

LOCAL NOISE

Monkey Marc

This Is Not Art Festival, Newcastle, 2005.

Monkey Marc, Tony Mitchell, Nick Keys.

Summary:

“There is elements in Australian hip-hop that are increasingly conservative and restrictive and to me that’s anti-hip-hop. Hip-hop is about creativity and culture and about expanding your mind and so to put restrictions on yourself and your music is probably as opposite as possible to the aims of the original hip-hoppers. Music is about expansion, so yeah, I just do what I do and don’t have any restrictions.”

Local Noise met with Combat Wombat producer and Lab Rats member Monkey Marc after he had finished running a workshop on altering engines from petrol to vegetable oil at TINA (This is Not Art) festival in Newcastle 2005. Marc spoke about the beginnings of Lab Rats at the Jabiluka protests in 1998, where he met Izzy Brown (Combat Wombat MC and other half of Lab Rats) and how initially the Lab Rats were a traveling sound system that went to the front of protests and blockades, running huge parties with solar- and wind-powered sound system and cinema. Marc talked about the evolution of Lab Rats into a mobile hip-hop, circus, video production and performance workshop that tours to the most remote Indigenous communities in the country. Marc spoke about this work, the idea of cultural preservation and continuation of Indigenous languages, recording songs all across the desert and the issues of mimicking American hip-hop. Marc also talked about the recently released album *Unsound System*, hip-hop as a form ripe for political expression and being written off as a left-wing extremist hip-hop group by the hip-hop ‘mainstream’.

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: Monkey Marc

TM: Tony Mitchell

NK: Nick Keys

TM: Can you tell me about how Lab Rats started up?

M: Well, Lab Rats Solar Power Sound System is a sound system collective which initially started with me – Monkey Marc – and Izzy Brown – MC Izzy. We met in 1998 at the Jabiluka protest. At the time, she had driven to Jabiluka on a four-wheel quad bike with a battery, a little sound system and a solar panel. The gist of it was to have a party at the blockade front. I'd flown up from Sydney with my whole record collection and my drum machines with the same idea. We didn't know who each other was, but we were introduced and instantly we made a track, within the first five minutes of meeting each other, and then we decided to link together, put all our gear together and form a sound system. Our first gig was at the Jabiluka blockade, all powered by solar: one panel, two batteries, some record players. From there we didn't stop, and it just evolved and got bigger and bigger, we ended up going from blockade to blockade. We basically amplified the system over time; these days it's five solar panels and a massive battery bank in a van that runs off vegetable oil, and we've got a wind-powered cinema that follows it around. So the start of the Lab Rats was 98.

TM: OK, and is there a kind of workshop [element] to the Lab Rats?

M: Yeah, there is. Initially there wasn't. Initially Lab Rats was a free party sound system that was designed to be taken to the front line, to blockades, to give people a voice to protest what was happening. In Jabiluka we had microphones and DJs, and we could do our thing, it was a party/political sound system. Then it kind of evolved into a more educational thing when we started linking up the whole cinema aspect and we got the wind generator. We were living with a fella called Uncle Kevin Buzzacott at the Lake Eyre protest camp, which is a protest camp set up on the foreshores of Lake Eyre against Roxby Downs uranium mine, and we set up this cinema as an educational tool for the tourists coming through, to tell them what was happening in the area. These days, of course, it's mutated into our desert workshops in which we do hip-hop, circus, video production and performance workshops all throughout the South Australian and Northern Territory desert.

TM: OK, and these workshops are mainly with young kids?

M: Mostly with Aboriginal kids, yeah. Mostly working with disadvantaged kids such as petrol sniffers, substance abuse kids, homeless kids, kids with family problems. We've been to communities like Kintor, Harts Bluff, Papunya, Balgo, Alice Springs, Port Augusta, Moree – a whole range of different places are kind of renowned as ghetto-like Aboriginal communities – and we go in there and give them something that they wouldn't normally get, with the hope that some sort of self-esteem boost follows.

TM: So you're teaching them skills like MCing, beatboxing, etc?

