

# LOCAL NOISE

## Urthboy & Ozi Batla

13/10/04, UTS.

Urthboy, Ozi Batla, Tony Mitchell, Nick Keys.

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### Summary:

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Urthboy and Ozi Batla are two of The Herd’s MCs, and members of the Elephant Traks record label. They both have other endeavours, Urthboy with two solo albums so far (*Distant Sense of Random Menace*, 2004 and *The Signal*, 2007) and Ozi Batla with his group, Astronomy Class (*Exit Strategy*, 2006). In this interview, conducted in 2004, Urthboy and Batla talk about the reaction to The Herd’s second album, *An Elephant Never Forgets*, particularly the lucid, political tracks ‘77%’ and ‘Burn Down the Parliament’. They talked about their discomfort as being pigeonholed as straight-up political rappers, commenting on the innateness of politics in everyday life and the desire to express opinion and to encourage dialogue in art rather than engaging in polemics. They also talked about the way that The Herd and Elephant Traks work as collectives, and the idiosyncrasies of the Australian hip-hop scene: its fans, artists, styles and practices.

### 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.

**U:** Urthboy

**OB:** Ozi Batla

**TM:** Tony Mitchell

**NK:** Nick Keys

**TM:** The Herd's now got this huge reputation for being a militant, political group, but you obviously do lots of other things as well?

**U:** I don't know about militant...

**OB:** Maybe after Saturday's result [Howard's re-election].

**TM:** You organised things like Coalition of the Illin' and stuff like that in the past, and were involved in the Rock Against Howard thing, and at the same time have probably been one of the most popular hip-hop groups in terms of sales.

**U:** Yeah, we're one of them I think, definitely we're one of them. I think we've maybe got a bit of connection with a lot of the hip-hop scene, and we also have a big connection with people who are really interested in politics, and I think that we've probably got a few people into hip-hop from that way. But, I guess, like with Coalition of the Illin' that's kind of pretty representative of us as a whole in that it references politics, and comments upon what's going on at the moment. But it's also a little bit more light-hearted as well, I don't think there was any attempt to really be ultra-serious, and definitely no attempt to be militant in that regard. Not that I'm saying there's a problem with using militancy, but I think that's always been the way we try to get across our politics and our hip-hop.

**TM:** But at the same time you are raising people's awareness, certainly in Australia, of political issues. And there's a sense in which a lot of hip-hop has kind of lost that, that conscious element that was there in the early days of American hip-hop, and now it's only people like Spearhead who seem to continue that in any kind of way.

**U:** I don't know about Spearhead... I think that Michael Franti does a lot of great stuff, and he does keep consistently coming up with political messages. But when we played a gig with them, we were all a little bit turned off by how watered down it was, and happy and joyous it was. It didn't have stuff like the message at the start...

**TM:** Oh sure, yeah it was all very strong at the start in the 80s, but it's lost its bite.

**U:** I think a lot of the hip-hop before then was very light-hearted, and didn't have that stronger message as well. There were those artists that came through, particularly when groups like Public Enemy took it up, they were really strong about it. But even Kool Herc and the Flash movement, I mean, they did do the message and stuff, but it was very much the DJ/MC thing where there was lots of hyping for a live format, rather than having anything that was commenting much more broadly.

**TM:** Groups like Public Enemy and N.W.A had an enormous international influence as well, didn't they, and were perceived as being very politicised and socially conscious...

**OB:** N.W.A created a monster, really. Yeah it was political in itself, but it went from being that to just being an extension of consumerism in America. But I think probably in the last couple of years some people have started to say some things, like even party hip-hop like Jurassic 5 drop some pretty conscious stuff. But there seems to be a belief that you can't do a whole album of it unless you're someone like Paris or Public Enemy. In terms of Australian hip-hop, I see my writing as much more of a following on from Midnight Oil. There's no real reference point for Australian hip-hop in terms of trying to be political.

**TM:** In one of the interviews I read, I think it was Dale [Rok Poshtya, bass player from The Herd] who was talking about storytelling, and relating hip-hop to things like bush ballads and stuff, and these Australian traditions of storytelling. Would you say that's a kind of accurate precedent for what you're doing in some way?

