

LOCAL NOISE

Music vs Physics

18/09/05, Fitzroy, Melbourne.

3rd Dek, Beatrix, Tony Mitchell, Nick Keys.

Summary:

“That’s the basis of it really, in that it stems from folk music and the idea of telling a story – so it can go in any direction and you can take influences from any other genre of music. It can’t be a rigid thing at all because it’s taking so many influences already.”

Music vs Physics are a Melbourne-based avant-garde hip-hop trio. Their live performance is a three-way conversation between the turntable, sampler and a drum kit, plus vocals. As a crew, they also experiment with animation, web-design, film, design and multimedia constructions. This interview, conducted by Tony Mitchell and Nick Keys in Melbourne, is with 3rd Dek (turntables and vocals) and Beatrix (samples and vocals). The discussion is mainly focused on the textures and architectures of sample-based production.

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.

3D: 3rd Dek

B: Beatrix

TM: Tony Mitchell

NK: Nick Keys

NK: When the Symbiotic Collective was starting in about 2000, one of the first things was the Music vs Physics...

B: ...Variety Show.

NK: That's right. Can you tell us about that?

3D: They were some gigs we were doing at the Empress, which is I guess where Symbiotic was kind of born from. We had this idea – instead of just having the general format of playing live where you have the bands and then they do their time slot – we wanted to this crazy, all hands on deck mash-up. The initial idea was just one track that went forever and evolved and changed. But we settled on just one performance where people would get up and down from the stage over the course of the night. We had this giant stage set up with all the gear and had 15 of us playing at various points.

B: We kept it kind of relaxed, and so producers would get up and mix their track into the track that was playing and then it would kind of take over and then rappers would get up and freestyle or do writtens. It was just a fun night of hanging out with friends and playing music.

NK: It's an interesting idea as well, welding it into one thing.

3D: Definitely. With the last one that we did it sort of ended up being our immediate circle of friends, producers and MCs. From that we thought 'Maybe we should keep doing this', and took it around to other places. We sort of created a band out of it, well not so much a band as we would get booked as a band and then get up and do that in the timeslot.

NK: Marcus [Guitarkus] mentioned something about the turn of the millennium New Year's Party?

B: Yeah, at Revolver.

TM: And that was more or less where it all started, was it?

3D: Yeah, I guess that's where we started calling it Symbiotic and actively getting a mindset and a goal towards something. Before that it was just something we were doing on occasions.

NK: Marcus was saying something interesting about the One Mammoth Saturday where they had five producers and 15 MCs and they pulled the names out of the envelope, Academy Awards style.

3D: That was almost the same idea turned into like a game show sort of, it was fun. So yeah, you'd rock up and you knew what you were doing but you had no idea who you were doing it with.

B: So they'd pull out a producer, a rapper and a turntabalist – it was great fun. You'd end up getting up there with someone you'd otherwise never play with.

3D: It was surprisingly nerve-wracking as well.

TM: I can imagine.

3D: There pulling names out of a hat...

B: And you're like 'Oh no!' And then you'd have to get up.

TM: So tell us a bit about your background, and how you got into hip-hop.

3D: I moved to Melbourne when I was 17 from Adelaide with the goal of making music, and I had some family here. I came here for a few family holidays and realised that if I was going to make music this was the town to do it in. I started hanging out with other people who were DJing and started doing DJ sets.

TM: There is quite a strong scene in Adelaide, isn't there?

3D: Yeah, but that's sort of popped up since I left, I guess. I know quite a few folk in Adelaide who are doing stuff now, but at the time, it was just a suburban thing.

TM: People like Quro, and Terra Firma.

3D: Yeah. And I guess to the left, people like New Pollutants and Red Moniker, so there's definitely a strong scene there now. Then I hooked up with Bec [Beatrix] and it started getting serious and we started buying gear.

