

# LOCAL NOISE

## **Morganics**

6/4/05, Sydney Opera House.

Morganics, Tony Mitchell, Nick Keys.

---

### **Summary:**

“There was this other project that I did in Adelaide about four weeks ago, leading up to a thing called Blak Nite. The group I had then was mad, I had this big boy Dana who’s like 15 – half Maori – he’s a beat boxer. This woman called Crystal, a Nunga woman, she’s got two kids, she’s 24, beautiful singer. I had this guy Neo, this black South African boy, 15, sweet as, little angel you know, sung beautifully, and he could rap really well. We had an African-American girl from Philadelphia in the show. We had a Nunga girl, Lisa, who’s half Nunga, half Afghan – from the camel traders. My god, we are the world! And one white boy, Toby, who was a b-boy.”

We caught up with Morganics for a quick interview at the Sydney Opera House before a performance of Morganics and Wire’s two-man hip-hop theatre show *Sterotype*. Morgan talked to us about the evolution of the show, the relationship of both black and white to lineage and a real sense of connection to the songlines and bloodlines of place. Morgan also discussed the crossover between hip-hop and theatre and the richness of what both forms have to offer each other. The theatrical roots of MetaBass N Breath were also discussed. Morgan also talked about the constant travel and rigours of life on the workshop trail; the great value of workshops and the issues of setting up facilities that will be of lasting effect in the communities, like recording studios.

### **About:**

This text is licensed under a Creative Commons Attributed-Sharealike-Noncommercial license. For details on the terms of this license, please see <http://www.creativecommons.org/nc-sa-a2.0/>

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

**M:** Morganics

**TM:** Tony Mitchell

**NK:** Nick Keys

**TM:** I guess the obvious place to start is to ask about *Stereotype*, how did it all come about?

**M:** Well, it's been an evolution basically, of a friendship between a black MC and a white MC. It came out of a conversation we had one day, we were sitting down, having a lunch break, I was having a cheese and salad sandwich on white bread, which I get very excited about. We were just talking about black and white stereotypes, and we came up with this idea for a song where we bag each other out: he'll call me a 'land-grabbing redneck', I'll call him a 'pension-bludging black fella'. And we did that song a few times, it was improvised each time, with a chorus going 'I'm not just a stereotype', but then [in the verse] we'd launch into all these classic stereotypical black and white things. So that was the seed of it really, and Wire came along and saw my *Crouching B-boy* show, and he said 'Look man, let's definitely do this man, let's do a two-man theatre show'. So the idea was planned two or three years ago and it's just been a natural evolution until after the *Crouching B-boy* show when I approached some venues and pitched my idea to them, and they were keen [at the Opera house], they knew Wire's stuff from before because he's done stuff there too.

**TM:** You said on Maya's show [triple j's *Hip-hop Show*] the other night that you were exploring ideas about lineage?

**M:** Definitely. I think it's great that you pick up on that, because this show's – I guess with respect to the title – we've ended up pushing really quite far into who we are as people. The main thing with my last solo show was that I played a lot of other people, people who I'd worked with, but not a lot of myself. With this show it's about who Wire is and who Morganics is, and our connections to our parents and grandparents, and then taking our lineage back further too. So, we sort of time travel in the show, there was a period of time when we were talking about the books we were reading, Wire is a real bookworm, and he was reading about Captain Cook and I was reading about Bennelong. And we were getting pretty inspired by that stuff and we really wanted to put some of it in the show, having some of the historical bits within it. So, in that sense, it's a real time travel piece, it feels a little – without getting to crazy about it – it does feel a little bigger than the two of us, in the sense of one black fella and one white fella, really looking at our bloodlines, our song lines and our connection to our country. And whether that's him in Gumbayngirri or me with my grandparents whose bones are buried along the eastern coast here. Yeah, it's been a good journey.

**TM:** You've done a lot in this hip-hop theatre genre, but it seems to me that what you do is very different from Russell Simmons-type of hip-hop theatre. I mean, you obviously have a background as an actor, so you obviously had one foot in the theatre all along, but do you think hip-hop theatre is a good way of opening hip-hop up to a, let's say, more mainstream audience, or an audience that aren't so into hip-hop?

