

LOCAL NOISE

MC Que

19/9/05, Fitzroy, Melbourne.
MC Que, Tony Mitchell, Nick Keys.

Summary:

“When we were doing *All The Ladies*, we were doing lots of interviews, and we were interviewing other artists ourselves, and the question was always ‘Why do you think there’s not many women involved in hip-hop?’ It took me so long to realise that I was asking the wrong question and being asked the wrong question, the question really was ‘What are we doing to improve the status of women in hip-hop?’ And it’s pretty much to say, ‘Jack shit’, because no one is really doing all that much about it.”

We met up with MC Que on Brunswick Street in Fitzroy for dinner and an interview whilst we were in Melbourne in 2005. Que told us about the way she first heard hip-hop through the tapes her sister’s brought back from trips to the city, and then plugging into the underground Australian scene through radio and going to gigs. She spoke about the genesis of the film *All the Ladies*, and her 15-member crew Ladies Love Hip-hop, as well as a much more broad-ranging discussion about being a woman in a male-dominated hip-hop culture, dealing with discrimination and supporting women in hip-hop. Que also spoke about the strong link between her ethnicity, marginalisation and her connection to hip-hop as an alternative to the Anglo-centric mainstream pop scene.

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.

Q: MC Que

TM: Tony Mitchell

N: Nick Keys

TM: So how did you get started in hip-hop?

Q: First was from my sister's treks into the city, just going to clubs in the late 80s. And then from hearing the tapes and stuff that they'd come back with, that's when I started hearing it. And then I was looking in the papers to see where I could find it, and listen to it on radio. So that's when I tuned into public radio, PBS and Triple R and so on.

N: And when was this?

Q: By the time I started finding it on radio it would have been the early 90s, maybe like 91.

TM: And what sort of stuff were you listening too?

Q: Oh, it was things like Cool G Rap and Polo, Big Daddy Kane, all that early stuff. But I quickly started hearing Australian stuff because all the local crews were on the radio, which was cool.

TM: And there was *Down Under By Law*, which came out about 88 or 89.

Q: Yeah, but I didn't end up hearing that until much later. But I soon as I started hearing hip-hop I started trying to find out where I could go and buy it, and where the gigs were. And so then I started going to gigs myself.

TM: Where were the gigs in those days?

Q: They were more like open jams in the city, like in City Square, and we were looking at some old footage of a gig in Footscray which would have been in 92 or 93, and there was footage of me dancing on the dance floor – it was very funny, I think I was 17 probably. It was cool to see some of the b-boys, some of whom are still around, others of which have been and gone, but it was cool to watch. So then I hooked up with Theo, my partner, who's Prowla, and we've been together since back then.

TM: And when did you start MCing?

Q: Pretty much straight away. I didn't really know that I was doing it, I just started writing raps and I guess I didn't think much about it until I met Theo and started doing my own raps and he was spinning out and that was when I realised what I was doing. But it took someone else to see it and respond to it before it clicked with me.

TM: Were you kind of freestyling in those days?

Q: No, it didn't really exist.

TM: So how did All The Ladies come about?

Q: I'd actually gone to a screening of films and there was a girl – which was Colleen – and she'd shown a film that night called *Chicks With Decks*, and we ended up talking afterwards. It seemed to make sense that we collaborate in some way, because she had more technical skills that I did, but I guess I had the link to the community. So that's how that started.

TM: What's your other crew?

Q: Ladies Love Hip-hop.

TM: And that's predominantly a breaking crew?

Q: No, all the elements.

TM: Including graffiti?

Q: Yep. That's pretty much what I've been busy with for the last year and a half, just getting that off the ground.

TM: How many people involved?

Q: Of people who are active I'd say about 15, but there are probably about 25 keen supporters. We're a big crew. I think we're having a little plateau at the moment. Because we've done two really big shows that we put on ourselves, called Return of the B-Girl 1 & 2. Those gigs had all elements, including a b-girl battle both times. So that was massive job, but I think we might just try and do that annually rather than bi-annually.

