the foundations of hip-hop. Because it wasn't born in Australia, it's almost adhered to in a much more strict sense, in the mainstream hip-hop community, you know, like 'This is hip-hop, this is hip-hop, this is hip-hop, you rap about this, you've got to have your battle raps, you sample off vinyl,' and so on. And so there's all these kind of unwritten rules and laws and they are kowtowed to even more because people don't own this music, essentially. And Australia has such a splintered idea of its own identity it can't or doesn't want to cement some new traditions, like create something that's definite and particular to us as a culture and a people. And I reckon that whole beat/intellectualising of hip-hop, it doesn't run with 90% of the hip-hop fans because they want it to be 'Like it was in the glory days of the 90s, and you don't rap about this,' and all that shit. And I hate that; I fucking won't have anything to do with it.

**NK:** But by the same token, that's cool as well, because if people just want the party vibe, to jump around and not be too political or poetic then that's fine as well.

**J:** For sure. And at the end of the day for me as a performer, I want people to enjoy it, and have a good time. And I also want music to be spread a message of good fun, have a sense of humour, enjoy yourself. Like sometimes I don't want to hear some...

**NK:** Rant.

**J:** Yeah. And much respect to Macromantics, and Sage Francis and those dudes, I love their music. But I can only listen to it at certain moments and times, the rest of the time I just want to nod my head and feel the vibe and get funky. For me, that's TZU, it's trying to balance that element of life with that deeper element which requires lots of serious reflection and thought – and has literary references and all of that – and the other side is 'Nah fuck it, let's have fun.'

**TM:** But in terms of what you were saying, do you kind of feel an affinity with people like Curse ov Dialect who are really doing something different, who a lot of people would say is not hip-hop, it's something else. So maybe it's better than hip-hop, in a way?

**J:** I love their shit. I admire them as artists and as people. It's funny, because Adam [Raceless] has big problems about being accepted into the hip-hop community, because for him it is hip-hop. He's quite a traditionalist, he wants to represent in the old school way. But he just is such a different character that it comes out the way it does. And I guess, for me, that's what I want in an artist, someone who's just been – like we were saying – is honest and prepared to let the flaws be in there. You know, it's hard, you've got to be quite brave I reckon to do that, and hip-hop is not known for its vulnerability or its emotional risk-taking in lyrical content, or in music, or in the vibe. It is becoming more and more and what not, but for me Curse – and the other beautiful thing is it's just chaos, it's not planned a lot of it – they didn't set out to be what they were, they just started doing something and kept going and going, 'Wouldn't it be great if we did this, had costumes and sampled from all over the world' and now it's this entity beyond all of its components, it's great.

**TM:** And their costumes are fantastic.

**J:** Their costumes, their stage show. And the good thing is – I don't know, you guys would have seen them on their best behaviour in Sydney and still pretty crazy – but witnessing a Curse ov Dialect show when they were first starting to play live and they were a bit more mad, a bit more out there. There were moments when the entire dance floor would be covered in sewage soil, and they would chuck rotten meat out at the audience, and they just thought 'Isn't this interesting?' And venues would just ban them, black ban them, they were black banned from like five venues in Melbourne. They didn't understand, they were just doing their thing, it was great, man, some of their gigs are fucking legendary, and people would be inspired to take off all their clothes and dance like a duck at their show. They'd pull that out of people.

