

LOCAL NOISE

Terra Firma

3/5/05, Park Jam, Luna Park, Sydney
Simplex, DJ Dyems, Tony Mitchell, Nick Keys.

Summary:

“[The] Adelaide scene, the way I see it, was built on the back of graffiti writing crews. And then from that people have stemmed out to become DJs and MCs ... Like mid-90s, early-90s, the most prominent part of hip-hop culture was graffiti, by a long way, and now it’s like the extreme and utter opposite. Now the focus is all on the MCing and whoever is up on stage. And the writers are still doing their thing, but...” [DJ Dyems]

Another group we spoke to backstage during the Park Jam gig at Luna Park was Terra Firma, and their MC/producer Simplex and DJ Dyems. The guys spoke about their LP *Waking The Past*, and Dyems talked also about the *Culture of Kings* releases that he had compiled in conjunction with Obese, and what this did for Obese and the exposure of different parts of the scene. The both talked about Adelaide, the history and growth of the scene there, about its close-knit nature and some of the figures upon whom the scene was built.

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.

S: Simplex

D: DJ Dyems

TM: Tony

NK: Nick

TM: Is this [*Waking the Past*] still the only Terra Firma album?

D: Yep, the only one.

S: Yeah, we're working on the second one now.

TM: And this one was basically self-produced?

S: Yeah, we done everything, from artwork, to...

D: ...To funding it, and getting it distributed.

S: There's another dude in the group, Gerard, or Carbons, who designed everything.

TM: I know I've talked to you [Simplex] before about your Brazilian background, you speak Portuguese don't you?

S: That's right.

TM: Have you ever tried MCing in Portuguese?

S: I use little bits of dialect in there, but not that much because I'm not that fluent and I don't want to...

D: ...Massacre our image!

S: Yeah, basically. Whereas Raphael, he writes verses in Portuguese and shit, he hasn't used 'em yet, though.

T: One track I really like is 'Shadow Society', can you talk a bit about how that came about?

S: 'Shadow Society' was one of the tracks I spent the longest time writing. I started writing it when I went over to Brazil for three and half months – I started writing on the plane and stuff. And I just continued through Brazil, and when you are outside of your hometown, you learn to appreciate things a little bit more. Like when you get homesick, you miss going to your mate's house just down the street, or going to the local shops and running into 20 of your mates. In Brazil, you're like 'Fuck!', you're wandering around like an idiot, you don't know anyone, you don't know how to speak the language. Yeah, I just started writing it from there, it took me about a year or so of writing, just having these verses, you know, never did nothing with them. Then we put them together for the *Culture of Kings Volume 1*, and that was our first release, and I done beatboxing over that for the instrumental.

TM: And also on 'Shadow Society', you've got Raph in there as well, what was his input?

S: Well, Raph, he is another MC from Terra Firma, so he just done his verse, and I just came up to him and went, 'I've got these verses about how, basically, I see hip-hop, the way that we live hip-hop, and so why don't you write a verse as well?' So he wrote a verse, and yeah, it just came about – made a beat, done cuts, yeah, put it out on *Culture of Kings 1*.

TM: Has the album had much of an impact? Have you got a response from it, in terms of reviews?