TM: Yeah, just getting all the people in one place and one time becomes incredibly complicated.

Q: We recently went up to Brisbane as a crew and did a couple of weeks' worth of workshops with substance abuse kids in Brisbane. And then we hosted a big battle, Battle City, and then we did Sui-biesta which was a big festival. So that was the first time that we had gone interstate as a full posse. And that was all through Lioness and all the hard work she's done over the years, because she's really in with Brisbane City Council. It was really good. So, these days, when it comes to the Ladies Love Hip-hop, I rap with Lioness and Jo-ski, that's who I perform with. And then I also do my solo stuff as well, as does Lioness.

TM: Are there any new releases on the way?

Q: Yep, my new album which will have tracks with all the girls on it.

TM: So are the workshops you are doing predominantly with young women?

Q: No, it's actually mixed, and then it's usually mainly boys.

TM: Yeah, well Maya and Trey do stuff in Sydney and it's usually only with girls.

Q: Well a couple of the ones Lioness and I have done were girls, but this one just by coincidence has been all boys and then one girl.

TM: How's the one girl coping?

Q: She's good. She's strong, and we try and support her as much as we can, informally I guess so she doesn't feel like she's a focus.

TM: Often they only set them up with girls because otherwise the guys completely dominate.

Q: I think Melbourne is not there yet, in that way [segregating the workshops], and I think it should be like that, these programs should be run parallel to each other, but it's not there yet.

TM: Are you getting kids from very wide ethnic backgrounds?

Q: Yes.

TM: Many Africans kids at all?

Q: Yep. African kids, Afghani kids, Timorese kids, all sorts.

TM: So lots of kind of refugee kids basically?

Q: Yep.

TM: Do you get any kids who are rapping in languages other than English?

Q: No, not at the moment. I think a lot of them are interested in battles, and they are not battling against people with the same native tongue ... Have you guys heard there's a Zulu Nation chapter being started over here?

N: I've heard that they are starting it up, but nothing more.

TM: It seems like it has been a very long time coming.

Q: Yeah, well it's pretty well supported, there's plenty of members.

TM: I think in France there was a Zulu Nation started up in the early 80s, and a few other countries as well. Still, better late than never.

N: Australia tends to be a bit behind on the revolutionary politics measure.

Q: Just a tad!

TM: Well Zulu Nation has always been heavily into African American politics, which isn't relevant here.

Q: No, but I went along to one of the first meetings that they had, and I knew pretty much straight away that I wasn't going to become a member, because you've got to pay and fill out an application form... I can see what they are trying to do but I feel that the Ladies Love stuff that I am involved in is doing that anyway. You don't have to pay and you don't have to fill out a form, you know what I'm saying?

TM: Yeah, sure.

Q: But we support each other, and are happy to be part of their show. I think what they have realised is that they are going to have to be open enough to work with the community even though they are not Zulu Nation, otherwise they are just going to cut themselves off.

TM: So it will be involved in touring people from the US who are members of Zulu over there?

Q: Exactly, they are trying to do an end of year anniversary of hip-hop, that's when they are doing the main Zulu jam. So far all of their shows are unpaid, the performers are not paid, which was one of the queries we took up with them when we were negotiating to do a show for them. Because they were saying 'We will charge entry, ten dollars, no one gets paid, but we are giving a percentage to charity'. And we were like, 'What do you mean charity? Artists are on the breadline dude! C'mon', you know. So we ended up saying, you got to give 20% to all the artists, even if it meant paying them with dinner or beer or a tram fare.

TM: Yeah, exactly, it's not as if it's Live 8 or anything.

Q: No, I mean, charity, c'mon!

N: I'm always suss on the term charity, there's lots of ways to define what it means.

Q: It's such an old school way of thinking and I think they are starting to grapple within their own group with what they are trying to do, and how they are going to try and do that. Which is really what we went through with Ladies Love in the beginning. Since we were being an open group, we still wanted to maintain a standard of quality when it comes to shows, who was going to perform.