B: My way into hip-hop was a bit different, 'cause I wasn't really into hip-hop until I met Joseph [3rd Dek]. I always liked singing and playing guitar, so I guess I was more into grunge music. Meeting Joe gave me exposure to hip-hop and I guess I got into DJ Krush and the whole instrumental hip-hop thing, which influenced us a lot for our first two albums, which are very instrumental.

TM: And you are from Melbourne?

B: Yep, though I grew up in the country.

3D: We started off with mostly instrumental stuff, with Bec doing a bit of vocal over the top. But I think it was performing live a lot with Curse and TZU back in the day that gave us a real taste for getting quite vocal in our performances. I guess for me, and for Bec as well, we pretty much learnt to rap in front of a crowd, just freestyling. Oh, I'd shudder to see our first performances. So it pretty much came from the live sense, it wasn't something we were doing at home and taking to the stage, it was very much the reverse. On our next album, which is our first very vocal album, it's very much that deal, taking the live essence into the studio, instead of struggling to do the reverse.

TM: And is that due out soon?

B: Yeah, in November, it's just been mastered.

TM: And where did the name [Music vs Physics] come from?

3D: I think it was a random choice.

B: We'd been thinking about a lot of different things and we decided to go for the whole random thing and we picked a number in the bookshelf and counted along until we picked that book, and then we picked another number for the page and on that page we found 'music vs physics'. Which is kind of an odd thing, but as soon as we found it we went, 'That's really cool', and it suits us a lot as well because we are both very much into science and mathematics and the way things work. As time has gone by the more and more the name has made sense for us.

3D: I think it ended up coming from the index of *A Brief History Of Time*, or some Stephen Hawking book, and it was about some radio show that he did where he talked about the five pieces of music he would take to a desert island. And that was the reference to it.

NK: It's interesting that you say it was random, because I always imagined it as a conscious point about not reducing music to a science, that music is the beautiful and sublime and where the imagination

lies. Of course, that's the reading I choose for it.

- 3D:** Yeah, well we've worked out stuff like that since having the name, thinking 'Oh, that does make a lot more sense to us', because we are constantly battling making music on a computer and actually trying to keep it musical.
- B:** Yeah, so the tension of trying to be creative but doing it in a technical way. It's the whole creative technology tension.
- TM:** Apart from DJ Krush, what are your other influences?
- B:** Definitely Buck 65 is one of them.
- B:** Yeah, we kinda heard his albums and just listened to them over and over again. Especially his vocals, just the way he writes...
- TM:** It's terrific, and the way he draws in so many other music influences outside of hip-hop, from Woody Guthrie to Tom Waits to country. Did you get to see him perform when he was out here?
- B:** Yeah, we were lucky enough to go on a bit of a tour with him – which was amazing. We were so excited about it and scared as well, having to perform in front of someone who we had idolised for a long time. He's a very interesting character.
- 3D:** It seemed he was pretty much over hip-hop by the time we toured with him. You could see his head was definitely going in other directions.
- TM:** Which is what hip-hop needs desperately, I think.
- 3D:** Oh, for sure.
- B:** And that is what hip-hop is anyway. That's the basis of it really, in that it stems from folk music and the idea of telling a story – so it can go in any direction and you can take influences from any other genre of music. It can't be a rigid thing at all because it's taking so many influences already.
- TM:** So with your lyrical content, are there statements that you are making, are there stories you are telling through that?
- 3D:** Hmm... in a way. I guess a lot of it is free form – for me personally anyway – and it tends to get collated and put into music at a later stage and accumulates meaning that way. But initially it stems from the playing and then it steers me in a certain direction. There's meaning behind it, but it's not something I consciously dictate. Obviously there's meaning in what I say because it's coming out of my head, but a lot of the time it doesn't actually take that form until I read over it or deliver it and go 'Oh, right, that's what I'm on about – of course!'
- NK:** I want to ask a technical question about how you produce your music, do you tend to start with samples or stuff you write or play and then sample from there?
- B:** It's a bit of a mixture. It used to be sampling to start with and then basing things off what we found, for example, really liking a loop and building the track from there. Also, we didn't really play any instruments back then. But recently we've been getting into guitar and things like that and trying to get live instruments more into the making of it. As time goes by you learn other ways to do things and so it sort of changes as you're going along. But I guess there always is that basis [the sample] and then the lyrics follow from there.
- 3D:** I think when we first started off, largely on our first album and completely on our second, it was very much samples driving the direction of our tracks. These days, we're not using as big samples as we