**OB:** Yeah I guess, in some way. I don't think we listen to many bush ballads, except maybe Simon who's a big fan of Mutiny and I'm quite a fan of Red Gum. But all the techniques have been taken from American hip-hop, and the stories, if they fall into that sort of lineage, then it's sort of by accident more than anything else, or just a funny coincidence with the content and what we write about, being in Australia, but the style is fully American.

**U:** I think in some ways it would be nice to romanticise it as an evolution of the bush ballad, or some sort of development of the bush ballad, but it's as much bush ballad as any kind of songwriting or any folk music or rock n' roll.

**TM:** What about someone like Ted Egan? Any impact?

**OB:** I'm quite partial to a bit of John Williamson every now and then, and I get shot down in flames for it...

**NK:** How about Kevin Bloody Wilson?!

**OB:** A lot of the more yobbo hip-hop probably ties into that sort of lineage very well.

**U:** And that's not being totally derogatory either, you know, he's got his space. I remember when I was growing up and I was about 17 or 18 growing up in the Blue Mountains, Kevin Bloody Wilson coming to town was a huge event, I remember he played at the RSL and everyone would go along and watch it. It was almost a sort of a rite of passage if you'd turned 18 or had fake ID. You go along and check him out, and he'd have his own very uniquely Australian way of telling a story which everyone would completely love. And I think that in a lot of ways that forms a lot of the hip-hop that comes out of Australia.

**OB:** Bias B is a good example, a very dry humour, he's very funny if you take him the right way, if you're not offended or whatever by it, then it's quite funny. Fat Face, Dazastah [from Downsyde], there are some funny dudes out there.

**TM:** You've mentioned, in terms of American influences that A Tribe Called Quest was one of the main influence. What was it about them?

**U:** I used to listen to their first two albums and to a certain extent their third one and it was just so smooth, and it wasn't aggressive. It was at a younger age for me and I was into the aggressive stuff, we all were, because I think you just naturally gravitate to that sort of outlet of anger and you can kind of relate to it even if the specific examples are way away from you, like gang violence and murder and whatnot. But Tribe were much more chilled and something you could get down with. Consequently I just listened to them non-stop.

**OB:** Their music is pretty infectious and nice and light-hearted. Everything was a bit more innocent then I think, the whole scene in the States, LL Cool J and EPMB and even like the harder stuff back then seems less offensive to me now than say Jake-1 and Ja Rule and all that shit. They're not swearing, they're not being verbally offensive, but the whole idea of it is so nihilistic and crass and shallow that, I don't know, all the stuff previous was so fresh to my ears. It was completely different.

**TM:** The obvious question about use of swearing: you seem to get more attention for using the c-word than for anything else, there was that big debate on triple j as a result. Was that good attention as far

as you were concerned?

- OB:** Yeah, I guess so. People are going to take from whatever you do what they want anyway, so, it was a bit frustrating when we had a girl up the front at a Canberra show, and we'd just got on stage, and she yelled 'Play the 'cunt' song!' It's like 'What, are you listening to the words?' But yeah, any publicity is good publicity.
- NK:** I remember a dude at one of the shows you did at the Gaelic club who was just drunk off his face, and someone in the band was wearing a 'Free the refugees' t-shirt, and this dude yells out 'Fuck the refugees', and you [Ozi Batla] came back and said 'Yeah, let's all fuck each other till there is no colour left', which I thought was a mad thing to say, but you know, it's the same thing: a guy jumping around to Oz hip-hop and The Herd down the front and it's like 'Have you listened to a single word?!'
- U:** Yeah, that happens on a semi-regular basis.
- TM:** It used to be the same with Midnight Oil, they'd get all these kids from the suburbs who didn't give a damn about what they were talking about, they were just into the music.
- OB:** And more recently, Frenzal Rhomb, we were having a chat about that when we were on tour. Half [of their fans] have no concept about the social message behind Frenzal Rhomb's music.
- U:** Half the time that's generally a cause and effect thing as well. It's true, you know, those guys are really politically articulate and a lot of their songs are simplified, but quite direct in a lot of ways. I mean, on the other hand they've got their Russell Crowe songs. Yeah, they were saying that the gigs we did with them recently were some of the first gigs – I'm sure this is an exaggeration – where they haven't just had lots of fights outside. A lot of their crowd is about getting pissed as, having a blue, and that's the night, have a bit of a mosh.
- OB:** And the kids in Adelaide were all wearing like old Frenzal Rhomb shirts, so they'd been fans for ever, and Lindsay the lead guitarist had to stop them making off with a whole box of 'Rock against Howard' hoodies.
- TM:** Oh my god, what were they going to do with them?
- OB:** I was going to say, you know, 'Don't you understand, the money is not going to us'.
- U:** I guess in a broader sense that's the difference between your moral views and your actions. Like right-wing Christians who are really religious but support wars that they don't fully understand.
- OB:** Yeah, everything's really disjointed, hey. There's no sort of linear paths between values sets anymore I think. I just encountered it yesterday; being the masochist that I am, I went online to look at the Oz hip-hop board to have a look at what people were saying about the election [federal election in which Howard government got re-elected for a third term], and there was stuff in there like 'David Hicks is an animal, he should be put down', and 'If I was in charge of refugee policy I'd just shoot them all as they arrived'.
- U:** These are often 15-year-olds as well. But it's true you know, I think there is an underlying attitude in hip-hop that is a bit lowest common denominator. It's very much a focus on the self as opposed to any community views and that's often because a lot of people have different backgrounds and the concerns that you have in your upbringing are very different from the concerns someone else may have. Not to condone anything, but...
- OB:** It's close to condoning though, and I know you're not, but it's the first thing everyone always says is 'backgrounds' and that's fair enough, but, you get to a certain point where you've got to take respon-