- S:** Yeah, it's been good, we just put it out and didn't expect much.
- D:** No, we got out of it what we meant from it, basically. 'Cause most of the tracks had been released either on the *Culture of Kings* series, or *Obesecity*, or *Suffering City*. So most of it was already released, so we just compiled it together and put it out, and it worked a treat.
- S:** So those tracks were just basically a lot of stuff that we had, and like he said, we had put them out on compilations, but we had other tracks that we wanted to work out on an album.
- TM:** How long have you guys been together?
- S:** I started Terra Firma up in 95 with this other MC called Jus B, who's now left, he left in about 99. And then Raph joined in about a year later, in 1996. And then we had DJ Turntable Sum1 in there for a while, and he just wanted to continue on with his turntablism and he went through to England, battling. And then we met up with Dyems in about 99...
- D:** Yeah, just as I was starting *Culture of Kings 1*, it was about 99, when I started DJing for Terra Firma.
- TM:** There's currently been three *Culture of Kings*, is there plans for anymore?
- D:** There is, but not at least for a year and a half. Not until we've finished our next album. Basically, whilst this was happening [their debut LP], *Culture of Kings 2* was happening, and yeah, it doesn't work. When I'm doing *Culture of Kings* I have to spend 100% of my time on it. There's too many deadlines involved in trying to do your own album and get a compilation together.
- TM:** *Culture of Kings* has done really well though hasn't it? It has sold well and has really got Adelaide on the map ever since.
- D:** It has also helped Obese, especially with number 2 – 'cause number 1 laid the groundwork for the whole thing and let it take off for number 2 - but it's also helped them, when it got triple j album of the week, they got contacted by this store, and this distributor...
- S:** And that's the first time I heard dudes like Downsyde, and Matty B. It exposed all these new people, like you hadn't ever heard these cunts before, and it brought everyone who was doing stuff around that time – 2000 and before – together, sort of thing.
- D:** That did what it was meant to do as well. Basically, around the country everyone had their own little scenes and everything. And it has linked everyone together and we've just seen it go from there.
- TM:** So do you guys have an arrangement with Obese for *Culture of Kings*?
- D:** It's basically that we're 99% sure that we're going to go through them.
- TM:** They seem to be the rising, up and coming label at the moment.
- S:** They're friends, you know what I mean. I've known Pegz for fuckin' a while now, ever since *Culture of Kings*, and we've done shows with him, we went through Reason, we've done stuff in Adelaide. So that's how we sort of got to know him, so I've known him since back then so there's a trust that's been built up over the years.
- D:** Plus everything that I've done with him, which is three *Culture of Kings*, everything has been done to the letter, you just can't fault him at all, and that's why we're looking to deal with him for this new album, he's just so trustworthy. You know, like, he's a friend, it's all good.
- NK:** I think *Culture of Kings* was very important for a lot of people who hadn't got into hip-hop yet.
- D:** It shows that there is something for everyone on there. There's the harder stuff like Terminal Illness,

and then Urthboy's on number 2, and you know, it's got a wide range of groups. So it shows that it's not all one style of music when you play it to someone. It's like, 'Oh, that's different to the other tracks'.

S: So, it's not just battle raps, or staunch hip-hop.

D: Yeah, there's something for everyone.

TM: I notice on this [*Waking the Past*] that you've got a track with Pegz and Reason, called 'Now and Somewhere'?

D: That was initially on another compilation, it was on *Obesecity*.

S: And it got lots of airplay through that. I was tripped out hearing that on triple j, I was working at a fucking construction site, and then the track came on... it was weird, hey. Yeah, put those tools down for three minutes, and then you realise, 'Oh, this is over.'

TM: And you also did a track with Layla, which must have been back in the days when she was hardly known at all.

S: Yep. She came down from Perth with the dudes from *Culture of Kings 1*, and I just, met her through that and just became good friends, and asked her if she wanted to do a track and she said 'Yeah, for sure'. So, we'd done a track and she just said she'd put her vocals over that. She was pretty pissed off with how her vocals turned out, because we'd been in Melbourne for the *Culture of Kings* launch, and then we came back and she laid her lyrics straight away.

D: So she was pretty tired when she did it, not the best it could have been, but still good.

S: I'm sorry Layla, I'm sorry!

TM: And there's also a track with Jodi, is she Adelaide-based?

S: She's going out with DJ Debris from the Hilltop Hoods. That last track [on the album] with Jodi is about a mate of ours that died in a car crash. And we wrote lyrics, and she's a singer, and we asked if she wanted to sing on this track and she said 'Yeah', 'cause she's the sister of our best mate that died. And we got the brother, Scott, to beatbox at the end of it. And the uncanny thing is that their parents are deaf, so they've never been able to hear the track.

D: And we've performed it, oh, not too many times, but it's always pretty good when we perform it, it's the most passionate thing..

S: It's the only time I've seen crowds at Australian hip-hop cry, they just burst out crying.

TM: So have you always been close to Hilltop Hoods?

S: I grew up fuckin' two suburbs away from Suffa, and Dyems lived...

D: ...I've lived down at Seaford at the time, and I've known him since we were 15 or 16, and where they currently live, I lived with them for two or three years, with their manager PJ, it was a good time.

TM: They seem to have gone to the next level, touring overseas and whatnot.

S: Way past the next level.

D: I said to them way back, 'You guys are going to be the first ones to make it', 'cause they've always seemed to have something different about them as far as the level they want to do things on, as far as the way they make their music. And also the way they handle themselves, it's different to any other

group, and it just seems to be an uncanny knack of picking the right moment.