M: Initially the concept was for me and Izzy to go out there and teach them most of those [hip-hop] skills, but the more and more we went out to the desert we discovered there was a whole band element. So recently, we've been encouraging them to make their own bands – even if it's not hip-hop – and record their own bands, showing them how to record their own bands, how to make their own CDs. Also, getting them to host shows on all the local radio networks. Just creating some sort of direction and creating a bit of a community, giving these kids a voice, that's the important thing. A lot of these communities do look at petrol sniffers as the outsiders, so it's good to be able to make people realise that they do have something to say and it's just a matter of getting lost along the way.

TM: Right, so a lot of it is about them telling their own stories, their own lives?

M: Yeah, I guess it's about them telling their own stories, but it's also about understanding and appreciating their own culture. When we do a lot of music workshops in the desert we try as hard as we can to incorporate their language, and we try to get them to sing about their own personal experiences and communities or even sing about the stories that are important to those communities – whether they are Dreamtime stories or whatever. It's a cultural preservation, cultural heritage sort of thing, as well as a self-preservation sort of thing. The loss of culture is quite frightening when you get out to these communities, and there is a huge gap with alcohol and petrol sniffing where people just aren't interested any more. So, we are trying to re-inject their own culture through new music and video and through all those means.

TM: So when you say their language, do you mean languages like Pitjantjatjara?

M: Yeah Pitjantjatjara, Pintupi, Latjilatji, we've also worked with Kukatja, and also Kukatha, Arabana and Adnyamathanha. Yeah, mostly those tribes.

TM: And you've had to learn most of these languages?

M: Yeah, look, I'm not very good at learning language, but I've learnt general things that seem to relate across languages, like say with Pitjantjatjara and Pintupi there is a few similarities. I can understand a lot more than I can talk, but I've had to learn a few little things. But it's remarkable how different some of the languages are, even within 300 kilometres. I guess people forget that in Australia – I don't know exactly how many – but there is so many different dialects and when you go through the desert you can be in another community and you can speak the language of the community before and no one will understand you. And even the concept of talking to some of the elders, you talk in an even more ancient language, even more ancient than the language that they are speaking now.

TM: And are the elders generally approving of what you are doing?

M: Yeah, at the start we were working with Uncle Kevin Buzzacott and he was really into what we are doing because we were obviously helping him with a blockade at Roxby Downs and we gained his trust through that. Then lots of other elders in the area knew about us because of that and knew that we were there for the right reasons, and from that there is a lot of trust between the kids and us now. Even recently some of the elders have been coming up to us and asking us to record their songs and their ancient stories and their proper Dreamtime stories, because they are worried about the loss of culture and that the kids don't want to learn the songlines which are integral to the whole area. There's been a real breakthrough in communication and trust between us and them, but it takes years. It's been six years now of us going in and out of the desert and now finally these things are starting to kind of gel.

TM: And do you get funding for these kind of things?

M: Initially we got no funding and we just went out there because we wanted to do it. About three years ago was the first funding we started to get. We get funding sometimes from the community itself; we have had two grants in the last three years, but the grants pretty much cover travel and that's it. So we don't we make any money, it's a not-for-profit organisation at the moment. We go out there, we get our travel expenses paid and we get fed and do the work for free.

TM: One of things I've talked to Morganiacs about is the idea of infrastructure, in his case he'd go into a community and run the workshops and then he'd kind of go away and everything would stop. Is there some way that you've found to keep these things going?

M: That was a real worry for us because in individual communities the main problem is that you get

people coming out once and then they never come back. With our Labs Rats/Sonic Boom package we make an effort to revisit ones that we go to, so some of the communities we've been to three or four times now, building relationships of skills. This year we managed to work hand in hand with some of the teachers of the area and they got interested in helping the kids form bands, and also interested in what computer programs we are using to record the bands. They started to think about putting the right software on their computers and so they got us back out there for the next time to train the kids up so that they can start recording their own bands. It's a very important aspect, because once you leave these kids...

TM: It totally falls apart.

M: Yeah, totally. Because you notice after you've been there for a week or two that there is a real decrease in the petrol sniffing because the kids will just come the workshop instead. As you soon as you leave it's back to square one again.