sibility for your opinions and your actions.

**U:** Yeah, absolutely. And that's the thing about the hip-hop side is that you do have these people that put aliases that put everyone on equal footing, but then you have some kid who's 15 going on seven, or 15 going on two.

**TM:** Why do you think these kids are getting into hip-hop?

**OB:** Probably the same reason we did.

**TM:** The aggression?

**OB:** Yep.

**U:** There are a lot of artists out there who are really just privileged middle-class white kids who have grown up in the States. And it seems that in some areas you're just as likely to experience a harsh environment, even if you're in a privileged area. The difference between ghettos and nice suburbs seems to be only a few blocks in some cities over there. But they're talking about gangbanging, and guns and violence and sex and gore and you know, just horror-core stuff. And I can't get down with it at all, which makes me think sometimes I am a bit more conservative these days, but then I think, this is probably the sort of thing I would have loved when I was 14 or 15. Just complete fantasy stuff.

**OB:** We were listening to the Geto Boys.

**U:** Exactly. Couldn't get enough of it. And the more violent it got, the more you'd shout it out, and it didn't seem strange to me. It seems a little stranger now. It didn't seem strange then, it made perfect sense.

**TM:** Does this force you into a bit of a role of responsibility, do you kind of feel that you've got to try and prevent or try and avoid that sort of stuff happening?

**OB:** No. I think the big challenge for Australian hip-hop is for it to expand on those 3000 people who will always buy the CD. The question people have to ask themselves is, who are the other 35 000 odd people who bought the Hilltop Hoods album? It's such a small insular and at times disturbingly ignorant little slice of Australia that I think we'd just be banging our heads against the wall trying to get through to those 15-year-old kids. Yeah, I don't know. There's always that responsibility of just trying to keep it true, even though we don't focus on that as much as a lot of acts do, I think it's always in the back of everyone's mind – probably whatever art form it is – that if they really love the art form that they're attempting or drawing influences from then, you know, everyone is always really quite sensitive about other people's perceptions in that culture or community. I think that's the only responsibility, and obviously not to sell out is the other one. But that is pretty unlikely. And I'd say to hopefully bring more people in and that'll change the culture of it, or it'll make that more ignorant style of the culture a bit more isolated. I don't know, to tell you the truth, sometimes I don't feel like we're part of the community that's there at all. And neither are a lot of the artists we know, and even the artists that are respected in that community just throw their hands up and go 'Look, I stopped trying to deal on that level with those fans a long time'.