- D:** All credit to them, 'cause they've put in so much hard work, 'cause I was basically there when their first album *Back Once Again* was being recorded – like at the recording sessions, at their meetings when they were arranging how they were going to fund it, and put it out. I've just seen them come from that – even back then with PJ they were so, like, you could just tell they were going to be at the forefront of everything, and it's just a credit to them. They've persisted, they've had troubles, and been through so much themselves, like all of us, but they've come through really well.
- TM:** They seemed to have a lot of luck with 'The Nosebleed Section' and the Melanie sample, and all that, I mean that really got them a hit in a way.
- S:** That, 'The Nosebleed Section', was the first sort of hit that caught on, I don't know – people like Nova and Triple M picked it up. Whereas in Adelaide everyone was already into them, people were like 'Hilltop Hoods, fuckin' oath! 'Back Once Again', 'Left Foot Right Foot.' 'Cause Adelaide's so small, everyone knows everyone, 'Oh, do you know Derek?', and it's 'Oh, Derek, he used to live next door to that guy who moved up to Sydney'.
- D:** Adelaide's so small that within the town, everyone knows someone through someone – way different to here. In Adelaide, if you do something or say something, then in two weeks time, you hear it come back around from a completely different avenue. It's really a small country town, and it has its ups and downs for that reason. That's why the scene is so healthy, 'cause it's so small that you can bank on getting x amount of numbers.
- S:** Yeah, you fuckin' book these dudes, and 20 dudes from this fuckin' crew will rock down, and those dudes know these other fuckin' 20 dudes from this other side, and they are going to rock down, and those people are fuckin' mates with these cunts, and...
- TM:** It's all interconnected.
- S:** Fuckin' oath.
- TM:** Another person I've had some dealings with is Quro, who is obviously a major figure down in Adelaide.
- D:** Basically, I grew up going to shows with Madcab, DJ Agent 86 – Nigel, who DJs in Melbourne now – these guys, and Quro and Muskrat – all people like that. They, along with the Hoods, were like laying the foundation of what the Adelaide scene has been built on. I mean, there is lots of people who have helped do it, but yeah Quro, Madcab, Delta – all of them are the same group basically. It was essentially two groups doing lots of stuff, there was the Hoods and all of us doing stuff down South and Quro and everyone else – BVA from Mnemonic Ascent – doing their stuff.
- S:** Dudes like Madcab gave us our first show.
- D:** Quro gave me my first DJ gig.
- TM:** How did the name Terra Firma come about?
- S:** I was sitting in science class, and was fuckin' thinking of a name for the crew, and the science teacher said 'Blah blah blah terra firma,' and I said 'What?' and he said 'The land, terra, and firma, solid'. I was just like yeah, solid ground, that's basically what it's about, underground MCs, we were freestylers back then, and we used to go to this old club called Sticks where everyone used to converge on Thursday night. And that place didn't last that long, 'cause we weren't good at hip-hop, and people would go to the Lightning scene, where they'd be an open mic night, and dudes like Lost in Space and Quro used to rock up, and the Hoods and dudes from all the suburbs just going into

Civic for one night. Fuck man, at this place, Sticks, fights, stabbing, you name it, it was fuckin' hard, everyone from the other side of town used to converge on that Thursday night.