- TM:** So is there kind of a Melbourne school that's based around this exhibitionist, outrageous, extreme hip-hop?
- J:** Yeah, that's them, that's their gig. I mean TZU is much more straight up and that. I think for us, we're trying to surf a line – yeah, I think because of our musical backgrounds – I think we're just trying to make really good music, music that is influenced by jazz and dub and reggae and soul and bringing something soulful to hip-hop.
- TM:** You actually got on to Liberation, Mushroom's subsidiary, what's that been like working with Mushroom?
- J:** Um, how's it been? It's been good. Liberation is an independent arm of Mushroom, so we don't deal with Mushroom, we deal with Liberation. They are really supportive of us, we signed a contract which basically meant we have complete creative control and they fund it. They give us a little bit of money before each recording. And we've got to see, I 'spose, some of the machinations of the industry at large, and watching what happens, what kind of money – the fucking money that goes on major acts is phenomenal – like I was disgusted when I heard about all the Australian Idols and how much money they pumped into them. Also, to some degree, how much money we have to pay back, what recouping means, all these things so it's been pretty educational. But, at the end of the day, like I've talked to lots of other dudes who are on labels and we've got a very sweet deal. And there's only like ten people working at Liberation so we've gotten to know all of them and you know...
- TM:** So you're not tempted to sign to Obese?
- J:** No, I don't think we'd ever get offered. That's just a completely different arm of hip-hop to us. We're good friends with lots of those dudes and it's all love, but Australian hip-hop is at a point now where it doesn't need to be the same or have to...
- NK:** To centralise.
- J:** Yeah, exactly. Obese are a wicked label. I used to be pretty critical of them, but I think they're doing such a fucking good job right now. And they've really pulled their game, in terms of publishing and in terms of getting material out to other countries, like Japan and stuff, full props.
- NK:** It's props to Pegz isn't it? He's the ones who's been busting his balls to get it up to that level.
- J:** Yeah, props Pegz. He's doing good shit. And then there is Crookneck and the Symbiotic label. You know, I want more diversity, I never want people to...
- TM:** Amalgamate. No, it's good for the creative development of the whole scene. But there still seems to be this thing where major labels just don't know how to deal with Australian hip-hop in general.
- J:** They don't have a clue – they don't want to go near it. I think at the moment they're in the phase of promoting New Zealand artists because that's really easy to market; they've got American accents, their beats sound American, they look black, 'There you go, they're kind of Australian, they're like a seventh state, so let's put them on the Australian market'. Guys like Scribe are getting big PR. And fuck, you know, for me, I don't relate to it for a start, I don't relate to a lot of American hip-hop. I can listen to it for it as a joke, or enjoy the beats and whatnot, but lyrically, I don't know. Dudes rapping gangsta shit about South Auckland just doesn't do it for me. They will still shout out their hometowns and whatnot, but apart from that line it's just a really bad imitation of a whole lot of New York dudes. The flows are good, but content wise I just go 'Oh man!' But, and this is the other side of the coin, is that they are huge on their domestic markets...
- TM:** Oh, absolutely, they're top of the charts.

- J:** Yeah, topping the charts, which is not going to happen in Australia for, whatever, fucking a hundred years, you know what I mean. They've got number one on the mainstream chart singles from home-grown hip-hop artists.
- TM:** Yep, well Scribe's had three number ones now I think. He was the only artist in New Zealand to have the number one single and the number one album in the same week. Which is kind of extraordinary.
- J:** So you know, like, props. And I have heard reports that the New Zealand hip-hop scene is cackling at the Australian hip-hop scene; they don't know what's going on, they don't get it one bit.
- TM:** They think Australian accents sound terrible, they think it's absolute shit, it's embarrassing and all that kind of stuff. It's full-on cultural cringe kind of stuff.
- J:** Which is where Australia was about ten years ago. You couldn't really talk to any people, except for a small group of underground heads who actually liked the Australian accent. And now, it's just part and parcel of it. It used to be that the big debate was the accent issue and there is a lot of MCs in Melbourne using an American accent and stuff, and I don't know, for me the accent is important, but it's not the defining thing. A lot of it is content. A lot of these guys who use American accents in Melbourne, I know them and I go 'Well, I like your lyrics, I like your flow, the accent I can live with, but essentially I think you've got a bit of soul searching to do or whatever'. But for me with New Zealand stuff, even content wise I don't get it.
- TM:** Yeroc [a member of TZU] is from New Zealand isn't he?
- J:** Yep.
- TM:** When did he come over here?
- J:** I think like seven years ago, oh no, hang on, more like nine or ten now. So quite a long time.
- TM:** So was he into hip-hop in New Zealand?
- J:** More into Ninja Tunes and Krush and that kind of instrumental hip-hop. And even to this day he's more into instrumental hip-hop than vocal hip-hop.
- TM:** And you sort of got together while you were in Pan, is that right?
- J:** Yep, we were in a band called Pan together, which was live instruments; drums, bass, keys, percussion and a sampler. That was influenced by hip-hop, but equally influenced by dub and funk I guess, and breakbeats. We were a party band that occasionally had rapping and a lot of players who were interested in various styles of music. It was very schizophrenic you could say.
- TM:** Did you record anything?
- J:** Yeah, we did an EP which has three tracks on it. But we had serious problems defining what we wanted to play, and what we wanted to write. Me, Pip and Cory wanted to write hip-hop and this other guy wanted to play serious jazz and another guy wanted to play dub and the percussionist just wanted to have this big djembe jams, so it just kind of folded.
- TM:** There are a lot of Chinese elements in hip-hop, if you look at breaking and the influence of kung-fu, and ninja moves and all that. And you look at groups like the Wu-Tang Clan and how they got their name and obviously there are a lot of Asian-Americans who are involved in hip-hop as well. Have you delved into of that sort of stuff? Have you thought about the Chinese influences on hip-hop? And things like graffiti has connections with hieroglyphics and all that.