**TM:** So, you're talking like Hilltop Hoods and 1200 Techniques and people like that?

**OB:** More like Koolism and Mnemonic Ascent and Ser Rec.

**U:** I'd say groups like 1200 Techniques would definitely, probably more than anyone else, hold out views, they'd be crucified. The Hoods, well probably no one has had as much love as them, and I've had little chats with those guys and they're still being just as alienated from the vast majority of the scene as anyone. As far as responsibility goes, I don't think there should be any responsibility to try

and curb the popularity of acts like Necro or groups doing the same sort of thing. Because that's like saying that we have to write five more hardcore political albums. If we go and we're sitting there writing, and it's not political, then it's just not political. But it will still be doing what we are supposed to be doing as according to what's going on in our head at the time. I think an artist starts really making mistakes when they start doing things they feel obliged to do.

**NK:** I think a few of those questions that were asked before the cypher up in Newcastle – well this is a caricature of the question – ‘Why aren't there chicks on the panel?’, questions about misogyny and accent and all that kind of stuff, and Ciecmate said it pretty well when he said that you can't expect hip-hop to be all these things straight-up or instantaneously. You can't ask artists to suddenly become what your politically correct, left-wing views think it should be.

**OB:** Yeah, the same thing happened last year. The main problem is that the panel is after the battle and you know, the Writers Festival is on at the same time, and for a lot of people it's the first serious introduction to live hip-hop and most battles are appalling, they are just terrible, entertainment-wise, content-wise, skills-wise, just the whole thing is just terrible. And that's what those people take away from it. ‘Why are you calling each other faggots?’ and that only happens in battles, pretty much.

**NK:** It was a bad one as well.

**OB:** Oh, just terrible.

**U:** Yeah, it was one of the worst.

**TM:** I think it's probably more of an intellectual perception, myself included, I guess we would like hip-hop to be cleaner and more politically aware and more socially conscious and that kind of thing. And obviously that's unrealistic, you know, there are certain hopes and aspirations there for hip-hop, ‘Wow, this is a wonderful opportunity to be expressing the views of the underprivileged, the views of the oppressed and disenfranchised in really articulate ways’. But it just doesn't correspond to reality at all.

**OB:** Yeah, all those disenfranchised people who we want the music to speak for, when they speak, they don't say what we want to hear.

**NK:** Should we have expected them to say anything in the first place is then the question that gets raised?

**OB:** Yeah, you can't.

**TM:** So yeah, the whole party aspect of hip-hop is obviously really important, you know, getting out there and having a good time. I mean, I'm very much an outsider, but one thing that I constantly notice is the incredibly strong community that has built in Australian hip-hop. You guys and TZU and Up-shot, you know, different people sort of merge together and mesh together and work together and hang out, this incredible kind of collaboration that goes on.

**OB:** Yeah, it's just like-minded people I guess, and that's the cool thing about music and art in general, is that someone can produce a work of art and you can go ‘I know that I'm going to get along with that person. We have something in common and we could possibly be complementary’. So it makes it pretty easy, I can listen to a track and think ‘OK, I'm not really coming from a place that those guys are’, so I'm not going to go around chasing a phone number to call ‘em up. And obviously TZU and Koolism, they're just a bunch of dudes. There are a lot of really good people, some who have been doing it forever, some for only a few years.

**TM:** And my perception too is that there is a lot of university-educated people involved, a lot of middle class people in lots of ways, which is not being judgemental, it's certainly not the disenfranchised.