We wanted to have an openness about it; we meet Monday nights at This is It, so anyone who wanted to could drop in, open to all women. But obviously, there are differing skill levels and that forms our main struggle, balancing that.

N: And it is an issue. I don't mean to be overly cynical, but groups like Zulu Nation and other ideologically driven political groups are going to have to grapple with the realities that people face themselves with, and one of those is that you have to pay artists.

TM: Especially here where there is no industry support at all, it's all DIY. We were talking to Muph earlier in the day and one of the things that came up was just how much the music industry has not understood Australian hip-hop, right from the start. Which in a way has been a benefit because people have had to do it themselves, work from the ground up, setting up a really strong infrastructure of independent labels and support networks which from my outside perspective seems to be working really well. It's reaching the point now when people are getting audiences of 400-500 from time to time, so now it's sort of like 'Who needs the major labels?'

Q: Yeah, totally. I guess I'm pretty cynical myself when it comes to 'making it', or whatever people want to say, 'becoming a successful artist', maybe. I think I'm more about keeping it local – and that doesn't mean I only listen to Australian hip-hop, no way. I feel like this has been my community for ages now and that's the way I see it.

TM: Absolutely, yeah. We were talking about TZU about their new album. It seems to be much more marketable in lots of ways because it's got those rock elements in it and it looks as if Mushroom are giving them quite a push, because they were doing a signing today in JB Hi-Fi.

Q: Were they really? Wow. We went to Tasmania recently and they were on the same bill, and they were telling us how 'Everyone is just going to bag us for our new album, but we don't care, we're ready for it', and so on. All the rock elements, it's intentionally not hip-hop.

TM: Which comes back to that thing about hip-hop purism. Why can't people do stuff like that and not get bagged for it.

Q: Oh yeah, totally. They knew they were going to get bagged, and they were ready for it.

TM: I seem to remember that there were a few gigs in Melbourne a while ago that were all women, similar to the ones in Sydney, the Ladies First ones? Or maybe not?

Q: No... not really. I think there's been different DJ nights which have been a bit more like that, but nothing like the scale of what has already happened in Sydney.

TM: Well they only did the two in Sydney and then it seemed to fall apart.

Q: Well that's kind of what's happening to us now, we've done the two and it's like... don't know if we're going to do it again in a hurry.

N: It's probably got a lot to do with freshness. Any night of any type, if you recycle the material then for both audience and performers alike it can become stale. And this again comes back to the idea of time and resources, because if you want to make new things and keep it fresh for the people then you need time and resources, and if you don't, well....

Q: Exactly. I think I'd be more keen to support the b-girls and just providing an annual battle, that's where I'd like to go with it.

TM: Are there many female DJs in Melbourne?

Q: Yeah, there is. I just noticed recently that there is a lot more than I thought, but I'd say they are not yet at the level that a lot of the guys are at, definitely not. They are still developing skills, but it's cool, a lot of them are really good at mixing and club sets, but not yet really at cutting or trick sets.

N: I guess we should ask more directly about the experience of being a woman in Oz hip-hop, has it been getting better over the years? Was it very difficult to start off with? How hard is it to gain acceptance?

Q: I think actually, at least within the underground hip-hop, in a lot of ways it's gone backwards. For me, growing up, I never encountered anything directly, I always felt that hip-hop was for me and there was never really any question about it. And all the different people that I met were always supportive... I think with the new generation of people coming through – I guess I feel a little disheartened about it. I guess the stuff that I hear, and most of it is online, about whether in 2005 women should be involved in hip-hop, or 'Whether women should rap?' That's a question that gets asked, and another one is, 'Should women do shows together?' And I just can't believe it; I think 'Are you serious?'...

TM: Where is this coming from?