TM: You mentioned before we started recording the whole therapeutic aspect of it all, that you were actually doing stuff that the kids didn't realise you were doing, can you talk a bit more about that?

M: Yeah, well, how can I explain it? Maybe the kids do realise what's going on in a way, but I guess sometimes when you go out doing these hip-hop or community workshops you don't get looked at like teachers or adults, so there isn't that barrier. You've got this amazing connection with the kids where you are a really just a big kid and they are another kid expressing things to you. So you get more of a concept as to where they are coming from, and on an individual basis you can see what the different problems with different kids are, and so over the years you can form different relationships and really start giving some sort of direction to the kids and help them make some sort of pathway for themselves. By revisiting these communities we can keep it going.

TM: Have you actually released stuff that you've done with these kids?

M: Yeah. The first CD I released was called *Western Desert Mob* and it was 11 tracks, mainly from Papunya and Kinto. An interesting story with the first track on that release is that it was recorded by me and a guy called Gavin B.B. Bush who is a chronic petrol sniffer from Papunya – Papunya has got a huge petrol sniffing problem, it's like 60-80 percent of the kids sniff petrol, it's huge, everyone sniffs petrol. And this kid Gavin, everyone said 'This kid is mad, he's the maddest kid in the community', and he used to come and visit us and just sing. He never used to talk – he was really off his head – but he'd just sing, and so I was like 'I'm gonna get this guy in the studio, this guy is amazing, he's a natural'. So I wrote a song for him and then told him to come in and sing something in his language and he came in and freestyled this song all about the Dreamtime story about this hill, Urunburu hill, which overlooks Papunya. It was just the most amazing experience of this guy singing this ancient song over this new beat, but it was all made up by him. After that, some of the elders were like 'Oh, I never realised he had that in him, we just thought he was mad'. Since then he's formed a band and he runs the local youth disco centre and he has stopped sniffing petrol. You know, that's one of the good stories. But that particular CD we recorded in conjunction with The Warumpi Studio with a guy called Sammy Butcher, who is from the Warumpi Band. We worked hand in hand with him and his concept was to get kids off the petrol, and all the profits from that went into funding the studio. We don't make a lot of profits but anything we do make we put straight back in.

TM: And is that available? Can I get that online?

M: You can get that from me or from Friends of the Earth down in Melbourne. I've recorded, probably, another 40 tracks and the only reason I haven't released it yet is because we haven't had the funding to do it. Eventually that will come out, there's some great tracks to, from all over the place. Different style from Morganics in a way, some of it's in the hip-hop vein, but some of it's hip-hop influenced

but more like singing in traditional language. It's a really interesting crossover. I guess it's that I don't want the kids in the desert taking hip-hop to be just this American thing, I've got a real worry about them saying 'Well, I'll just grab onto that identity', and then start rapping in American accents and rap about what they rap about. Our concept is to get them to rap about what matters to them and what is real to them and their situation, and to rap in their own language about their own culture.

TM: Yeah, that's very important.

M: That's always on my mind, so I'm always trying to steer things in that direction and in the long run it's good for Australian culture and Aboriginal culture also, because they are not losing their culture, they are gaining.

TM: We saw Local Knowledge in Sydney the other week, and one of the things they say is 'We want to talk to all the Aboriginal kids who are wannabe Americans and teach them to tell their own stories and talk in their own languages,' etc.

M: That's it, be yourself. Yeah well that's what I try to do, and I've been out there with Elf Tranzporter and Wire MC and I've been with Ozi Batla and Matt Nos from the Nos Foundation and we've all got that sort of similar concept. It's all about advancing culture and self-pride in who you are. If you're an Australian or an Aboriginal kid, doesn't matter; be proud of your culture and where you come from.

TM: And do they generally respond to that fairly quickly?

