

LOCAL NOISE

Interview with Sereck

8/2/08, UTS, Sydney
Sereck & Tony Mitchell

Summary:

“You had to paint trains. Back then – nowadays doors are shut tight – when you had the rattlers, it was a culture that you’d meet up with your friends in the back carriage and bomb it, and kill it, and do hang outs. A lot of accidents happened, but the thing is we were travelling all the city, everywhere. I knew the system better than the SRA [the old RailCorp] by the end of it. We were getting off everywhere, like Chatswood, and this is coming from Miller! We’re hanging at St. Leonards and then we are hanging at Ryde with all the Ryde boys, and then we are in Burwood with all the Burwood boys. In a sense, it taught me about linking up with Sydney.”

Paul Westgate, also known as Sereck from Def Wish Cast and as the graffiti writer Unique, has been involved in the hip-hop scene in Australia since 1983. He was a key figure in the Western Sydney hip hop scene, and Def Wish cast produced what is acknowledged as the first Australian hip hop album in 1993, *Knights of the Round Table*, which included the track A.U.S.T. Down Under Comin’ Upper, the video clip of which has become an anthem of early Australian hip hop. Sereck also narrated the first Australian hip hop documentary, *Basic Equipment*, in 1996, and later formed a record label named after the program. After going their separate ways in Celsius, and Kilawattz, Def Wish Cast reformed in 2001 and released their second album, *The Legacy Continues*, in 2006.

In this interview Sereck reminisces about the early days of Western Sydney hip-hop, the emergence of Def Wish Cast, their style and the people they represented. He also talks about his interconnection, via train travel and graffiti, with all the others local scenes in Sydney (Burwood, Campsie, Ryde, Redfern, etc).

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.

TM: Tony Mitchell

S: Sereck

T: Can you talk about how you started in hip-hop?

S: It's the normal old school story. We were in a time where it was predominantly rock, and we had a wave come through, like the Buffalo Gals by Malcolm McLaren and Blondie. And the music started to change and morph in from disco, the electro and all the more driven stuff. And just seeing breakdancing - Flashdance was the first movie I seen - and Rock Steady Crew glidin' across the floor. I was at Westfields High at that time, in year 7, and I was 13 years of age, and it was 1983, and from that day forth I went 'that's what I'm doing for the rest of my life.' Everyone started B-boying or B-girling at that time because breakdancing was the fad, you know. And then you started gathering what was around it - graffiti. And I think that's the two easiest things to pick up, is the art and the dance. The music hadn't matured yet. You're around the mat, and you're dancing, and you have a name, everyone has their alias name. So automatically the alias name is going to advance into graffiti. So it was '86, probably, when I started takin' it serious. I had a mate at school at the time, and we were the only ones who were really on the whole street development of graffiti. So then we used to go on trips together, and go and see the city and see a lot more.

T: Were you involved at all in the Burwood scene?

S: Oh, I know all the Burwood scene, definitely, I was very linked into it. You had the Blues and Reds. It was a separation of Tongan and Samoan, not many people know that. So Burwood was Tongan and Campsie was Samoan, but we were down with both of them. So we used to come in as a neutral breaking crew, and we were called the Superstars at that time, with Mistery and a few other guys, Outlaw, Legend. Even though I lived out West, I used to travel into the inner city, because you know, as a graffiti writer you had to communicate on all lines and hook up with everyone, that was the whole journey.

T: You were once quoted as saying: 'They'll tell you hip-hop is a black thing, but it's not, it's our thing.' What exactly did you mean by that?

S: I think as soon as it's taken away from the U.S., it's people operating on another level. Kool Herc, Afrika Bambaata, all the forefathers of hip-hop, were predominantly black, and it was something they could speak through, how they were living. But as soon as hip-hop culture spread, you're going to have everyone involved. So when we're living that little lifestyle over here - you're not even thinking about the U.S., you're just looking at the U.S. - I'm hanging out with every nationality, you know, and that's the beauty of Australia. It's just that person who can grasp that art and take that skill to the next level, that's the person who gets respect.

T: When did Def Wish Cast come about?

S: That was about 1989. I was living in Ashfield and I was hanging out with a lot of young graffiti writing crews, and we got pretty serious. I had been going through charges and courts, I was staying with a Christian home at that time because I'd just got off the streets. And they were lookin' after me, and my art was everywhere, we'd started in Newtown in '88, and pretty much all throughout the inner city, we were going nuts. I see a bunch of young guys, I knew they were writers: 'hey fellas' and Boom! I took 'em, took 'em under my wing, I taught 'em everything. And they have now become RBS, which is Rebels in Sydney, which is one of the most predominant graffiti criminal crews. From that, I went out West, started hanging out at some parties at Seven Hills, at a place called Times Square. These hip-hop parties where about 30 people would just turn up. And yeah, you're just flowin' with the whole thing. And then I just moved back out West, from Liverpool to St. Clair. And then later I was painting for Pen-

rith Arts Council, in this big competition, and I won it and was presented with this medal.