- D:** That Adelaide scene, the way I see it, was built on the back of graffiti writing crews. And then from that people have stemmed out to become DJs and MCs.
- S:** You hang around with crews, you know what I mean.
- D:** Yeah, like mid-90s, early-90s, the most prominent part of hip-hop culture was graffiti, by a long way, and now it's like the extreme and utter opposite. Now the focus is all on the MCing and whoever is up on stage. And the writers are still doing their thing, but...
- TM:** It's all in the background. That's almost exactly the same as what Lazy Grey was saying about the Brisbane scene as well, it all started with the graffiti and a bit of breaking. And the same thing happened in Sydney. And why [the title of the album] *Waking the Past?*
- S:** 'Cause it's a collection of all our old tracks, so it's just like making our past come awake. It was just a collection of tracks, there was no concept. We did tracks, we used to go around to Debris's house and record there. I'd be like, 'I got this loop off Perish', this dude called Perish from TTC which is Def Connection, and now's there is dudes like Rank, Cab and Massacre, and they are like the forefront in Adelaide. You look at Rank's stuff and this shit just blows your mind, you look at Massacre's stuff, the pieces are almost alive kind of thing. We used to work with Perish from his MPC, we used to bang away and go through his records and go 'Oh this song is wicked' and he'd go 'Oh, yeah, this record here, that was sampled by blah blah in blah blah...'
- D:** It's like him and Delta, if you wanna find out where something's come from or if you're a digger, they can play it, like any loop, they'll be like 'Oh yeah, it's been used heaps and heaps, he used that there and so on'. Him and Delta are both excellent like that. They can tell you who used it, what record, when it was released, how many copies were pressed – it makes you wonder if they get out much. It's their thing, you know.
- TM:** What have been your major influences, in terms of people who have steered you in particular directions?
- D:** For me, definitely Scott Flat, aka Flatface. Yeah, he was almost kind of an urban legend in Adelaide, like, basically when people like Cab and all the old graffiti writers were doing their thing, he was one of the few – there was him, and Risk from TTC, Perish – they were all getting into hip-hop when we were all scratching our arses in primary school. They were the people doing it, and basically, yeah, since the very first time I met him, I've got along really well, and best friends to this day, and he's given me so much good advice and guidance over the years. Especially with the *Culture of Kings* releases, what to do and what not to do, if he thinks something is wack he's going to tell me, he's always been 100 percent honest. And he's given so much to the scene, like, he made up the Hilltop Hoods name, he started and was part of Finger Lickin' Good, which was with Quro and Groove Terminator and that. Like, he's the whole backbone of the whole Adelaide scene, and he's basically started Certified Wise, which is basically a big collective of all of us. That would be my one person, if I have to single out one person.
- S:** Mine would be a tape by Public Enemy, and 'Fuck the Police'. I got that in year five when I moved from Christians Beach to Abbotsford Park, on opposite sides of town, [the latter] a bit more inland, up into the hills, and as soon as we heard Public Enemy, the whole class would be chanting 'Fuck let me go', because that's what we thought they said, you know it's actually 'Yo bumrush the show', but we were like 'Fuck let me go', yeah my whole class was screaming before lesson started. So I used to write by myself, just shit rhymes in an American accent, 'cause I'd never met any of these dudes

before, and then just kept doing it, yeah, and through travels you know, you kept meeting dudes and having cyphers. When I was about 16 and onwards, I took it a bit more serious, started going into battles and losing a lot, learning a lot, and then I started production.

TM: And there was that track you did, 'Terminal Illness' with Case, is that right?

S: Yep, Case and Illogic. Yeah, Raph used to live in Newcastle and I met him through them, and ended up hooking up on a track with them.

TM: And that's Raph who's now with Mnemonic Accent?

D: No, different Raph. Perhaps they should draw pistols for the name, or swords at sunset.

TM: What do you think is particularly distinctive about the Adelaide scene? What are the main characteristics of the scene?

D: I think it's the uphill standard.

S: Well, we're all from different backgrounds, but we all know each other, do you know what I mean, and we don't sound like each other. You can fuckin' chuck on one of our tracks and go 'Yeah, that's Terra Firma,' or you can chuck on a Funkoars track and go 'Yeah, that's Funkoars', or you can chuck an After Hours track on and know it's After Hours. We're all mates and we all hang around with each other, but we sound nothing like each other. Diversity in Adelaide is the whole thing.

NK: It's like community and diversity.

S: Yeah, whoever you are, you've got your own style.

D: It's really healthy as well, because you always know that people are working on stuff, especially with the Certified crew, you know everyone within it is going to release an album on their own. You'll always know that people are working on stuff, and that's healthy...

S: Friendly competitiveness. Not even competition, but...

D: Who's going to come out with the better album, or the better track.

S: It's not even that, it's about pushing the boundaries, you know what I mean, it's not about going 'I'm just gonna sit here and kick this simple syllable pattern and do these freestyles, and make these full-on beats, and I'm happy with that'. It's not like that, everyone is trying to get better and better, it's where you learn a thousand lessons. Everyday I sit in my studio and I learn something new, 'Fuck, I should have cued that like that,' and the next day I'm like 'Shit, I should have painted that like that'. And you sit there, and everyone works with each other, I'll ring up Debris or Reflux or whoever, and go 'Man, fucking Logic is pissing me off. Fuckin', I've got this weird delay,' and they go, 'Dude, turn this off and this on and do this'. And another day I'll ring them and go 'Fuck, I've just worked out this shit on Logic, fuckin' hold down Control and Alt and chop this up like this'. Do you know what I mean, we are all trying to better it, you know, 'cause hip-hop is always evolving. If you listen to shit from 1988 compared to shit that was done in 1998, to shit that is getting done in 2008, it's a whole fucking different world. Evolution, if you don't keep evolving with it, you get left behind.