**J:** Um, yeah, I guess so. I've noted, it's duly noted, but in comparable to the amount of black culture that hip-hop stems from its a mollusk. Yeah, I don't know, I guess for me, all the cool elements of Asian culture that permeate pop culture at the moment, from Kill Bill onto Wu-Tang and old kung-fu films and Bruce Lee, it's cool, I like it. But at the same time, I don't know, I think America just chews up and spits out so many cultures and doesn't really take the time to learn anything about them or accept them really. So, at the end of the day, it can be patronising, or it can be token ... It's Black music. It is black music, essentially, that's where it comes from and how it was born. I respect that, but, I like the form and I want to appropriate that into my life and my culture and not necessarily apply all the same aesthetics. So it's a fine line between always remembering where it came from and trying to change it at the same time.

**TM:** But it's not – my argument is that it's not exclusively black music. There were lots of Latinos involved in the early days, lots of Chinese-American, lots of Europeans, it was really multicultural...

**NK:** When Kool Herc was there in the South Bronx, it had such a diverse range of people.

**TM:** Yep, including white kids as well.

**J:** Yeah, and you see those photo books from the 80s and there is totally a diverse range of ethnicity.

**TM:** And I often find the sort of argument that it's an African-American form to be really essentialising, I mean, and kind of trying to write that out of it and saying that there weren't other cultures involved in it. But my view is that it was a mixture of all kinds of different cultures that came in. And it originally came from Jamaica anyway, Kool Herc brought the sound system idea over.

**J:** And the whole idea of toasting.

**TM:** Which has got nothing to do with African-American culture basically. I mean, OK, they are African by origin, but the way Jamaican culture developed is completely different from American.

**NK:** And weren't the Jamaican toast DJs getting their records from London as well?

**TM:** From London, and also from the US actually. They were influenced by the radio DJs from the 50s who used to rap. You can trace it back a long way.

**J:** You can go back as far as the griots in Africa.

**TM:** Oh, absolutely.

**J:** Yeah, it's rich. I mean, word and sound has always been married, so at its basic essence, it's totally international and transcends culture, but, modern hip-hop as we know it, b-boy culture, it helps me to find my identity within it if I remember where it came from, and I pay tribute and respect to that, and also do my own thing. 'Cause in doing that, I know what I don't want to take from that. I can define the elements that don't apply to my life. And also I guess, for me, rhythmically and musically a lot of music I listen to is Black American, or black in origin, you know. I have to be honest and say that's what it is, I just like the vibe.

...

**J:** Hip-hop is always being written off as novelty music, but it's folk music now, it's the music of the people, no matter where you're from, it's going to take on its own form.

**TM:** Yeah, for sure. I think those kind of Indigenous elements are being drawn on, too, and that's what's helping hip-hop to grow and develop, particularly in Australia. And in particular, Aboriginal story telling.

- NK:** Something that I hold very dear about hip-hop, is the whole nexus of it coming together – like we’re talking about – is totally always infused with a sense of resistance. Like the slam poetry movement, let’s do poetry instead of getting caught up in gang warfare.
- J:** And also, it affirms pride and pride for people who have had it ripped away from them a lot of the time as well. Like up in Oenpelli, when we went up to Darwin and got to do some workshops up in Oenpelli, yeah the first thing people write in a rap is ‘My name is’ or ‘I come from’ and it’s that pride of place that’s really strong and powerful when your in the middle of Australia – and yeah, every one’s rocking a Tupac t-shirt – but when they rhyme, if they can get away from the obvious gangsta stuff, it just becomes about really powerful life stories.
- TM:** Yeah, who you are and we’re you’re from.
- J:** Yep, and that’s identity, trying to assert and identify yourself and where you’re from seems to be in short supply in music today, and art even, I guess. So, for me, it’s one of the most exciting things of hip-hop, beyond the rhythmical content, and what’s being sampled, what tempo this is at, or what’s going to go down at the clubs, or if it’s abstract or not, it’s just that fucking sense of, you know, the old Grandmaster flash line: ‘I am somebody’. That was one of their choruses, and it’s so true, that’s what hip-hop is saying. Asserting self. It’s good shit.
- TM:** Well, it’s an empowering thing too I think for a lot of young disadvantaged kids, who are actually able to get up and talk about themselves, and have a sense of agency. Being able to assert their own identity.
- J:** And if that’s something that you’re attracted to in hip-hop, it makes the whole Americanisation and accent issue really important too, it does then actually become an issue of ‘well, what are you doing?’
- NK:** And the same thing is at work when you’re talking about guys like, say, Sereck [from Def Wish Cast], and this is what Mark Pollard was talking about: out west is where is they come from, this belligerent hip-hop thing is what they grew up with, it’s what defines them. And so when it happens to go bezerk in the inner city and around Australia, why then should people come to him and say ‘Why isn’t hip-hop more this or less that?’, because it’s obviously so key for him and his identity, and finding a sense of social agency in the world.
- J:** Yeah, that’s a whole new world. And for me, that’s what I’ve come into contact with in Footscray, hip-hop is the anthems of pride and self-discovery in some ways. When you take it out of the inner city cafes and out of the scene, it’s speaking for 16-, 17-, 18-year-old kids who are completely and utterly disassociated from mainstream Australian society. And they might have black skin, or they might be Asian, and in hip-hop they hear something that speaks for them. And that’s really important for the workshops I’ve done, to get to that level of, I guess, the essential part of that communication, what I discover through hip-hop, and I wanted to pass that on. And it’s that thing, you can do it your own way, you can do it anyway you choose, in your own language, in your own accent, talking about your own life, you can fucking do it.
- TM:** Yeah, it’s about finding your own voice.
- J:** In vocal attack as well. The musicality, that’s kind of where TZU is going, in a kind of musical direction, trying to borrow from the Beatles to Radiohead now, and just fusing all those influences into what we’re doing. The musical side of it as well, a lot of time that’s ignored, and that really bugs me. MCs don’t think about being in the music, about being musicians, some of them just destroy the beat ... you don’t have to sing, but get into the music, feel the rhythm of the tune, of the beat, and think about where this sample came from and the feeling this is bringing, and what does that evoke