M: Yeah, some do, some don't. Some are just convinced that it is all Eminem and 2pac and whatever. After a while they are just doing it without you even suggesting it. Initially they come in with attitude and these 'bitch' and 'ho' raps, and after a while all you get them to sit down and write some raps and all these things start coming out. This kid we just worked with in Moree wrote a rap that had lines like 'growing up in Moree is like being nailed to the cross'. It was really full-on, and he's like a 13-year-old kid talking about the family violence he'd been through, talking about how he roams the street and pickpockets and then also talking about how his grandfather is a really important man in the area. And all of this came in one rap, but initially the kid came to us with this full on 'Yo yo, fuck this, fuck that', and after three hours he was coming up with the reality of his situation. And in three hours that's a good thing. There's some amazing things out there.

TM: That's fantastic. Yeah, well maybe we should talk about your own work to because both of us have listened to [Combat Wombat album] *Unsound System*, and particularly the 'Shock Jock' track ['Redneck Shock Jock'] was interesting, how did that come about?

M: Yeah, well there is sort of two of them on there, part 1 and part 2 [tracks 'Radio Woomera Pt. 1' and 'Radio Woomera Pt. 2'], and then there is the little 'Redneck Shock Jock' part. Essentially I'm always on the lookout for political samples. But I've got a friend in Adelaide, called Technique, and he's a magnificent fella. He's an autistic guy and he's obsessed with recording every media and news program and he's done it since the Gulf War, 1989. To cut a long story short, he's got a 300 TVs, he's got video recorders everywhere and he's got CDs and tapes stacked to the ceiling like huge Eiffel Towers all over the place. All his floor is sunken in, just from the weight of it. He has the set-up where everyday the news – Channel 7, 10, 9, SBS and ABC – gets recorded on the TV, and he's got these two computer which record every single talkback show for Bob Francis and Jeremy Cordeaux and this other guy. And then, he records all the news from the radio stations and it all goes into mp3 and then he puts it on this big catalogue. But it's just total chaos, everything is there, but you can't find it. So I go and see him every now and again. He always used to complain to me at protests that 'No one ever does anything with my stuff, what am I doing? I've got all this stuff, I'm the media monitor' – that's what he calls himself – 'Technique the media monitor'. So for a couple of years

I've just been going over to his place and going through it all, kind of crate digging like a vinyl digger would do. Going through all this stuff and pulling out all these samples, and the particular one on the album is Bob Francis, one of Adelaide biggest shock jocks. That's just showing him for what he is, that's like the best of maybe a year from what he's done, but it's all the stuff that just instantly jumped out at me, and it's not even edited in a way to change his words, it's just phrases that he has said. I guess we wanted to put it on there for freedom of speech, let him say what he is saying and people can work it out for themselves.

TM: Does he know it's on there?

M: He doesn't. I've actually sent a copy to the radio station, but I've had no reply. We've played in Adelaide and we dedicated it to Bob Francis, but yeah, still nothing.

TM: And then there's also the track where Izzy rings up ['Radio Woomera Pt. 1&2']...

M: Well, the story behind that is that Izzy was at the Woomera protests, I guess, two years ago this April. She'd been arrested for the refugee break out and she arrived back in Adelaide at about five in the morning with Nick [Technique the Media Monitor]. She couldn't get to sleep in amongst the 300 TVs in the house, which are all usually on – it's like 'Oh my god', sonic nightmare, radiation, buzzing, 'I don't know what's going on?'

NK: What a power drain as well.

M: Yeah, the whole city charges down. So Nick is like, 'Quick quick quick, Jeremy Cordeaux [from 5DN radio station in Adelaide] is on the radio, it's his morning show, you've got to ring him up'. So she rings him up and starts talking about Woomera, and it's all live, the original is about twice as long as that, but it's exactly how it was and it's insane, word for word. The guy just exposes himself for what he is...

NK: 'This is not Aboriginal land...'

M: Yeah, 'This is not Aboriginal land. Do you know what happened? Three ships didn't seem to be too important...' And every time I hear it – you know I've heard it so many times with recording and mixing and all that – it just amazes me every single time. But I guess that's what we are about, exposing things that people wouldn't normally hear. That was just a breakfast show that happened one morning at seven am in Adelaide, probably there's not many people listening then, so we are like a little media news service ourselves, putting things out there so we can broaden people's scopes as to the reality of redneck Australia.