**M:** Yeah, definitely. Because a large amount of the crowd you get won't be from the hip-hop scene, and it depends on the show of course. With my last show, that show was a bit more educational, and it was a good place to start, but with this, it's another step from that, people will have to do a bit of research if they don't know some of the references we're making. But yeah, I think it is a great form, having been involved in hip-hop in different ways for quite a long time now, I actually find hip-hop theatre probably the most refreshing and cutting edge thing going on in hip-hop. I think about three or four years ago it would have been turntablism, or maybe it's a bit longer, back when the Scratch Pickles were rocking, DJ Disc, people like that, I thought, 'The avant-garde of hip-hop is these guys'. B-boying is probably the really big one now, in terms of interesting shit going on. Lyrically, there

isn't that much going on, there isn't a swell of inspired lyricists around. I think if you go back to the early, I think some of the early Rawkus stuff, there was a swell of MCs who were pushing stuff, but there isn't that same thing going on now, I don't think, lyrically. But hip-hop theatre, it is really refreshing, you can go into so much more depth than you can in a hip-hop gig, and people like Benji Reed, or Jonesy D, I've seen Storm from Germany perform as well...

**TM:** In fact I think you were going to go and see his show last time we met to talk.

**M:** Right yeah, I went and saw his show, and I think it's great to see some older b-boys rocking it in a different way, and I think we can share ideas and experiences, which is very important to me, the two main crowds for me are the hip-hop crowd and the Indigenous crowd – whether it's Koori or Maori or whatever – they are really important, but beyond that, if people can get into it then great.

**TM:** Well the MetaBass reunion gig, that was almost an example of hip-hop theatre too, because you ended up performing the origins of MetaBass, and that was a nice touch, because it makes a really refreshing change to seeing an MC up on a stage, belting it to you.

**M:** Oh definitely, in MetaBass we were always theatrical, which has got a lot to do with my roots in theatre and Baba and his parents with *The Living Theatre*...

**TM:** Oh, really?

**M:** Yeah, his dad was in *The Living Theatre*, Steve Ben Israel, and his mum was great mates with Barry Humphries back in the day. She performs in a Korean dance theatre company in New York. So, there's a really strong theatrical back ground, he's done a lot of street theatre. So for me, it's just a natural progression, a natural continuation, there a bits from this show which we did at Park Jam actually, because there are bits in this show that turn into a gig and there are some bits which are more spoken word, more freestyle, we're really trying to push those elements this time. We've got a couple of certain moments where we freestyle to get from point A to point B, and it's different every night and it really keeps us on our toes. There was a review of it in Brissy, and they picked up that it keeps the authenticity of the form, and I think it's really important when you mix hip-hop and theatre that you don't dilute hip-hop to make theatre, you actually intensify hip-hop and you challenge yourself as an MC, or a b-boy, or a producer to create soundtracks, or sound effects, linkages and so on and so forth. I'm not a little kid anymore, I don't just want to get up and rock the mic, I've done that plenty of times, this keeps it as more of an interesting challenge and you've got a broader scope that you can get across – both in terms of form and content, more than you get a beer swilling hip-hop crowd.

**TM:** I saw *The Longest Night* when you did it in Adelaide at the Park Project, and I thought that was really interesting because that was like a scripted – well not a scripted play – but it was a fairly tightly structured, three-dimensional, realist drama, and yet you'd incorporated breaking and hip-hop elements into that, and I just thought that was an interesting form to work in. And that was a sequel to an earlier play wasn't it?

**M:** *The Cement Garage*, which was working with homeless people in western Sydney. And I should pay tribute to Alicia Talbot, the director, it's a tribute to her vision that the show got to what it was, and I think in a sense she was drawing on what I and Brotha Black could bring to the table, but the way she incorporated stuff was really incredible. Both her and Brotha Black were in the crowd last night, and there's no coincidence in that, it's just another sort of lineage of the form, definitely, that was a great project.

**TM:** And that was something that was group devised, wasn't it? Where you created your own characters and the dialogue was close to naturalisation?

**M:** Yeah, it was group-devised in collaboration with the community, we had lots of meetings with them, every week – and we were in Adelaide for seven weeks leading up the show – every week we would meet with them and a certain select group would come and have a yak with us and we'd show them what we'd done. And they'd act like directors basically; they'd go 'No don't do this, I don't believe this', and 'what's that about?' and so on. And so when they came to see the show there was a really strong sense of ownership without them having to have the pressure of getting up and having to performing, because particularly when you're working with people like on the first project *The Cement Garage*, with the homeless and stuff, you know, their life is so hectic, it's a crazy schedule, so it's too much pressure to expect them to perform, but by them being directors as such, they can feel ownership of it, and feel totally represented, 'cause we would take on board very seriously what they had to say.

**TM:** I thought that was a terrific project and especially the stuff you were doing beforehand with the kids, the acrobatic breaking. There seemed to be a lot of Somalian and Eritrean kids there.

