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February 2002 Edition No.8



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HERBALISER
interview

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Something Wicked

They're back! Jake Wherry and Ollie Teeba have emerged from the studio once again and something wicked this way comes...

It may seem a long while since 'Very Mercenary' showcased the both the Herbaliser's way with the beat-heavy music of Hip Hop and their unerring taste in MCs, but the dynamic duo have been busy.

First there was a tour with full band which covered 21 countries, took their gig tally to well over 350 shows and included highlights such as the Glastonbury Festival, Paleo Festival, Axiom Beach Festival, Montreaux, Montreal Jazz Festival, Drum Rhythm, Pukkelpop and Essential. During this epic journey they took time to dive into the studio with the band and record the critically acclaimed 'Session One' - a widescreen, epic and beautifully produced version of what crowds were hearing live on stage.

Once they got back to their Traintrax Studio, Jake and Ollie then began work on a number of commissions, from contributing production for MCs from T-Love to Princess Superstar, to remixing acts like Push Button Objects (a Hip Hop supergroup featuring Del Tha Funky Homosapien), to soundtracking Odeon Pictures' 'Pimp Of The Year', to recording and compiling music for EA Sports' Playstation title 'NBA Street' and even contributing music to Guy Ritchie's 'Snatch' (apparently Madonna brought their music to his attention in between learning cockney rhyming slang - lawdluvaduck).

Then, at last it was down to business - the creation of their fourth and most ambitious album for Ninja Tune.

As Jake says, the Herbaliser always "start off with a concept". The idea this time was to combine what the band had been doing live with what Jake and Ollie were capable of creating in the studio. As Ollie explains, "for ages people have been approaching us at our shows and saying 'Why does your live show sound so different to the records?' so we decided to use more actual instruments in the process, making our own samples rather than only using bits of other peoples' music. We would still construct tracks along the same lines, with a good strong sample idea as a foundation then building along with that. Although on several occasions we would remove the original sample at a later stage and develop the remaining music."

Jake expands: "With Something Wicked (the new album) we had such strong ideas about what we wanted to hear that it was simply easier to play the stuff ourselves, or in the case of our horn and string arrangements, get it done by either Chris Bowden or The Easy Access Orchestra (our horn section). I played bass and guitar on most of the tunes and even played keyboards for the first time since I learnt as a 10 year old!"

Collaborations with US rappers, Raaka Iriscience (Dilated Peoples) and MF Doom (formerly of KMD), UK's herbal favourite, Blade, the exotic and mind-blowing Seaming To, sparkling street gal Wildflower and Gorillaz touranauts Phi Life Cypher all show that the boys can produce blistering vocal productions that firmly establish them as beatmeisters par excellence. The guests are for the most part people they have met and grown to know over their years of making music and travelling, the collaborations sounding natural rather than forced.

But just as there are two meanings to the word 'wicked,'so there are two sides to the record. The other aspect of this album has been to develop and further explore their cinematic production techniques on a series of instrumental tours des forces, which is where the writing skills of The Easy Access Orchestra and Chris Bowden with the superstring performances of Echo Strings and the keyboard extravagance of West London funk gurus Kaidi Tatham and Ollie Parfitt have all come into their own. Nodding back to the horror-funk of classic DeWolfe and forward to a psychedelic soul movie that may never be made, Herbaliser can get the hairs standing up on the back of your neck as well as setting you spinning on your head...

Something wicked, indeed. As Ollie says, "we feel that musically this is the pinnacle of our achievements so far." Don't get confused, though - this is Hip Hop done in another way. "It's the same, but different," laughs Jake. "We aren't trying to change, we just try and get better as producers, and keep on challenging ourselves. Hopefully the masses of stuff we did live will still sound like authentic samples but people will be able to appreciate the fact that it was done live in a room in Twickenham..."

Outline's own, Louis Macintosh had a few more questions for Jake...

You're due to play at the Dedbeat Weekender in Yarmouth later this month with a 10 piece band. How did this evolve, how did you link-up with the musicians?

Essentially the live band consists of rhythm section of my first funk band - the Propheteers (Kaidi Tatham, Mickey Moody, Oliver Parfitt and myself) with the horn section from the Big Cheese All Stars... it evolved over 7 years of touring together... most of the musicians were local friends from college, or people we met on the west london funk scene.

What can we expect from the live show?

Well, we will be using the singer from the track 'Something Wicked'. She's called Seaming To, and also Wildflower will be guest MCing... plus we haven't played together as a band for nearly 2 years, and we're itching to play our new material.

Do you think there should be more link-ups between live musicians and DJ's, as for too long the DJ has been king to the detriment of a live sound?