TM: And how has *Unsound System* done in terms of sales?

M: It's done really well. It's been out for five months now; we only expected to sell a thousand copies for the entire sales run. To know my knowledge we're now around the 2000 mark and it's most likely going to go for another pressing. So it's going amazingly well, and it's just interesting watching it, because I guess there is a little bit of a division in Australian hip-hop sometimes between what scene is political and what scene is not. We did get a little backlash from that at the start, but now I think that has gone away as people have realised that we are what we talk about. We are real people talking about real issues and there is a place for us. Whether or not people agree with it, well OK, but we're out there having a go and I think people are picking up on it.

TM: Yeah, there does seem to be a move away from politically conscious hip-hop in a lot of Australian hip-hop, more towards the party rap stuff which is quite noticeable. Do you see yourself as being a sort of underground of the underground because you are totally committed to political hip-hop?

M: Well almost, yeah, I suppose we are, because the Australian hip-hop scene is underground in a sense. I guess it's like a subculture within a culture, and evolving from Lab Rats and having this urgency to get the message out there, going to blockades and experiencing all the things we experience, like police brutality, native title corruption, blah, blah, blah, and everything we have witnessed first hand – we just have to say our thing and that's what Combat Wombat is about. It's just a shame in a way that maybe people in hip-hop aren't being as honest as they should be, they are just succumbing to the pressure of becoming a commercial success or whatever they are trying to be, I don't know. I mean, people are being honest within themselves...

TM: Yeah, there is certainly a personal honesty there.

M: Definitely, which is a really good thing, and I'm really into that. But at the same time, we are in it for the sole reason of getting our message out there, so we're a different band in that form.

NK: So in many ways, you guys are just appropriating hip-hop rather than being hip-hop, and I don't mean that in a negative sense at all, it's just like you have the political message and the sound system behind you and so to categorise you as hip-hop act is possibly misleading. You make hip-hop music but there are more things to it. I find that so often the hip-hop label is just as restricting as it is explanatory, it doesn't really explain much about the group, 'Oh, Elephant Traks are hip-hop', and it's like 'OK, yes, but they are also a diverse range of things'.

M: Yeah, that's right. It's music with a message. I guess if it was 30 years ago we would be a rock 'n' roll band, who knows. And maybe in the future we will be something else, but right now, for some bizarre reason we started writing this form of hip-hop and it just seemed to gel and it seems to work. And being involved with Elf [Tranzporter] and his work with MetaBass N' Breath, it seemed to take that angle a little bit more. It's just like life though really, it's all accidentally on purpose, that's just what comes out. When I write a track, I don't think I'm writing a hip-hop track, I'm just writing music.

TM: What would you say are your music influences, in terms of political influences?

M: Growing up, my first favourite band was The Jam but I was always into the Paul Weller ideology. That was a real eye-opener for me and that was the time of Maggie Thatcher and I really related to that music with a message, even though The Jam wasn't a totally political band or anything. I was also into The Clash and all that late 70s/early 80s music. Later on in my teenage years I was in a bunch of different hardcore bands, reminiscing on bands like Fugazi, I was really into the whole Fugazi thing and keeping the gigs on a community level, low price and all age – that whole concept of community in music – and self-expression. From there I sort of discovered people like Public Enemy and recently I've been getting into a lot of late 60s ska, rock steady, reggae and early 70s stuff and a lot of that political stuff that came out, people like Joe Gibbs and the Professionals. I am very into political reggae in a big way. These days there are a lot of bands that I am into, there's so many...

TM: Yeah, and not just hip-hop.

M: Yeah, I'm influenced by a range of things. I've got a huge record collection, I'm a complete vinyl junkie, it's a real worry, like most people who are involved in hip-hop or music, you become obsessed. I'm into my ska and my reggae, but I've also got a huge 70s funk collection. I'm really into my old blues and I love my hip-hop as well, loads of jungle drum n bass, up tempo stuff. So my taste is all over the place.

TM: Right, a real musical omnivore?