**M:** Yeah, definitely. There was this other project that I did in Adelaide about four weeks ago, leading up to a thing called *Blak Nite*. The group I had then was mad, I had this big boy Dana who's like 15 – half Maori – he's a beat boxer. This woman called Crystal, a Nunga woman, she's got two kids, she's 24, beautiful singer. I had this guy Neo, this black South African boy, 15, sweet as, little angel you know, sung beautifully, and he could rap really well. We had an African-American girl from Philadelphia in the show. We had a Nunga girl, Lisa, who's half Nunga, half Afghan – from the camel traders. My god, we are the world! And one white boy, Toby, who was a b-boy.

**TM:** Where was this happening?

**M:** In Adelaide. It was part of a night called *Blak Nite* which has been going for at least five years over there, and the Carclew Youth Arts and Kurruru Indigenous Performing Arts put it on together. Pulled about 1000 people on the night, with a whole bunch of workshops leading up to it, and people performing their stuff. But yeah, great mix, crazy mix of people.

**TM:** You're unearthing all this young hip-hop talent all over the country it seems. There's a huge amount of it.

**M:** Yeah there is. I think it's getting a ground swell now. It's going step-by-step, and getting more and more.

**NK:** Is there an issue with transience at all? In that you come in, and do the workshop and really inspire them, but when you leave, you take your equipment. Does that sometimes leave a gap?

**M:** Yeah, definitely. I mean, that really comes down to the people who work in that community on a full-time basis, and luckily in Adelaide they are well supported, and they have other people, Da Clinic, and I'm in consultation with them about setting up workshops with them, to continue after I left, which they are more than capable of doing. So, that's good. Other examples, I was out in Broken Hill and Wilcannia about four weeks ago, setting up two recording studios for them out there, which was money that came from the *River Rhythm* beatbox shows that we did here for *Message Sticks*. So we got amazing results, for \$2 500 each, I set up a full hip-hop studio. And I was teaching the tutors – which is a very small group of five, one group from Broken Hill, one group from Wilcannia – how to use the equipment and the software. So I brought it all for them, and now they are producing their own beats, doing their own thing out there. I have made myself redundant, yeah!

**TM:** Which is the object of the exercise isn't it?

**M:** That's right, it is.

**TM:** Facilitating them to be able to do it themselves.

**M:** That's self-sufficiency, definitely.

**TM:** 'Cause I mean, Murris MCs came out of that project, they were basically a bunch of kids working mainly with Elena in Brisbane.

**M:** Yeah, I think we did the first project together actually – 'Stylin' Up' – when we recorded their first song 'Too Black Too Strong'. I still remember them going 'Oh, I can't rap, I can't rap,' and now they've just done so well.

**TM:** They've got airplay on triple j.

**M:** Two songs on rotation. The played at the Australia Day parade, through the streets of Brisbane, which in a redneck state like Queensland, that's incredible. Their father is a very politically aware guy, and very supportive of what they do, and I think that's reflected in their lyrics. He was involved in the Tent Embassy I think, he was pretty into the Black Panthers, I've had some good talks with him, and he's very supportive of them and they rehearse every week, those boys. It's incredible the difference to home life a parent or supportive adult can make.

**TM:** I think one of the last times we saw you was at the Throwdown gig out at Parramatta, which was kind of interesting because during the day there were heaps of people and there was a really strong community atmosphere, and then in the evening when they had the Oz hip-hop acts there were only a few people left. Everybody dissipated after the beatboxing and the breaking.

**M:** Yeah, I heard that. It's disappointing. You know, they are different things [the daytime session and the night gig], like that was one of my favourite things in recent memory in Australia, that event. The way it pulled off was really great. Mistery and Peaches, their graff work really changed the vibe in the room, and the guys there from Massive Monkee's crew, Domes and Juse, they were up there saying 'Man, this is a better vibe than any jam in America, it's better than Rock Steady'. Yeah, the vibe was really lovely. It was a great mix wasn't it? I always find its good when there's a big mix in ages, because no one can take it too serious, and they can take it more serious in another way.

**NK:** You could just judge by the look on young faces listening to Baba beatbox, it was like 'How the...? I want that.'

**M:** Yeah, 'I want to do that'. It was good like that, it was great, and the beatbox comp, all the entrants, it was a good spirit the whole way through, a good mix. And the groups that performed, Hermitude with Ozi Batla and Urthboy did really well.