- OB:** Yeah, I guess certain people are involved, but you know, I think the origins of Aussie stuff were always suburbia and that's still where a big chunk is going and coming from. Yeah, maybe the beers and bongs raps are an extension of the working class tales, or bludges tales, or whoever.
- TM:** I think this whole connection with place has always been incredibly strong in hip-hop, particularly in the US scene, but the origins of the Sydney scene are always seen as being western suburbs – Auburn – and the early days of breakdancing in the park, which almost seems to have got mythologised now hasn't it as a kind of origin for Sydney hip-hop?
- U:** 'Cause a lot of the hip-hop in Australia, a lot of stuff that was released came from those areas, even the likes of Case, all the way back in the 80s, you know, south-west Sydney. I don't know how much it's been mythologised yet, I think maybe in a few people's eyes it has. Perhaps in a number of years when hip-hop continues to get big – everyone talks about how big hip-hop is now but relatively it's still tiny. Maybe it will be mythologised more and more.
- TM:** It's getting bigger though, It's getting harder and harder to keep track of it I find. New crews are emerging all the time, new albums coming out, and it's just spreading. But no, I was referring to an article I saw a few years ago, written by Miguel, about how he thought Sydney hip-hop had sort of shifted from the western suburbs to the inner-city. He saw it as being really quite noticeable; it would have been in the mid-90s.
- OB:** That's right, and R 'n' B is the hip-hop of Australian suburbs. The demographic that would be listening to hip-hop in other countries has started listening to R 'n' B and going to R 'n' B clubs. There's always been that sort of dissonance because all the venues are in the city and all the crews are all over the place. There is a few people, Dave from GPS has been doing a lot to build some bridges in that way. There's always been people trying to re-connect all those crews, Mark Pollard is another example. You know, Dave has put on weekly battles, and shifts it around pubs all over the city and was doing it over in Balmain for a while 'cause he figured it was easier for people from the West to get to. He did some stuff in Homebush, you know, he's ended up at the Lansdowne now, up the road. It's funny like that. There's sort of structural reasons why it's occurred like that, licensing laws and that.
- TM:** It seems now that you've got the Gaelic Club, and the Marquee and Next Level and 2SER, and they're all pretty central city, you know, kind of focal points for the hip-hop scene in lots of ways.
- OB:** Yeah, the only weekly night that there's ever been, or at least recently, was Step Forward, which had a good vibe for many years.
- U:** I think a lot of people moved into town for those reasons and a lot of people grew up in a lot of inner city areas. But I also think there's a bit of resentment from the western suburbs in that a lot of the acts that are in the city are getting more prominence rather than the old way it went where they were the only people doing things – out west. And that links straight in with all those old hip-hop themes of your socio-economic background. It's easy to take the piss out of rich kids, and you won't see any crews from the north shore admitting they're from the north shore. Bliss n' Eso are from the north shore, yet those guys would be at pains to acknowledge it, just because it's seen as a huge weakness in Australia.
- OB:** I don't know. Blaze has always pretty up front about it...
- U:** Yeah, but he's always copped shit for it, for being the product of that...
- TM:** I was talking to Morganics and he talked about going to some of the gigs in Penrith in the early days, he said he felt that he was at a kind of Nuremburg rally, there was so many kind of restrictions and this pressure to wear the right clothes. He said he found it really oppressive.

**U:** Wear the right clothes, really? We'd be screwed.

**OB:** Oh we are.

**TM:** This was back in late 80s, I don't think it happens anymore.

**OB:** Oh, I think it does. You want to get into it, so you want to adopt all the codes of the culture. Especially when you're younger, you're pretty vulnerable to criticism as well.

**U:** Hip-hop, particularly in this country, I think the pressure to conform is pretty high, I would say. As it diversifies, there's lots more comfort zones and people can ally with people who are like-minded, as you do quite naturally as a human I think. But yeah, I think the pressure to conform is as strong now as ever, I mean I wasn't around in the 80s but...

**OB:** There's a big barrier you have to cross as well with production values and artwork and that. There's almost this idea that if something sounds good then it's commercial. Like if it actually sounds pleasing to the ear, then it's commercial, and I think a lot of people get hung up on that. It's the same way people are into two-minute punk songs, you know, albums by bands who have taken a day to record, just thrashed it out, and that's it, no remixing, no nothing, it's got to be raw. That's quite strong that rawness, I think people get props sometimes where they aren't necessarily musically merited 'cause it seems authentic and gritty. It is gritty, you know, it was recorded on crappy equipment, the MCs hadn't learnt their raps properly and the DJ stuffs up his scratches and the artwork is terrible and you know. But then if you do something that looks really nice and sounds good, even if it's super funky or whatever, people criticise it. That's why maybe Koolism haven't got as much love as they deserve, cause Hau's always on point, Danielsan is an incredible producer and I think a lot of people resent it.

**TM:** So it's this notion of authenticity then, this notion of keeping it raw and low-fi.

**OB:** Yeah, there's definitely a movement like that. But then in the past couple of years there's been stuff coming out that's of a really high standard. And then when you see artists hooking up with producers who have put out two or three albums and are legends in the scene and then they got something that sounds nice as well, the acceptance is starting to come through I think. You know, like, Lazy Grey has very beautiful production, and Bias B's album.

**U:** Yeah, authenticity is a big issue, and it's subjective opinion, it's such a subjective thing. Authenticity is a big issue, whether it's real or imagined, in Australian hip-hop.