in your brain. How are you going to use that lyrically? I guess that's why battle rapping bores the shit out of me, you can spit that same rap on any beat and it's not going to...

**NK:** It's not going to move.

**J:** Yeah.

**TM:** Battling seems to have become a bit of scourge in a way.

**J:** It's a natural part of hip-hop, it is competition, it is easily definable competition. I think battling over time is going to get bigger and bigger and better in Australia, 'cause Australians have got a really good sense of come-back, and smart-arse, and tomfoolery, it seems like it will go down really well here. And also the tall poppy syndrome, ripping people apart, it's all pretty Aussie.

**TM:** Sure, but I think *8 Mile* had a bad influence on people.

**J:** Yeah, *8 Mile* has definitely left behind its legacy of people wanting to be Eminem, and that sort of shit. But that's a part of hip-hop that I used to hate, but I don't hate it anymore, I actually kind of respect it, you know, I've been in a few battles and had my arse kicked and kicked arse, it's worthy, it puts you on the spot. It's really purpose-built, that's what I like about it, there's this definite thing 'This is what you are wanting to do, what you're supposed to do is get in there is lyrically destroy this person'. I think that the format of battles is an excellent vehicle for hip-hop, I totally agree. It's just where it's at currently, as a general standard, taking for example the battle up in Newcastle for the TINA [*This is not Art Festival in Newcastle*] thing, it works in reverse because a lot of dudes – your arty types – who are up there for youth writers festivals and that, they come out to this hip-hop gig and their first experience of Aussie hip-hop is kids getting up on the mic screaming 'Suck my dick', and 'I fucked your mum'.

**TM:** 'You fucking faggot' and all that.

**NK:** Yeah, and then they turn up to the panel the next day and grill you guys about it, 'cause they want to know, and perhaps rightfully so.

**J:** Yeah, I guess, the track 'Cowboys' on that [from *Position Correction*] was a definite attempt for us to battle Australian conservatism, that's the closest we've come to laying a battle rap down...

**TM:** Well, it's a different type of battle rap.

**J:** Yeah, well, it's not, it's the same, it's a battle, it just choosing different angles, a different opponent.

...

**J:** I kind of feel that I don't have to explain anyone else's work, and that's all it breaks down to, and that's that whole thing about hip-hop and representing – I believe in the community spirit and I believe that I like the scene and all these things – but at the end of the day I'm taking responsibility for me. And that's where it begins and ends, and if a lot more people did that then there would be less fucking problems in the world. And also, for any art form to grow, it's got to have people who just want to fuck shit up.

**TM:** Yeah, sure. It's ridiculous for people to expect you to be a representative for Australian hip-hop, partly because it's now so huge and so diverse.

**J:** Exactly. And there is a lot of people who constantly want to have it spelt out, 'Why is there this misogyny and homophobia and these things, why is it like that?'

**NK:** It's like, 'Do some history on it'.

**J:** Also, why is it in the world? Like you know, you tell me why I can see it in mainstream advertising and then I'll try and tell you why I see it in hip-hop, it's like, it's fucking people, it's human nature. And rock music, fucking hell, hello, how much more sexist can you get, you know. It's just now that it's so entrenched in the art form, people don't question it anymore.