TM: So you do the main production duties?

S: Yeah.

D: Well yeah, I don't do anything, I seem to touch the computer and it will freeze. Like I've just got the knack of stuffing things up.

- S:** I come back, and I just know he's been on my computer, 'Dyems, what have you fucking done to it?' 'Nothing man, there was this fatal error, and so I just switched it off and I spilt some bourbon on it'.
- D:** I'm not that bad. He's got like 800 beats just sitting there, he's just a machine. I come around most days at the moment, but if I don't come around for a week, and he's done like 20 more beats. I don't know; he needs a girlfriend.
- S:** When I come home, instead of sitting in front of the TV and zoning out, I go to my studio, sit down, I've got heaps of fuckin' records. I've picked up records from the biggest fuckin' freako at this garage sale. I picked up five boxes for 400 bucks and I sold one of the records for \$170. And dudes are like 'Oh, you've got this! This has been used on this, and this dude used to do this but then he left because his wife'. It was like, I broke up with my chick the night before, because she didn't like me smoking, so I quit smoking, and then I woke up in the morning, and thought 'Fuck this, I'm starting smoking again'. I slept in my jeans and that, so I got up and drove down to the shops, and just up from my house was this garage sale, I thought 'I'll drop by on the way back'. Got my orange juice, and pack of cigarettes and my pants were falling down 'cause I didn't have a belt. Fuckin' drove back and I walked in and go 'Do you have any records?' and he goes 'Oh, what, for sampling?' – 'Yes' – and he goes 'Come back here!' and he pulls out five boxes of record library stuff. I said, 'How much do you want?' and he was like 'I don't know, three or four hundred dollars,' and I said 'I'll give you 400 right now.' So he was stoked, but I was even more stoked, got home...
- D:** It was like four or five boxes of stuff, and then of the real valuable ones it was the complete volume set, and it's such a rare find.
- S:** No one believed me. I found a record library.
- D:** And the other story, the records that you picked up from the old couple, a van load of records.
- S:** Oh, fuck.
- D:** This is full on.
- S:** I stopped work 'cause I wasn't feeling too well, so I was driving home and I saw this dingy-arse fuckin' second-hand store on the side of the road on the other side of town where I don't live and don't hang around. I stopped and had a look through and he had heaps of records, and I looked through some of them, bought a few and was walking out and this couple goes 'oh, do you buy records?' and I was like 'Yeah'. And they go, 'Oh, we go to record auctions and we get big boxes full, if you want to buy one for eight dollars, we'll get you a box'. And I was like 'No worries', gave them my phone number. And in the end the shop owner sold up, and they got all his records I think, so they fuckin' rang me up one day and said 'Yeah, we got all those records, do you want to come down and have a look before we send them off'. So I went down there with Chris from After Hours, and she's just pulled out all these boxes, I don't know how many fuckin' records there were.
- D:** Thousands. It's like a Toyota Hilux, just full.
- S:** Unbelievable, so it's just like 'Where the fuck do we start?' We started going through them and then the dude just goes 'Make me an offer for all of them?' And I go 'An offer for all of them?! I wouldn't know where to start mate'. He says, 'How much you got in your wallet,' – 'I don't know, 70 bucks'. – and he says 'That'll do'. Sweet as, rang up some boys, got two vans down there and packed them up box for box.
- D:** But now we've got like 100 Kamahl records, so if you want a Kamahl record, you know where to come, hey.

S: Fuck, do you know how many records that dudes put out? I can't believe it, fuck.

NK: Are they all different releases?

D: Yep, you name it, Kamahl's greatest hits, rarest hits, you name it. But there was heaps of good stuff in the vans as well. Just a great find.

S: You know, right place at the right time.

NK: Well that's it, that's how it goes with those things. If you hadn't been going down to start your smoking habit again...

S: Yeah, shit hey.