used to, and a lot of our samples we're cutting down into sounds and then rebuilding those sounds into completely different melodies. In a lot of cases we don't even really know where they are from anymore, because they don't represent where they came from. It's more using sounds and samples just like a colour palette, like 'I want a sound that sort of sounds like this', but not going 'I like that tune or that loop'. These days it's not building tracks around appealing melodies but using them at their base level.

NK: Yeah, this building from the base level seems to be the prevalent mode of production. It is sort of post-sampling in a way. When you say 'sampling', in its old school meaning that was grabbing a loop and then dumping vocals on top, but this is not that sort of sampling is it?

3D: No, it's not that old context any more.

B: And as you go on you sort of realise that you need to expand in this way – I mean you don't have to – but just using obvious samples that people know can't be done unless you are willing to pay for it.

3D: It also gets a little bit boring after awhile. If you hear a great loop then all you can hope for is that they totally ruin the rest of the song, make the rest of it hideous apart from those two bars of prime gold. James Last and Bert Kaempfert are great like that, easy listening dudes from the 60s and 70s who had a couple bars of greatness and then goes into crazy noise. So you can justify grabbing that and making a song, but these days it's very much bits and pieces as the structural basis.

TM: Are you a crate digger? Do you collect vinyl?

3D: Yeah, we've got a house full of it.

B: We've got to get rid of some of it, it's kind of taking over.

3D: We're notorious for collecting really crap records. We've got some really good ones of course, but on the whole it's pretty average. Most of the stuff we are trying to get out of our house at the moment is stuff we got for 20 cents a record.

B: You can find things off anything, but you just end up with so much of it that it takes up too much space.

3D: And a lot of it becomes really useless after you've grabbed that tiny valuable bit off it. You just never listen to it.

NK: It's almost an interesting conceptual idea though, to make people produce music from a whole pile of crap that you're trying to throw out. It would be like 'We know you can make good music, but can you make good music out of this pile of crap that we're going to chuck in the bin?'

B: Yeah, totally.

3D: On an album that came out awhile ago, compiled by a guy called Brian May – not like Brian May Brian May from Queen, but another Brian May – and the challenge he set the produces was to make tracks using nothing but sounds off Kamahl albums. So the whole album was made using nothing but Kamahl's sounds. It was a really interesting album, lots of playful stuff but some really great tunes also, some great samples that you'd hardly believe came off a Kamahl album.

NK: The only other thing I had to ask was how comfortable you guys are in relation to being grouped under the term 'hip-hop', and how comfortable Symbiotic are in relation to that?

3D: Originally I reckon it was sitting pretty firmly in instrumental hip-hop, but these days it's not at all. It's definitely got its production skills and formats...

B: Yeah, the beats would probably be the closest to any form of hip-hop.

3D: Rhythm-wise. But it's begging for a 'That's not hip-hop' label to be put on it.

NK: Yes. There's a lot of differences shall we say, due to the diversity in Australian hip-hop, there's quite puritanical views about 'what Aussie hip-hop is or is not' and Curse, we know, have made people angry on that tip. And it seems the Symbiotic has always been on that experimental tip and has only had a few toes, at best, in the hip-hop door.

3D: Yeah, we are really not that precious about 'keeping things real' or anything like that. We don't have a problem with totally destroying things and rebuilding it in new ways. Where as there are other people who are definitely straight down the line, live it to the total purest form, and yeah, they are the ones who get angry about it.