Q: I'd say mostly 16- and 17-year-olds. And I think that the stuff that we are doing with Ladies Love is even testimony to this, we are so localised in Melbourne, and interstate people don't know about us, a lot of people don't know. But on the ground I feel there is a lot of support for that, because it's needed, you know. And I just think 'why did this take me so long to get off the ground?' When we were doing All The Ladies, we were doing lots of interviews, and we were interviewing other artists ourselves, and the question was always 'Why do you think there's not many women involved in hip-hop?' It took me so long to realise that I was asking the wrong question and being asked the wrong question, the question really was 'What are we doing to improve the status of women in hip-hop?' And it's pretty much to say, 'Jack shit', because no one is really doing all that much about it.

TM: Right, because my perception is that the Australian scene is a lot healthier than a lot of other scenes around the world, like the New Zealand scene, there are almost no women at all, and the ones that are a total kind of minority. I remember an interview with Eternia from a few years back, and she said that compared to Canada the Australian scene is far more supportive of women and there were more women releasing product, which was interesting.

Q: Well, I guess within the more commercial hip-hop over here, it's more accepting and nurturing of female artists, but I don't think so in the underground scene.

N: I guess with the kids coming up through underground hip-hop, who have an implicit prejudice against women, it's probably not the only prejudice that they carry...

Q: Totally. But in my opinion, there are things being said by people who should know better. I really believe that. As artists, I cannot believe some of things being said. I think that people are reluctant to see themselves as role models. I was for a long time, you know, but now being more involved in youth work, which uses hip-hop to bridge gaps and get people participating and creating, it's all good stuff. I guess doing all that has opened my eyes to the bigger picture, as opposed to when you're too busy thinking about what is real and what is not, you just lose sight of it. But that's not to say that authenticity is not a good discussion to have, we talk about identity and accent – and I think we've talked the accent thing to death actually.

TM: That's true, but mind you, the accent issue still comes up.

Q: Yeah, I mean we were talking about it the other night! I don't like it, I don't agree with people who rap any other way than the way they speak, and I can't believe I'm hearing it still.

TM: Well it comes up constantly in relation to the New Zealand scene, because the majority of NZ rappers seem to do it, and it's just ridiculous.

N: From what I gather, it's really mostly in opposition to the New Zealand scene that the accent debate gets raised, because in Australian it's pretty much resolved, I think. I mean, how many Australian MC actually rap in American accents now?

Q: Well, it's a lot less than it used to be.

TM: A lot less.

Q: But still, you look at guys like Weapon X, who are getting a lot of press at the moment; I think they got signed to a big label. They are complete American accent all the way.

TM: Yeah. On another topic then, we haven't talked about your famous tape, *Telling It Like It Is*, when did that come out, in the mid 90s?

Q: 94 or 95, I can't remember.

TM: It's sort of got something of a legendary status, because it was the era of the cassette tape, and people like Koolism, Trey, Blaze and all those people were putting out cassette tapes because that was all they could afford to produce, and things have really moved on a long way from that stage. That era was really the marker of impoverishment of Australian hip-hop, in a way. How many did you put out?

Q: I think they only did 200, maybe.

TM: There was the famous Easybass one from Sydney because they were such a good group. And Mark Pollard talks about that; have you ever read his 15 moments in Australian hip-hop?

Q: Yes, I have.

TM: Cassette tape culture is one of them. And so how did that all come together?

Q: Pretty much at the same time as I met Theo, that's when the label started, or maybe a little bit earlier. That tape was the first thing off the label. In retrospect, it seems like quite an easy thing to have done, to me it was just myself, a piece of paper, a pen and these two guys who are helping me do it. It didn't seem anything huge, which was good, and we did shows as well but it never felt like a big deal. It was only much later that it became something bigger.

TM: And did you sell it at gigs?

Q: Yeah, but mostly shops, and they sent them to different shops interstate.

TM: Shops like Obese?

Q: No. Central Station in Sydney, and Next Level too. Also Rocking Horse in Brisbane.

N: So those places were like the focal point for hip-hop in the early days?

Q: Yep.

TM: And it seems like Nuffsaid has been quiet for a while, and is not having a bit of a resurgence, no?

