

Interview: Grandmaster Melle Mel
By: Stewart Dalley

In the ego fuelled arena of hip hop, bullshit is often in evidence. While others claim to be inventors of hip hop or to have more money than sense, there are thankfully some who remain somewhat more grounded. None more so than the legendary Grand Master Melle Mel, to give him his full title - or as he put it "just a wanker rapper {that's} a specialist on the old skin flute".

One of the main perks you get out of being a journalist is that you occasionally get to meet some of your own idols ('cause it sure as shit ain't the money!). And like most people who are into music, I grew up listening to tunes often thinking to myself what the artist might be like in person. But no matter how much of a daydreamer you may be you never really think that you will get the opportunity to find out. So when I caught up with Melle Mel when he was in Glasgow recently, I was well chuffed. My chuffed-ness was doubled when I found out that he was a true star. And for a man that has been shafted more times than a 50 cent whore and conducted more interviews than I've had pints of lager, he was surprisingly upbeat, warm and down right funny.

The interview was scheduled to coincide with his tour with the equally famous Sugar Hill Gang under the 'Still the Joint' banner, to promote the current remix album of Sugar Hill Records classic tracks - a gig that is without question my personal favourite of the year for so many reasons. And if you've been lucky enough to catch it you'll know why.

Tracks from the 'Still the Joint' album have been fiddled with by some notable UK talent; namely Roots Manuva, Coldcut, Scratch Perverts etc. And it's a project Mel was keen to see get off the ground, as he explained. "Rap has one of its biggest fan bases here in the UK, I still feel like part of the game over here. For me as a traditional style rapper it's cool to have people remember what we did and define new ways to keep it out there. American radio and the industry in general, have drawn a line at like '85. For others and me we are no longer welcome, which is foolish 'cause when we be doing a show the public come out to see us...they embrace us. As much as they like the new stuff that's out they still like to here where it originated from."

As part of Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, Melvin 'Melle Mel' Glover was the real vocal talent - and as the recent blinding Channel 4 series 'The Hip Hop Years' highlighted, there is more than a fair share of history in that band. When Grandmaster Flash was on freebase, Mel was rapping about 'White Lines', all the while snorting them; hip hop hypocrisy at its best you might say. Surprisingly its something he feels he never really took any flak for 'cause as he says. "Everybody I knew was doing it...when I wrote *White Lines* I never thought of myself as a junkie. I was at that stage, about two years into the shit, when I thought nothing of it. It wasn't until later, when I got myself straightened out, that I realised I had been a junkie at that time."

Talk has been flying around for a while that there is to be a film of Grandmaster Flash and The Furious Five's exploits but sadly like most things in the movie business that is going to take a laborious amount of time to get sorted. "Sony bought over a company called Mandolin and with that came the rights to a movie about us. I lost track with what was happening after the guy who wrote the Muhammad Ali life story had his script of the movie turned down. It would be a good time to do a movie to help educate people on how rap took off and what it took to get there. 'Cause today rap has no foundation, especially in America. Today you've got a better chance of getting a deal if your Busta Rhymes' neighbour's friend, than I have. When we came through you had to earn your spot. We were groomed by the record company. We had guidelines on what to wear and on things not to do like smoking and drinking on stage. Rappers now bring some tough guys from the hood on stage, where is the entertainment value in that?"

Hip hop is a completely different animal now compared with when the Sugar Hill label was on top, at that time rap never glamorised drug dealing and death, it brought it to people's attention and warned against its evils a la 'The Message'. But now you ain't considered

down, in some circles, unless you've *been to the 'pen* or *wacked some mutherfucker* and it's a situation Mel is keen to see squashed. "A whole section of rappers now aren't rappers 'cause that's what they want to be, but because its a way of making quick money. They be talking about real negative shit like killing mutherfukers and selling dope. When we called a bitch a bitch we was just raggin' on her trying to get some pussy, these guys now be talkin' about killin' the bitch too. These guys are too cowardly to be dope dealers they talk all this shit, that they don't need to be doin' rap and that they could be back in the hood selling dope. Well I say to them that they never was that great a rapper anyway, you only got what bullshit your record company pushed. And as a matter of fact go sell the crack and I'll go get a pistol and I'll make it look like a dope deal gone wrong; doing the whole public a favour." He laughed and shit so did I, as did everyone in earshot.

New material is expected out in March/April next year on Castle Records. From the "new combination", that is The Sugar Hill Gang featuring Melle Mel. The new material signals a change in direction for them, when you consider that all of Sugar Hill's tracks weren't sampled but recreated by the house band Positive Force. The new album has been written and produced by the Gang and Mel, along with the likes of the Chemical Brothers. "When we tour with that album it's gonna be crazy!"

Still the Joint is available now on Castle Records