M: Yeah, well music is music and it goes with different emotions and music suits them all and that's what I love. Sometimes hip-hop suits things perfectly and it's a great and powerful medium for a

message at a party, but if I'm relaxing I'll just stick on some weird-ass ambient music from Indonesia that was recorded on gongs in some temple. I'm into lots of sounds.

TM: Right, and from what you were saying before it sounds like you run parties that go for up to 12 hours, so presumably you play a whole different range of music at these events?

M: Yeah, that's the whole Lab Rats and Combat Wombat thing. Last time we were in Newcastle we did a huge wind-powered party at the wind generator. We started off the night with DJ Wasabi – who's in our band – and he played lots of breakcore, sort of hard breaks that's a very Newcastle sort of thing. Then Wasabi and me jammed for a while, doing this sort of ambient hip-hop thing and then Morganics came on and did his sort of thing. Then Mark N came on – he's a famous Newcastle star, sort of hip-hop crossover with breakcore stuff – and then some of the guys from System Corrupt, who are really into their noise/trash music, whatever you call it, and then I came on and played some raga jungle and some reggae and then a French guy came on and played some gabber. In the end we had some this guy from Newcastle playing all these chilled out, beautiful, soulful beats. So we take it wherever; any music with a message is good with me.

TM: A guy that I know called Graham St John has written a lot about you, and he's put you more in the context of rave and bush doofs and all that kind of thing, which is kind of strange for me because I'm really looking at hip-hop. But it seems that you do crossover into that sort of area.

M: Yeah, well the essence of the Lab Rats and some of the people that were around us at the same time were sound system collectives like the Vibe Tribe and Oms Not Bombs and it was all about the free party culture, creating alternative zones, reclaiming public space, reclaiming the streets, all these community-minded events that were about reclaiming everything back for the people. So we've come from that angle and that's why we sometimes get locked into that area, sometimes people think we are a trance band because we are seen as the bush party people, but really we're people with similar ethics to the free party system but with different musical tastes. I've never written psychedelic trance and I don't think I could! I think I'd shock a few hip-hop people if I started doing that.

TM: Right, so really it's the politics that link the two things in a way?

M: It's the politics and the community attitude.

TM: Yeah, because I think the political aspect of trance and rave is really important and often gets overlooked and people see it solely as a hedonistic, drug-taking thing, where as actually there is a strong political dimension to it.

M: Yeah, that's why I think with Lab Rats and now evolving into Combat Wombat people don't see the message, like you say, in those sort of parties and realise that's what going on. I guess it's because it's vibe music, it's just happening and there are no words. It was only when I started hearing bands and started linking up with people like John Jacobs and Fluffy Pete, Non-Bossy Posse and Organiky and all these kinds of people who were really the only ones who were putting a message in the music back then – with their political samples. Then everyone sort of broke away and started making experimental music, which was good, but we felt we needed to put the message back in and hence that's why we thought hip-hop was the perfect medium, and also because we had such a love for it.

TM: Apart from Morganics and the Elefant Traks crew, and you've mentioned a few others already, but what other Australian hip-hop artists do you feel most affinities with?

M: Curse ov Dialect. We're great friends with them, they are a very political act, though sometimes people don't see it because they are so crazy on stage all dressed up. It's fantastic, politics and self-expression sort of moulded into one. There are some other interesting acts out there as well, even some local Newcastle crews like Productions Crew, who are MC Cyphen and Wasabi doing this

intelligent/conscious hip-hop, it's not so political in a way but it's stating some really interesting facts about society. There's some good hip-hop coming out of Melbourne and Newcastle. Also ESI from Sydney, a very small little crew but they are very interesting. Who else is there? There Toekoe from Darwin, who is Kris Keogh and Byron [Toefu] from the Herd who produced the track 'John Howard is a Filthy Slut'. In their own funny way it was a very successful political track.

TM: Do you know Culture Connect?

M: I do know roughly, yeah, they are another good crew and of course the Local Knowledge crew. So there are some amazing things happening in Australia really. But yeah, for me, Ozi Batla and MC Izzy are the most political rappers in Australia and I think their raps work so well because of the honesty, and if you meet them as human beings and talk to them, their hearts are in the right places.