T: And Def Wish Cast formed in St. Clair?

S: Simon and Pablo, which is Def Wish and Die C, they were hangin' around with DJ Case and they had already been hangin' around the West for a bit, b-boying and stuff like that, over the years. But I think it was at a time when music was just becoming of age, and they were working in the same studio, which was linked to my girlfriend at the time – she was an old school female MC. We started sitting around 4 tracks and drum machines and getting active. And the Western Suburbs had a different kind of rap approach, it was a bit more aggressive, and it was bit harder with more edge, and drum machines and synthesizers and everything. We were not worrying too much on the sampling, and coming from that garage mentality.

T: When you did your first album, you used a lot of samples from the video of Excalibur.

S: We're fans of Excalibur. It's all about the passion and fire, bringing the sword out, coming in to take over. Bring the glory land to its days. How you view something in a movie is exactly our passion for hip-hop. We could foresee it, way long ago, and as every year goes past and it's still around, it's just a blessing to us. We wanted to take it into the new direction. We'd seen where Public Enemy and Run DMC concerts had taken it, and we wanted to be like that.

T: A.U.S.T Down Under Comin' Upper was something of a celebration of Australian hip hop at that time.

S: Yeah, it was basically saying 'we're comin' through, and no one is going to stop us.' But I think looking at our age and at that time, it's us saying 'this Island is gonna break.' It's like you so believed it that you stated it. And our choruses at that time are still done in the same way now. We actually laid the foundation and we didn't know it. So A.U.S.T Down Under Comin' Upper is a force, and it was Western Suburbs, we didn't care about anyone else. We thought if N.W.A or anyone else could say 'Westside' or where they are from and represent, then we were going to say where we were from and represent. It kinda matched, and it worked.

T: It seemed like almost everybody involved in Sydney hip-hop was in the video?

S: That was Random Records at the time - he brought in some film students with their crew. And then we chose the location and I just brought graffiti writers from around Sydney. And then we had major MC crews from all around Australia, at that time, and for everyone to turn up – you won't get that nowadays. Travelling from Adelaide, Melbourne, wherever they come from. And having [all of] Sydney coming together, because Sydney is a bit of a different place nowadays. It's a lot more segregated and everyone seems to be on their own, with their own stuff. But back then, it was one of the craziest moments mate. We went into a burnt-out car park, and we had the film crew and they used to drop their camera in the back of a trolley and then just swing it around and do the cheap version of tracks. Mate, we were on fire. Nothing could stop us, back then. That was one of the best days of my life and that will never happen again. And our B-boying at that time was superb too.

T: It was a very long time between drinks, as it were, between the first album and the second album.

S: Yeah, people don't understand that we're involved in all aspects of hip-hop culture. So after you do an album like that, and everyone wants to hear it over and over and over, and you keep running it and running it and running it, you don't realise that 4 years have gone past. In the first couple of years we did about 300 shows, and we were goin' hard. We were doing everything from Mt. Druiitt Tech to [supports for] the Beastie Boys and Helmet. And then we were doin' Meltdown, where we would appear on MacDonalds place mats. By then, it's 1995, and we've made two records that didn't get released. People have got to understand that, they just don't see the stuff that happens underneath. And then Die C had

a very serious accident at Penrith Panthers. He was around a fight, and a bouncer come out and ran from about 30 metres – he must of had something in his hand – and clocked him in the side of his head and crushed his skull. That put him on life support. And that just kind of killed everything, you know. By the time he had got himself together, and we did a show at the Hip Hopera at Casula Powerhouse and Pier 4. And I was on full charge at this point, I was producing a lot too, I bought all the equipment and everything and worked with a lot of people in the studios around St. Clair. From then on, I just went, ‘I can’t pause, I’ve got to keep going,’ so that’s when we kind of split into two crews which was Celsius and Kilawattz.

T: You mentioned Hip-Hopera. Were you involved at all in the production of that?

S: I got called in because Morganiacs was the director, and I’d just met him. I come in as doin’ all the art work for him, and my girlfriend at the time, Spice, she was one of the main board people [for the production]. So she brought me in as a hard arse tellin’ ‘em what hip-hop is, but they want[ed] to do a more arts thing about it. It was young times, and we were coming in and communicating and then the next minute we were doing these things off budgets of 120 grand and doing a couple of performances, and rigging some of the biggest light settings I’d seen in ages. It was about bringing young people up. I seen Lebanese right through to everyone [from different ethnic backgrounds]. It was developing their talents, to bring them up on stage. I think it was mainly based all around ‘the funk’ in the end, and that was the good thing.