**TM:** Can you talk a bit about the Peanut Spell, the show you did on 2SER for a while?

**U:** Yeah we finished up a couple of weeks ago after five years or so. When I first moved to Sydney a couple of years before we started I immediately went to 2SER and inquired about doing a show and I'd done radio in the [Blue] Mountains for a few years on a little community radio station called 2Blu FM. And I was told you don't get to do a show for a year or two years, and that depends on if the show is good enough conceptually. But then with Elephant Traks and the stuff we were doing I guess we got in the back door or the side door, or through the window or the ceiling. But the original premise of it was to do unreleased music in a similar vein to the way we ran our label in that we weren't really discriminating on any style. Of course we were a little bit more inclined to play something along the lines of hip-hop than we would have ever done for a rock demo or something. That was the premise of the show and we ran it fairly haphazardly. A couple of years ago we started doing release music as well, simply 'cause there's wasn't enough music to do all across the board, of all genres. And of course, when you're dealing with unreleased music you're dealing with lots of shit as well, so in order to play a half reasonable show we had to play some release stuff. And then this year we went and expanded it to all genres and started playing everything, in the hope that we

would reinvigorate the show and make it interesting for us, but it didn't work. That coupled with very busy timetables, we let it go.

**TM:** Is it true to say that The Herd has always been influenced by all sorts of different genres of music, rather than just hip-hop?

**U:** Yeah, absolutely.

**TM:** To take that a step further it seems that a lot of Australian groups are like that, I'm thinking of someone like Curse ov Dialect, they've got this immense input of world music and ethnic musics from all over the place. So many groups seem to have this kind of rock-influence as well – like being influenced by people like Midnight Oil etc. – and perhaps if there's something that's really distinctive about Australian hip-hop it is that, the fact that it's not restricted to the four elements, that it's actually looking much broader, in a much boarder way at other kinds of music, not closing itself down to other genres of music.

**OB:** Yeah, I think it would depend on who you asked, as well. A lot of people are pretty staunch about their four elements and would consider a band like Curse ov Dialect or The Herd to not really be hip-hop at all. But then I think that hip-hop has been pretty open to all types of music and influences throughout its whole history. I guess one of the things I noticed this year was a rise in the live thing. It just seems like I woke up one day and there was a dozen live bands making hip-hop. That's a particularly Australian take on it, 'cause you know, audiences and listeners are used to seeing a band when they go out, not necessarily hip-hop followers, but everyone else. I think that will keep getting stronger, you know the Resin Dogs already did it, they were probably the first people to go big with that kind of sound. Some of their songs are hip-hop, some are funk tunes. But then again, producers have always sampled everything from harpsichords to Greek folk tunes or whatever.

**TM:** It seems to me that The Roots had a big impact on that too, showing that it was possible for hip-hop...

**U:** Yeah, the world over.

**TM:** And I think in the early days, MetaBass had a live band as well.

**OB:** Yeah, MetaBass were always live.

**TM:** And of course, Culture Connect in Darwin, which The Herd has a connection with don't they?

**OB:** Yeah, we've done a couple of gigs and hung out with them a fair bit, they're good lads. We're just hanging for them to get their shit together and move to Brisbane. That's the idea, so they can actually put out something. Yeah, 'cause they're all a bit scattered.

**U:** Darwin lifestyle.

**OB:** But also Liam's been in Adelaide for years, and the percussionist, the drummer, is part of Drum Drum, an Indonesian fusion orchestra, so they're really busy. Yeah, they're good.

**TM:** I saw them play in Adelaide about three years ago, there was a big Indigenous conference about hip-hop and Indigenous culture and they were part of that. But hasn't someone from The Herd actually been working in Darwin quite a bit?

**OB:** Two members are up there now. Byron [Toefu], the guitarist and singer, he's been up there for years, and Snapsuit, the producer, has moved up there recently.

**TM:** And among other things, have they been running workshops?

**OB:** Byron has been, that's his full-time gig.

**U:** That's his bread and butter.

**OB:** The whole workshop scene is quite locked down in Australia, there are only so many gigs...

**TM:** And Morganics gets most of them I think.

**OB:** Yeah, amongst other people, you know Sista Native, and Byron and Joel [Joelistics] down in Melbourne from TZU. Yeah, we were up there earlier this year, and it's got a nice innocence and naivety about it still, all the people practicing, just that real excitement.