TM: That's right, and everyone says about Ozi Batla that he's such a modest guy.

M: Yeah, he is, almost like a shy guy, always looks hungover. He's probably my favourite, no, without a doubt my favourite male MC in Australia.

TM: So you are based in Melbourne, but obviously spend a lot of time out in the desert as well?

M: Yeah, well Elf and Wasabi are both based in Melbourne now and me and Izzy are as well, but for example, in the last six months we spent four months in the desert. Our thing is basically when we're not doing the Combat Wombat/Lab Rats thing then every moment of our time is spent helping kids in workshops or getting involved in local protest groups, mostly to do with anti-uranium and deforesting sort of groups. We're busy!

TM: Yeah, it certainly sounds like it, but it's admirable, I think it's fantastic. And you guys are obviously activists; you're actually living the politics that you are talking about.

M: Yeah, I guess that's what makes our music what it is, it's usually personal stories or personal experiences, so there's that passion behind it which makes it real and your message can reach so much further when it's like that.

TM: Do you get the sense in Australian hip-hop scene that there is a reigning orthodoxy sometimes, or that there is a certain faction that insists on keeping to the four elements and all those sort of ethical issues relating to being staunch? Which sometimes reacts against and prevents really kind of innovative stuff from happening.

M: Yeah, there is that. I guess I just don't take it too seriously, if I did I'd probably not have written my album if I was thinking 'Oh shit, I should follow these rules and regulations'. There's elements like that which can really work, because you've got people like Morganics that can pull it off so well, creating a join between all the elements and still having a message and still having a party vibe. The guy is a real talent like that. But then there is elements in Australian hip-hop that are increasingly conservative and restrictive and to me that's anti-hip-hop. Hip-hop is about creativity and culture and about expanding your mind and so to put restrictions on yourself and your music is probably as opposite as possible to the aims of the original hip-hoppers. Music is about expansion, so yeah, I just do what I do and don't have any restrictions.

NK: Well, you touch upon something that Tony has been saying for years now. In the South Bronx in the early 70s it was African-Americans, Jamaicans, Chinese, Jews, Puerto Ricans, etc. It was a big ethnic melting pot and that eclecticism is, in my opinion, the binding feature of the culture and continues to be today. So people who argue the four pillars of hip-hop endlessly are, as you say, anti-hip-hop.

M: Yeah, it's almost like this religious code you've got to follow; are you going to be a devout Christian

and follow the rules? Or are you just going to be a good person and just help people around you? I don't know.

TM: But what about things like battles, do you ever get involved in things like that, or in cyphers? Obviously you're not an MC, but what's your slant on those type of things?

M: The best person to talk to would be Elf; he's very big on trying to pull the mindset of the battle into the expansion of the mind. So not, like, dragging into this derogatory and homophobic slander – which is just ingrained in Australian culture anyway and so it just comes through in the lyrics – which might be funny for five minutes, but after that it's just like 'Man, this all sounds the same'. So as far as Elf, and also [Ozi] Batla go, there is an effort to explode the consciousness of the battle. I've hosted battles with Elf where he's strictly put topics there that you have to follow, things like 'You tell him how much you like him, how good his hair is' – and he just throws the topics at them and these MCs just going 'Oh, I love your hair, I really wish I knew you'. And that's even more hilarious, because you put the male MCs whose testosterone is pumping, but you're getting this whole other side of them out.

TM: And that aspect of it is really good I think, in that it's not an *8 Mile* thing anymore. I've seen Elf doing cyphers in Melbourne and he's a really inspirational MC in lots of different ways, because he is so supportive towards other MCs.

M: He is, he is. He has such a broad perspective on things, and he knows so many people as well. And so many people have started hip-hop bands in Australia because of bands like MetaBass N' Breath, and so people like Elf and Morganics have a huge influence across Australia.

NK: Last time we were talking to Morganics he was saying that... what was that almanac book that came out that was mostly American?