T: Have you been involved in workshops, educational projects, teaching skills?

S: Yeah man, I’ve pretty much been doin’ workshops since the 80’s. And I did it through the 90’s and then I just kinda got over it, because there’s only so much you can really tell kids. And if you have a passion for what you do, then sometimes that can take the passion away. You end up doin’ it for the money. It’s like doin’ a legal [piece of graffiti], someone asks you to paint a wall, ‘can you do some ducks here and some things here.’ I don’t want to paint ducks, and after a while when you do a lot of it, it really starts taking the passion away. But yeah, I don’t mind helping kids, I just wish I could control it in a sense, and start the curriculum of it.

T: It seems like there are so many hip hop crews around now, and there is so much stuff coming out, and it just seems a hell of a lot easier to get stuff out than it was in your day. In the sense that an unknown group can put out a record, get on Rage, and do a few shows, and things like that. The infrastructure is there.

S: Yeah the infrastructure is there, the media is there, the digital is there, everything’s there, they’re taught it. I almost think it’s tragic in a couple of senses because kids have been given a structure of how to release a CD. You have the programs at home, you make the things and you make your CD as soon as you can at home, and then you start handing it around. Distribution became easier. I think the ABC and a few other things really helped that along, because it helps, say, someone from a non-English speaking background, who gets their track put straight onto Triple J. When you’ve had people working hard to make professional records and spend a lot of money, then it kinda defies the whole purpose. So what you have to do is backtrack, you have to relearn yourself as an older artist. That’s the only way to move forward, you have to move with the times, otherwise you’ll end up jaded. You got to remember, back then I used to receive letters from kids. Def Wish Cast was the first Australian hip-hop group to have a fan base. And the energy we put forth, we represented them. And so I used to answer letters, and used to have [them addressed] ‘Dear uncle Unique’. And this kid is telling me how he escaped from his refuge and things like that. It was almost like I was a social worker. And it was communication back then, but it was harder than nowadays, you can quickly set up your own whole profile.

T: It's almost like hip-hop is losing its sense of geography. You were always associated with Western Sydney, whereas now you've got crews coming from the North Shore, and from all over the place.

S: It's always been from every area. But in Western Sydney what we had was a very proud place. And I think that was the beauty of it. And the city had its own thing. The city was educated more on jazz, and had things like that, where we were like 'fuck Jazz!' Jazz was old people's music to me. We were brought up on Soild Gold and AC/DC and Jimmy [Barnes]. You know, 2SM, and anything I could grasp of a top hits album. And when we came into town we clashed with these people. They'd be like a little bit too good for us, so we'd have this whole standoffish thing. But nowadays the education is very broad on music. I'll bump into a kid out west who's been heavily collecting Australian jazz records. But he's still also heavily break hunting and collecting break records. So the respect goes in a whole other way. But [back then] it was small, and more defined. Nowadays I meet everyone from all regions. The west still has a style of living that is different, but as time goes by, everyone is linking up and the world's becoming a lot smaller. The west can't come in [to town] and go "we're the West" because it's already gone through that phase.

T: What's your position on accent?

S: I started out in an American accent 'cause that's all I seen and that's all I knew, and that was my influence. But as time goes on you are told and you are taught, and I was taught to re-speak my stuff. And through that process I was taught to develop a warm Australian accent, not an ocker accent, more of a universal Australian accent. But I say, how you talk is how you should rhyme if you want to start speaking to the local people. A lot of Aboriginal kids will rhyme very American because that's the only thing they really see, and identification too, towards 2-Pac and their black culture. And that's totally understandable, so you got to have a respect for that as well. And you've got to be very careful of how you tell someone. You can tell someone directly, 'boom boom boom boom', or you can say, 'hey, have you ever thought of this?' It's not about saying 'this is the way it should be,' it's about teaching it too and moving it on.

T: When you say you were taught, who taught you?

S: I had a crew called Just Us, and there was an old school guy, Case, he had a little tint of American accent still, but this other guy, Mentor, he had this really strong Australian, full delivery, it was almost like the Ice-T of Australia, you know. And it was great, but these guys just couldn't do a show. So what we did was grab that. That was where a lot of the Australian accent came from, also hearing AKA Brothers from Melbourne, doing the accent on their record they dropped. But they did [a softer style], which wasn't our style, but we respected what they were saying, and it was over great music and great breaks.

T: You did a lot of gigs in the inner city ...

S: We had 600 people bouncing in Kinsellas - until you came into the city you were just doing rock venues. Some of our best gigs were in the Cross, up at Tom Tom club, which is Candy's Apartment now. The Site, Kinsellas, the Rocks and everything like that. But when you go out west, it's a different story. Boys just think it's a riot night. Pinball machines get turned over, the money doesn't get paid and everything just goes into riot form. You've got the coppers there, and everyone is bluing [brawling]. It's just a whole different mentality back then. We had managers back then, but they struggled with us. But nowadays we lay a form out to look after ourselves.