**U:** Yeah, there's only two hip-hop crews in town and lots of stragglers and lots of MCs and stuff, but it seems the groups that stick together that are within cooee of each other's genres. Like Byron's group, Cinco Loco, play with Culture Connect and they don't really go to far into any hip-hop stuff, although it does seem to be a backbone of the production, although they're equally kind of electronic and reggae influenced. But Culture Connect are more hip-hop and they do gigs together all the time. You don't have the luxury of being a purist.

**TM:** And there is a new Herd album on the way?

**OB:** It's in conceptual stage.

**U:** We've only just gotten a studio, which as you may imagine is just an absolute bitch of a thing to find in Sydney. To pay rent on a place and have it anywhere close to ideal is...yeah...it's luck, it's a case of stumbling into somewhere you score lucky with. But if you go through the normal channels it's really hard to find a space. And none of us have been looking full-time for it, but we've been pretty aware, inquiring for quite a while and we've recently just got a space that is reasonably affordable for us, and that will change everything about the way that we write music. So the next album is going to be pretty exciting, 'cause we seem to have done pretty well with a fairly scattered creative process. Though all of us have always had a lot of input, it's just never been super cohesive in the way we write. Sometimes it comes out sounding cohesive which is cool, but this next album, it's going to be fun.

**TM:** Yeah, because there is a lot of diversity in the first two albums, which seems to come from so many different people working in different contexts.

**OB:** That's something we're going to try and consciously keep there, 'cause Tim [Urthboy] and I can get our more hip-hop centric ideas and we get our kick from doing our own music and also I think we have fans who would be disappointed now if we put out a really sort of staunchly Aussie hip-hop album, I think they'd be disappointed.

**U:** It's funny though because you meet people when you're on the road, you don't meet people when you're in town. When you get on the road, whether it's a gig in town, or in another town, that's where you actually get to talk to people who bought the album, or who are fans. And for a lot of them, we are the first hip-hop group that they got into, so I think that in some ways, sometimes the politics get lost, I mean the only radio songs we've ever had have been hip-hop tracks.

**OB:** 'Burn Down the Parliament'. That's a dancehall tune.

**U:** Yeah, it's different production-wise. I guess as the project's grown and developed we've started to realise that it sort of has it's own character in some ways, that you've been the creator of and in some ways which you don't have any control of. Which is wrong, 'cause you do have control, but to a certain extent you don't. Personally speaking, I don't really understand what the whole project means until well after the fact, and you start to get an insight into what people think and then that starts to

formulate what the whole project means. It's not just a thing that you make yourself and then it's gone, it's pretty interactive. But yeah, we can go and record any hip-hop tracks and do battle tracks and have our own space and concentrate The Herd on what The Herd is.

**OB:** One thing I'd definitely like to do on the next album is make it – 'cause from the last album, one of the things that I was most happy about was that it was a soundtrack and an inspiration for a lot of really active people, or activists – I think that's really important. I think I might have had some kind of funny belief that the music could change people's opinions, but I'm starting to feel that it can't really. So basically we'll just express ourselves and yeah, when people tell me that we used to listen to 'Burn Down the Parliament' every morning before we went out to do our actions on this toxic waste dump up in the Gold Coast, and Monkey Marc and Izzy who are Combat Wombat, two of the most incredible people I know, playing '77%' at a desert doof and having people going crazy... That's really important to me.

**U:** That's part of the hindsight perspective you get on what it means. Like I have to say similarly, you take to some staunch hip-hoppers, some people are into what we're doing, some people aren't, but those people have no influence, or close to no influence on the things I want to cover, and want to write about that the people that Batla was just saying who go 'OK'. It's music that fuels them on, and gives them something to be motivated by, that sort of thing makes you write a thousand songs.

**TM:** Yeah, I think that the videos too, for both '77%' and 'Burn Down the Parliament'. I saw them both first on *Rage* and I thought that was a really important event and I've actually shown them in my lectures to students as an example of politically-committed hip-hop. Particularly '77%', I mean it's a great video. Have you made other videos?

**OB:** There's one for 'Scallops' and Tim's got two videos for the new singles of his new album [*Distant Sense of Random Menace*].

