

PLUGGED OUT

Dave Tompkins



134

The head of Chi-Ali is spinning. In fact, the entire chair of Chi-Ali is spinning. When the room stops, »the Native Son« finds himself sitting in Calliope Studios in Manhattan in 1991. One of the Beatnuts, perhaps Psycho Les, stands in front of him, holding a 40-ounce of malt liquor that'll put a hurting on tomorrow. All of fifteen, Chi-Ali will remember that Les had given him a swig, and maybe a puff – Beatnuts being Beatnuts, after all – and sent his chair in a tizzy. He will also remember, fondly, that a guy named yogurt spelled backwards just rapped about windshield wipers, and hitting someone with a diaper.

This verse would be on Chi-Ali's album, released just in time to get his driver's license, while being down with his heroes: Jungle Brothers, A Tribe Called Quest and De La Soul.

There's an instant of Chi-Ali in the video for 1988's »Buddy«, a track that De La shared with Jungle, Tribe, Latifah, Monie Love, producer Prince Paul, a gang of kazoos, and whoever else they could squeeze into the camera. (The Beatnuts, Black Sheep and Leaders of the New School would be annexed later, as would, for one gloriously baked imaginary radio drop, the Divine Styler.) »Buddy« was a friends-with-benefits play on the body that seemed to be less posse cut than a pal-around with an inside joke.

In the video, Dove rhymes with a plastic spoon in his hand. Shoulders get dusted. Great satisfaction is taken in the words »fuddy duddy«. There are cue cards and kids. A chubby extra, who spends much of the video in an alternate

b/w reality chasing Mace (De La's DJ/resident bear) on a push-scooter, takes an exasperated pause. He shakes his head under a thought bubble: »This video makes no sense.«

But it did.

Native Tongues had so much fun finishing each other's thoughts, you sensed them in the studio even when they weren't on the song. Tribe would burn through at least four different versions of »Scenario« while sorting out the final line-up. (These were hallowed spots.) »Buddy« invented the posse cut in the rapper's cult of Me – beads on a string instead of gold rope narcissism. Often mistook for a heady granola rap commune, in the »Golden Age« of Public Enemy's and Boogie Down Production's, the darker Native Tongue songs about crack addiction and incest occupy rap's memory as much as »Bonita Applebum.« Q-Tip's conflicted »Sucka Nigga« could've had more on NWA than the FBI.

Afrika Baby Bam of the Jungle Brothers coined the Native Tongue collective in the spirit of Bambaataa's Zulu Nation and George Clinton's Parliament-Funkadelic. The acknowledgments for Jungle Brothers' second album – 1989's »Done By the Forces of Nature« – read like the ultimate play list but was grouped according to time zones. Grouped according to time zones, Ultramagnetic is held solely responsible for The Future, a future where Kool Keith claimed his voice could dim satellites.

According to the credits, »Done by the Forces...« wasn't produced, it was »recycled«, making Jungle Brothers perhaps the first eco-friendly rap group, if not the first to namedrop a pupating chrysalis. Earth made them funky. Meanwhile, De La were mistaken for Long Island hippies and would be compared to the Grateful Dead as a misguided salute to their longevity. So the three Plugs ingeniously faked their own death, as if pranking career suicide while forecasting yet another rap trend that would never die. And they did it by simply upsetting a flowerpot.

Tribe's carbon footprint had more impact, as »Low End Theory« got more jeep time than any Native Tongue release. Artists like Redman and Jay-Z borrowed Tribe lyrics, giving Gumby nods to the collective memory while informing the rookies. Perhaps this is what Afrika Baby Bam meant when calling »Tribe Vibes« a level of consciousness, embedded like Tip's Dristan voice – more specifically »a boom bip« – when Das EFX pinched his drum phonetic for their own beat. Biting was the sincerest form of flattery.

Native Tongues became hip-hop grammar. How many rappers would anxiously recall Tribe's »Industry Rule #4080« caveat before signing and parting on bad terms with their record label? (Or starting their own, for that matter.) Where would Don Knott's haircut be without Phife namechecking Ralph Furley? Who could order a Whopper without, in good faith, tipping their aluminum ashtray crown to De La, who ran the dozens in the BK Lounge? With De

135

La, songs crossriffed amongst themselves, so by track 24, you felt like you were in on the morphology. In fact, you were so busy decrypting, you didn't realize that De La had also invented the long-ass rap album.