TM: Oh, *The All Music Book of Hip-Hop*. I actually checked that out and MetaBass N' Breath is the only Australian group that is mentioned in the whole thing. They do mention a few other international groups, but they actually get it all wrong. The guy who wrote the introduction doesn't know what beatboxing is, and he was saying beatboxing is a DJ technique...

M: Oh! Good luck, I'd like to see that.

TM: So, it's actually a bit unfortunate that they [Metabass] are mentioned in that. And they say things like 'Their style is very much like the North American style', which OK, Elf and Baba are originally from the States, but they are still very Australian in all sorts of ways. That's the other thing about Australian hip-hop, it's mixed with all sorts of other aspects of Australian culture in a way that's made it quite unique. I was quite interested that in the publicity for the latest album, The Herd was saying they've been described as hip-hop's version of Midnight Oil.

M: Yeah, well we got described like that on quite a few interviews lately. Things like, 'Well, what do you think of Peter Garret?' But the funny thing with bands like Midnight Oil, and even The Herd sometimes, is that people don't have a clue what they are saying. I remember growing up in Berowra and people just loving Midnight Oil and singing it all, and they were just the biggest redneck drongo, male chauvinistic dudes who seemed to have no idea that the words were totally political, because the music was so good and it was so empowering. I've heard The Herd do '77%' – which is obviously an incredibly political track – at this gig one time and when the chorus started instead of going 'Wake up, this country needs a shake up', these guys near me were shouting 'Wankers, you cunts are wankers'. And they thought that that was the chorus to the song. And then when Batla played in Armidale one guy came up to him and said 'Can you play that swearing song that you do?' It's funny like that, how people don't see that, they just pick it up for some other reason. But yeah, people are

always going to misunderstand and try and cut you down for what you're saying, that's just going to happen no matter what, and the bigger you get the more people there are to cut you down. That's life when you're in the spotlight. I guess you've got to look at it like that, there will always be at least one person who has understood everything that has been said and has got inspired, and who knows, could get involved in something and make a difference. As long as there is that one person, and I always aim for that at every gig, I just look out for that one. Infiltration of a nation.

TM: Well, long may it continue.

M: Yeah, well, it's fun. It's a constant experiment. It's just funny being in the mainstream I guess, getting songs of ours played on triple j now – we never expected that.

TM: On the normal daytime rotation, or just Maya's show [*The Hip-hop Show*]?

M: No, normal. Our single 'Qwest' just reached number two on the Net 50. It was totally unexpected, and this is its fourth week in the Net 50. The video has been on *Rage*. Lyrically it's a very political song, and so it was surprising that they picked it up. They've even played songs like 'Police Brutality' and 'Alternative Energy'. It's just good to get it out there, get the message out because the media out there is just so distorted – our mission is to get what we think is the real story out there – and if we can get on mainstream radio and get kids listening to the facts of what's going on, then we're getting an alternate news service happening.

TM: I guess you're not going to get onto Nova anytime soon?

M: No, no, I don't think we will. But I won't be surprised if The Herd do. You never know.

TM: Have you had anything to do with Reason?

M: No, I haven't had anything to do with anyone from Obese. That's a whole different area. It's kind of like the dominant paradigm of Australian hip-hop, the Obese thing. And it's a huge thing with the [Hilltop] Hoods, Hyjak n Torcha and all those guys. It's a big business; it's almost like a big corporation I guess. They do things their way and we do ours our way. They've done a lot of good things for Australian hip-hop but sometimes I feel I'm in a different ball game. Maybe if I knew them, and knew where they were at, I could talk about them, but it's so hard to tell people from the music that they record. It doesn't always reflect who they are. But I'd like to talk to them one day. We're often seen as this left-wing extreme hip-hop band, so sometimes we do get a little written off by that crowd. People just take a while to get used to something new and extreme. We're seen not as a pure hip-hop crew, but more as some weird reggae/hip-hop/world music/political crossover/sound system thing.

NK: Well, Elf does have his rasta rhymes on the album...

M: Yeah, he's the rastafarian, Jewish-Australian, American. And Izzy is the punk rapper. Often when I'm playing I feel the energy is more like a punk band than a hip-hop band for some bizarre reason. I suppose it's the passion and energy behind it.