**NK:** Do you think it helps that it's out at a place like Parramatta?

**M:** Oh, definitely.

**NK:** Because in the city it might be harder to get that family vibe?

**M:** Maybe, yeah, it may be, it's hard to say.

**TM:** You could do it somewhere like Marrickville, I reckon.

**M:** Yeah, suburban.

**TM:** Park events can be really good.

**M:** Wheels of Steel and so forth, yeah, I've heard they are great, but I've never made it to one. And they have a good one a Chippendale, in Pine Street, they have some good little jams there. So it sort of

depends. It was pretty mainstream advertising, as part of the Sydney Festival, so that helped to get a sort of broader crowd. No, that was a really fun day man. The Oz b-boy championships the next weekend was not as good as that – I mean, it was good I enjoyed it, all the b-boy's from around Australia came together in Glebe – but the crowd didn't give as much love as they did to the breakers in Parramatta

**TM:** I remember last time, you said trying to balance all your workshop stuff, your community stuff with your own work was sometimes a real struggle. Because you're using the community stuff to finance your own stuff and your own stuff really wasn't getting the kind of airplay that the Wilcannia Mob was getting and that sort of thing, which seemed to be a slight frustration. And that's still pretty much the case?

**M:** Oh yeah, nothing's changed. But doing a show like this is good, because it gives us a chance to concentrate on our show. And it's a nice crossover because some of the boys we work with from Redfern, and up in Brissy, they'll come see the show. For our first night audience up in Brissy they picked up 50 chromers off the street, you know, paint sniffers, who'd just done their paint, bang, and they picked them up, it's a program they have in the city, and took them straight to our show! And they watched it, off their heads.

**NK:** That would have been interesting?

**M:** It was a bit hard actually, but no, it was OK. But that's sort of a good compromise as well, because as an artist I can do my thing and explore ideas and push things, because you don't want one to overwhelm the other, 'cause otherwise you lose the balance and you become a staid old teacher. And you lose your passion for what really inspires you. But I do find it's a good balance, I can't complain too much, I just need to take a break more than anything, I just worked myself a bit too hard. I find it hard to say no, I think most freelance artists are like that, you're scared that if you say no they won't come back and ask you again, and it wasn't that long ago that I was working in a factory for a little bit. I don't want to go back to that shit. You just want to strike while the iron is hot, while the opportunity is there. And most of the work is interesting, it's just a matter of balancing it so I don't collapse and die.

**TM:** And is one of your next things in WA?

**M:** Yeah, on Monday I fly to Western Australia, and I'll be over there for two weeks, out in Albany, and I'll get out to the Aboriginal community out there, only for one day but I'm glad that's happening. And also Denmark, there's a bit of hip-hop jam going down in Denmark – Downsyde, Layla, people like that. They'll perform at that, do a couple of workshops. That'll be cool, then I'll fly to Sydney and that morning go Lismore, and direct a group of dancers up there, who also do a lot of community work. So yeah, keep traveling, keep traveling.

...

**TM:** Sometimes, well I find anyway, the hip-hop purism angle to be really stultifying, after a while it can be really restrictive and rigid, and orthodox, you know.

**M:** I agree, I agree. I'd like to see a healthy balance. Me personally, I came up as a b-boy and I'll always, no matter what I do, I'll still always have an element of b-boy aesthetic and feel to what I do so I'll always feel a connection to b-boys and b-girls. Which, you know, if I was doing hip-hop or I wasn't doing hip-hop or I was invisible doing it, I'd still feel that connection, I've grow up with it, it's in my blood, it schooled me, it educated me. But at the same time, I'm not going to spend my whole time just doing rhymes about b-boying, or just do rhymes about bombing trains, or something. So, I agree, a lot of countries outside of America can get caught up in the four elements, you know,

‘You have to represent all the elements’. And I don’t think you do, it’s good to be reminded of it and good to be around it – I will often get really inspired by graff artists, people like Snarl and Caves and Demote, you know, Seize, Exit, Prinz, guys like that will really inspire me lyrically, I’ll shout them out in my lyrics. The standard of graff here is so high, it’s amazing, very creative.

**TM:** Have you got material in the pipeline, for another album?

**M:** Yeah, Wire and I, we recorded a whole album in two weeks up in Arnhem Land, in Noombuwa, the community there, and we were teaching in the mornings and we had the whole afternoon, so we just knocked out a whole album. But since then, owing to our schedules, we haven’t been able to record the sketch vocals we did. So we want to do that, you’ll hear some of the new tracks in the show.

**TM:** So, you are Wire are very much a double act now?

**M:** With the album we said ‘OK, let’s do a collaborative album’, but we’ve haven’t become a crew. And I really want to model in on the Black Star’s album: Mos Def and Talib Kwali are Black Star. They didn’t become a total crew; it was just Mos Def and Kwali.