At the end of »Buddy«, just after the best group »um-hmm« on record, someone – and I mean this sincerely – had the bright idea to fly in a few seconds of »Jimbrowski«, an earlier Jungle Brothers cut that cleverly allowed rap to talk about its dick without talking about its dick. (WBLS approved. Mentor/prop-master DJ Red Alert wore an airbrushed Auto-Bot sweatshirt and endorsed Native Tongue releases with modulated assonance, a signature »yeeeah« that Flavor Flav took to the stage.) Most were introduced to Jungle Brothers under odd circumstances: a man in a safari hat sitting on the commode under a raving blue light, rapping to house music of his own doing, wearing boots and dreads when hip-hop was still in Balley's and fades.

Though Hip-House went the way of the rap ballad, the skit, another Native Tongue conceit, would be stuck with us forever. Prince Paul's bugged out game show – which marked the first cameo by »Bloodsucking Freaks« on a rap album – opened ears for Dre's cinematic drive-bys, Wu Tang's Shaolin wisdom and shoe-dye advice, and Pete Rock crate teasers, not to mention getting gaffled at MacDonald's, blunted hairball coughs, and too many unprintably freaky tales to name.

136 With De La, hip-hop did something unheard of. It made fun of itself. A kid gets bullied for holding a »Three Feet...« tape, followed by a song that clowned hardness by throwing fists over a children's nursery rhyme lifted from Prince Paul's novelty emporium. (The irony thickens: we remember Biggie making fun of Kwame's Daisy Age-inspired polka dots, more than Kwame himself.)

Without De La, Fozzy the Bear wouldn't have hummed a KMD bassline. »Three Feet High and Rising« was so dense you'd think Prince Paul was stocking up for the sampling apocalypse. Everything is fair when you're living in the Daisy Age. You could loop »Stand By Me« to comment on buddy odor (joke received) and not get sued. Or your label could hold a contest offering 500.00 to the first nerd who I.D.'d a vocal bit from De La's »Plug Tunin'« (Just after Plug someone says »the clue of a naughty noise«, incidentally.) Meanwhile, The Turtles' legal team would plot copyright infringement that would ultimately scare producers – see Mannie Fresh and Organized Noize – into new creative terrain. Others like Dre paid mind. That Mr. Sprinkler pia-no from »A Roller Skating Jam Named Saturday« took a sinister turn with Above The Law.

While Prince Paul sampled Hall & Oates, and Jungle Brothers used Black Sabbath for a bead-link, Tribe raided the Blue Note catalog. Tip and Ali also beat Timbaland to baby noises, crickets, and India by a good six years. Without Tribe, a younger generation may not have ever discovered Eugene McDaniels' album »Headless Heroes of the Apocalypse«. It was all part of the journey

that began with a road trip in a '74 Dodge Dart, passing by a Jodorowski dwarf in a sombrero, while en route to El Segundo.

Odd choice for a lead single but apparently hip-hop was ready.

Chi-Ali was ready.

On the back cover of his only album – »The Fabulous Chi-Ali« – one may notice two things. The office chair is still, and the tape collection includes a Cassingle of »Can I Kick It?« Now serving out a 12-14 year sentence for attempted murder, Chi-Ali still keeps in touch with Dres from Black Sheep. Occasio-nally he'll hear from Plug One.

Native Tongues never recorded as Native Tongues – they thrived as a brand-name ideal, a legacy that transcended a pair of Nike De La Dunks. Perhaps their most memorable reference in song occurred when they were no more, a hurt realization that folks had moved on. On »I Am I Be« – the antidote to »Me, Myself and I« – Pos laments about »some Tongues who lied / And said »we'll be Natives to the end« / Nowadays we don't even speak.«

On 1996's »Stakes Is High«, Pos, now Plug Wonder Why, called for a Native Tongue reinstatement. The idea wouldn't outlive the verse, but this did not seem to matter. Kids still ran around grabbing their skulls. Another moment that made them feel »Strictly Dan Stuckie«, in a world the Jungle Brothers once described as »half real«. We were just happy to hear him say it. ♦

► Leicht überarbeitete Fassung des Aufsatzes »Native Tongues« aus dem Sammelband »Hip Hop: A Cultural Odyssey« (herausgegeben von Jordan Sommers). Abdruck mit freundlicher Genehmigung des Verlags Aria.