**TM:** Have they been shown on *Rage* yet?

**U:** Yeah, 'Come Around' was the first song, which has been played a bunch of times, and we just released the second song, which has just gone to air.

**NK:** What's the second single?

**U:** 'No Rider'.

**NK:** That one has a chance of blowing up.

**U:** You never know. It's a weird thing.

**NK:** Yeah, that's what DJ Reflux from the Funkoars was saying at the first Q & A in Newy that you boys weren't at. They were talking about how the Hoods blew up and Reflux was saying that 'At the end of the day it still came down to one sample off one song', and it was that sample off 'The Nose-bleed Section' and Nova decides to play it. So the difference between the Hoods blowing up and the Hoods being the loved crew that's been hustling for ten years is one sample.

**U:** Yeah, absolutely. I've found since releasing my album, in pure reality, is that it is completely out of your hands. I mean you know sometimes if you've got a song that's going to pop out of the noise and actually stand out like '77%' did. I think 'Burn Down the Parliament' did in many ways achieved better things, like it seemed to do other little things but '77%' got out there, obviously for many reasons but you certainly can't assume anything based on how songs are going to go.

**OB:** Yeah, we knew we were going to do that track, and that was I think the fourth version. I initially had a beat that I produced, this is back when we were still Daysteam 5000 and Dale used to play the bass

alone. And we did it live, and we just thought 'Fuck it', that's the only way that it sounded right so far so we went for that. Yeah, it's pretty hard to say what's going to be big. In retrospect, you can say, 'Oh, it's because we used the bass line, so even if they don't know the song, they know it somewhere in the back of their head'. We swear a lot, it's angry and noisy, and it's all done live as well. And it was probably at the right time.

**U:** I think there are many factors that go in on it. Some songs that are just catchy as hell, you just know they're going to go well, like 'The Nosebleed Section'.

**OB:** And some songs are as catchy as hell and they don't go well.

**U:** Yeah, absolutely.

**OB:** That's pop music isn't it? Dudes will tell you who've been in the industry for 30 years will tell you they still don't know how to make a hit single. They have ideas of what will be and won't be.

**TM:** The thing that always impresses me is that *An Elephant Never Forgets* stayed on the alternative charts for I think 70 weeks?

**U:** It's still on there.

**TM:** It's still there! It keeps coming back.

**U:** Yeah, and that's the thing, we release stuff after it, like we release Hermitude after it, and we come from the music background, but we also come from the label background which is sometimes a horrible combination, just balancing the two. And it really is, it's not just about doing a job, sometimes the combination of the art and the work around that is just not compatible. But we're sort of finding a relatively OK balance, but we release Hermitude and they just pop their heads into those charts every now and then, and you scratch your head trying to work out how to keep them in their and how to get them out. But, I mean The Herd has a pretty good live show that we've worked on for many years now which helps it. But we don't anything and The Herd just stays in that chart, and it keeps going from 18 down to five down to 13 down to six and we just don't do anything, it's been in those charts for 80-odd weeks now, and we release Apsci and we couldn't even get them into the charts, and then we've released my album and it's just popped in their once or twice. Not that we're too worried about charts, though we're definitely concerned about keeping the sales up because getting an insight into running the business, as I was saying to Nick before, is you're kidding yourself if you don't want to get sales, because if you don't get sales you don't release music. And there is a lot of money involved in releasing music and if we're all basically working for pittance then we'll all end up being angry and frustrated, or even more so.

**OB:** Yeah, that's the biggest challenge that I don't think we've figured out how to overcome from the label's point of view, is getting that follow on cred. The Herd has a market profile and Elefant Traks doesn't.

**U:** It does...

**OB:** Yeah it does, but not nearly as big. So, we did the tour earlier this year with Apsci and Hermitude and ourselves and we thought 'Well, what better way could you do it, these are the two bands that we think are unreal, go up to the merchandise desk and buy their CDs now'. So what do people buy: The Herd album.

**U:** And everyone rocks up and a lot of the gigs sell out and it's all great and we're all sitting there going 'Great, this is just too easy', and then you go and do another show that may not be The Herd and you get 50 or 60 payers and you're just sitting there going 'How does this work?' But then again, the

Hoods travel around the country and do barely any promo and sell out every gig they do, and it's just on the back of the airplay.