T: And you were also involved in The Next Level [Sydney's first hip hop record shop].

S: Yep, I've been associated with Blaze for a long time, back to the 80's when I was handing my [graffiti] outlines to his magazine Vapors. And I think when we became Def Wish Cast, he was just captivated by the way we brought this whole b-boy aggression -hip-hop, graffiti, everything - right the way through.

So we were deep rooted into Next Level, and before that, because it was Lounge Room before that, and Dr. Phibes took over and took it onto a different business level. And those guys were really the first two guys to bring specialist hip-hop music into Australia.

T: And you narrated Basic Equipment, which was the first documentary about Sydney hip-hop, and most of that was filmed in the Lounge Room, wasn't it?

S: Oh, at that time it was Next Level. Yeah, we'd set up the crates as the stage, and the b-boy mat. We had a lot of people come from overseas and go 'this is incredible, I've never seen stuff like this.' That documentary was a whole other story in itself. That's pretty much how [SBS TV series] Pizza got started, 'cause I introduced Sleek The Elite to Paul Fenech. And Paul Fenech had the idea for Pizza.

T: And it [Basic Equipment] was shown on the ABC.

S: The ABC flipped it around to be more a race issue, as they do, but viewing it now, it's great. It was just a bit rearranged to ABC format. I'm happy with it in the end, it was hard work and it taught me a lot. And we got to create a soundtrack off it, and I held a big gig up at Kinsellas, which was the last big hip-hop gig at Kinsellas at that time. And it was great to have DJ A.S.K and DJ Bonez, and have all these b-boys and everyone together. I felt it was the last unified time of some old-schoolers, you know.

T: Have you performed overseas much?

S: I've only been to Germany. I got paid to go over there for a hip-hop jam. I went over there to paint. Turned up, stayed there for a month with a Turkish family in Hannover. I just painted a canvas for them, and that was all I was to do. But I brought over all my stuff, and at that time I was solo so I did some solo shows in the three day hip-hop jam. And then I went up to Hamburg, visited a mate and went up and painted some trains. I got to do the pilgrimage kind of thing. But some of these people [in Germany] are just awesome, very talented people. Highly educated. I went back to Hannover, held my own jam down there, in this Turkish youth centre they have there. It was awesome.

T: Talking about painting trains - I imagine you haven't done that for a while?

S: I'm hanging out. It's a thing I really really want to do again. I kind of miss it. But then there's this other thing, that's kind of hitting me on the side of my head, going 'Paul, you know all it takes is one little thing and everything will be stuffed up.' That's how I started though, that's how I learnt to paint. You had to paint trains. Back then - nowadays doors are shut tight - when you had the rattlers, it was a culture that you'd meet up with your friends in the back carriage and bomb it, and kill it, and do hang outs. A lot of accidents happened, but the thing is we were travelling all the city, everywhere. I knew the system better than the SRA [the old RailCorp] by the end of it. We were getting off everywhere, like Chatswood, and this is coming from Miller! We're hanging at St. Leonards and then we are hanging at Ryde with all the Ryde boys, and then we are in Burwood with all the Burwood boys. In a sense, it taught me about linking up with Sydney. By the time I go home, your dad thinks you're an absolute loser because of what you do. But I don't care, I'm back out tomorrow because I just had the best day of my life. So yeah, painting trains is a sacrifice. It's what the art is, for communication. Humans rely on communication, and trains are it. It's not meant to harm anything or harm anyone, it's just what we did and it was pure fun. Everyone thinks it's linked to cutting seats and everything, but why do you want to cut a seat when you can tag it? We wanted to paint trains because they were beautiful, they were a deep maroon. The colours just went kaboom! You were just doing what you seen New Yorkers doing on their trains, you saw it and went 'hell yeah, I'm gonna be doing that stuff.' And by the time you do it, and the blood rush you get, you think 'I'm gonna do more trains.' Some of us just ended up on the streets then, just rebelling. I was just living in the streets in Campbelltown, and for a pastime we'd go down to Campbelltown yards and light a fire in winter and wait for the workers to go and then run down and destroy about six lay-ups. But it was just all about painting man, it wasn't nothin' else.

T: What sort of advice would you give to someone who is just starting out as an MC?

S: An MC. There's a million of 'em around. Anyone can get up there and shout their words, as everyone loves doing, and being the man up onstage, because that's what the MC has become. I think the MC has to really study his art, and ask a lot of questions. And listen to a lot of people, listen, don't be too indulgent to yourself. You'll have that bit of ego at the start, but if you've got something different to say then learn to recognize how you are different from the rest, and that's what can make you shine.