Q: I don't think it's ever been quiet, it's always been perceived as quiet because they are very reluctant to have any kind of public face, but it's been active the whole time. Whether it's with international artists or whoever.

TM: Because you've got a roster of American artists I saw on the website. But *In Case You Didn't Know* seems to be a kind of promotional thing in lots of ways?

Q: Yeah, and just picking up on lots of the younger kids coming through. And the next one is, so know you know, that's the next part of it, which is just being finalised this week.

TM: And you do a track on *In Case You Didn't Know* with... I've forgotten her name?

Q: Jo-Ski.

TM: And she's a young and up and coming MC?

Q: She's been around hip-hop for awhile now, but being in Ladies Love has given her a lot of confidence. And I like her style, so it just made sense.

TM: And is she working on her own EP?

Q: No, she's more into the video side of things, she's involved with Heavyweight TV, on channel 31, she does a lot of filming and interviews with artists.

TM: That seems to be a really great outlet. We don't seem to have anything like that in Sydney.

Q: Yeah, it's cool, it's really fresh and they are already starting to change the way they are doing things now. There is a new segment each week, but it's played two or three times during that week.

N: Maybe you could tell us the names of some of the people involved in the Ladies Love collective?

Q: There's me, Jo-Ski, Liones, Sammy D, Dosa, Chrissy, DJ Smitten, Lady Poise (who is the main graff writer and does all the merchandise and flyers – she's also done all the text and stuff for the website. Actually, the website has been really good, because we set it up not just for the local crew, but as a portal for all the international b-girls out there, and there's been lots of love and communication between people.) Then there's the b-girl set, which is known as OutSkirts crew. Have you heard of that new book that Martha Cooper is doing called *We B-girls*. Do you know who Martha Cooper is?

TM: No.

Q: She is a photographer, a historian and documentarian who has done a lot of stuff with Henry Shalfront...

TM: Oh yeah, the spray can art guy?

Q: Yep. So she's done a book with another woman and it's just about b-girls around the world, so Big L Demolition who is part of Outskirts Crew got her photo taken in New York and interviewed for that. We all got interviewed for the book as well, so just about what the definition of a b-girl is. It was cool, and the website has been a real resource.

TM: Do you think coming from a non-Anglo background influenced your involvement in hip-hop?

Q: Completely. Straight out yes. Because when I was growing up it was all Anglo, and I think part of the reason I identified with hip-hop at the time, in that place, was because it was something I could belong to. Pretty much no one was listening to hip-hop down there, and essentially no one was listening to me either, so it just made sense. I think that's why I took it up so wholeheartedly, I never thought about it, I just embraced it straight away.

TM: So you felt marginalised, like at school?

Q: Yeah, and where we were living, also.

TM: So where you were living was predominantly Anglo?

Q: Yeah, there were a few other Indian families, but other than that it was super Anglo, and it was a really working class area and there was a lot of violence and trouble around.

TM: Which area was this?

Q: This was Winton Peninsula, it's in Hastings. So as soon as I could get out, I left. I was hanging to come to the city.

TM: And you were born here?

Q: Nope, Chile. But I came here when I was four-months-old.

TM: So you spoke Spanish at home?

Q: No. Only at first when my parents first came out, but after that, my parents where really keen to have us assimilate, I guess.

TM: So you taught yourself?

Q: Yeah, I went back to school, uni, and picked it up. And then went back to Chile after that and did a trip. I've been there a couple of times. I was the only one of the kids who did that.

TM: Did you have family you could hook up with?

Q: Yeah, it was only immediate family that came over here; everyone else was back there.

TM: And did you spend long periods of time there?

Q: Yeah, it was nearly four months both times.

TM: Did you get into the hip-hop scene over there?

Q: No, it wasn't really around then, there was a bit of graff, but barely even that. But now I hear that it's thriving over there. That's one thing I want to do for my album is collaborate with at least one Latino rapper, to work with on a track, mixing English and Spanish.