That's why we put our band together those years ago... it was right in the middle of the 'so and so band live' PA stage... where dance acts started to blag that they were playing live... we wanted to put something real across... something to turn people onto live music in the same way as I was by bands like George Clinton and PFunk, the J.B.'s... even the early James Taylor Quartet.

You've been with Ninja Tunes for aeons, what is it about the label that still excites you and what is the Ninja Tunes philosophy?

Ninja has changed from what it was in 1995 when we put our 1st 12" out with them... they have grown and so have we... at the end of the day, they pay us in time... and most independents don't...and that's good for us!!

How would you define the 'Herbaliser' sound to the uninitiated?

Well, it's based around the sound of Hip Hop, but laced with lushness usually found on old soundtracks...

Where do you see the Herbaliser in five years time?

Very rich, I hope!!! And definitely doing more music to accompany visuals, either film or adverts.

What do you think about the current British Hip Hop scene, who are the movers and shakers and how do you think it compares to the U.S?

The term scene is something applied to us by journalists... it's like there is some secret 'club' that we all go to and discuss records, beatmaking and scratching!!!... It's very healthy at the moment... loads of young talented MCs from all over the country... and UK record buyers are getting behind UK made records more than ever before... it's all good!

What is it about Ollie's obsession with trainers (he has over 50 pairs)?

It's a lot more than 50 now... that number was from the press release from our 2nd LP...

What is your opinion of Manchester's Grand Central / Fat City and how does it compare to the London scene as regards attitude as well as the music?





Again... I don't like to comment on scenes... it's not a term that has any real meaning behind it... it's not though any 'city' can seriously claim to be better, or more dedicated to an artform, than another... keep territorial mentality in football!

Your new album 'Something Wicked This Way Comes' (see album reviews) is a slick, far ranging and well produced advert for British Hip Hop, could you tell us how it came about and the guests you used?

Well... it came about because we needed to make another record... quite simple really! Ollie and I have improved our studio, our techniques as producers, as musicians, and most importantly of all, at coming up with concepts for tunes. Usually, we imagine a scene from a film, either imaginary, or even a favourite scene from a real film, and then imagine what the music would be doing... then go from there. We wanted to work with a singer, and a singer who was a bit different, and I'm glad that we found that singer with Seaming... she is great. We wanted to have a balance of UK and US rappers, and now that we have toured and got to meet loads of people out and about, it wasn't too hard to find rap guests for the LP.

With the new LP we have actually used far more live instruments than ever before... from getting Chris Bowden to arrange strings, and then record the parts with a string quartet, to getting the Easy Access Orchestra to do our horn parts and arrangements. It's been a big long list of collaborators, as the album credits will show when the sleeves are finished!

Where did the title come from, am I right in thinking it's from a Philip K. Dick sci-fi novel?

Ollie's idea... from Shakespeare... one of the witches in Macbeth says, "At the end of the end of the day, when the battle is lost and won, something wicked this way comes" and ollie then had the visual idea of the

sleeve when we see the silhouettes of the band coming over a dodgy looking mountain. From there we made the track, Ollie had written the chorus lyrics (by using the Shakespeare)... and it inspired me to come up with the lyrics for the (very short) verse.

How did you guys originally meet up and what did you have in common that has led to a ten year partnership?

We were at the infamous (in our area) Richmond College when we were 16. Ollie was DJing at the Boilerhouse club in Kingston, and I was talking about bands with our drummer (Mickey Moody) but we never knew each other directly. We hooked up in 1992 through a scratch DJ I was trying to get things going with... after a few sessions working as a 3-some, Ollie and I decided that it would be better with just the 2 of us. We aren't too similar really... apart from our love of quite similar music. We just gel so well in the studio... we so rarely argue about stuff, usually we suggest the same thing at the same time.

Have you ever considered doing any more film score work (I believe you did some work on 'Snatch'), as the track 'Worldwide Connected' definitely has a Bond quality to it?

Glad you picked up on 'Worldwide Connected'... it's my favourite off the record. We get asked to do stuff rather than get to pick and choose... we would love to do more stuff for films... just ask us please!!!

The album moves from a Hip Hop base through to a jazz/funk excursion in the latter half showcasing the duality of the Herbaliser sound, a kind of back to our roots update, would you agree?

Er, yes... we just can't pick a sound and stay with it... although in this case I would drop the 'jazz' from the jazz/funk...

'Something Wicked This Way Comes' by The Herbaliser is released on Ninja on March 18th. The single, 'Good Girl Gone Bad', featuring Wildflower, is released on Ninja on February 11th. Both are highly recommended.

