

## Jungle Brothers

Words: Stewart Dalley

The Jungle Brothers were pioneers of a sound, like The Roots today, the JB's stood out like a sore thumb when they first emerged in 1988. Their Afro-centric approach to rap won them plaudits throughout the world from people sick of the ghetto glamorisation being peddled by their rapping colleagues - notably N.W.A who's 'Straight Out of Compton' was released the same year. The JB's along with fellow members of the Native Tongues - A Tribe Called Quest, De La Soul, Monie Love, Queen Latifah and to a lesser extent Stereo MC's - created a working body of rap that concentrated on positive messages within a party context.

Comprising Afrika (Nathaniel Hall) and Mike G (Michael Small) the JB's put their longevity, within a fickle marketplace, down to the fact that they have knowledge of different styles of music as well as a taste for them. Being born in 1968 New York, the JB's were there at hip hop's very beginnings, witnessing the block parties, the first scratches and the birth of break dancing and it had an immediate effect on them, says one half of the group, Mike G. "I grew up idolising guys like the Kold Krush Brothers, the Furious Five and Spooky G but I really didn't take rapping seriously until I got into high school and met up with Afrika. Then we took it seriously enough to the point that we were sitting writing and rehearsing and shit like that - we even got into some talent shows. From there we started doing tapes and one day my uncle, DJ Red Alert, took a tape and played it on the radio and, you know, pretty much started the ball rolling from there."

His Uncle Red Alert was no ordinary DJ he was one of the leading figures on American radio playing urban music, his voice boomed out of Kiss FM and what he played the nation in-turn went out and bought. As a well known face on the scene he was instrumental in introducing them to a then aspiring house producer, Todd Terry - an encounter which would go on to create one of the world's first hip house records, 'I'll House You'. What followed was a genuine hip hop classic album by the name of 'Straight Out the Jungle'. From those beginnings it was hardly surprising that the major labels came sniffing round and they were soon signed to Warner Brothers, quickly followed by the African influenced 'Done By The Forces Of Nature', which spawned the much housed remixed singles 'Doin' Our Own Dang' and 'What U Waitin' 4'.

Released the same year as De La Soul's '3 Feet High and Rising' and the Beastie Boy's 'Paul's Boutique' this was a golden era in hip hop and in the times of the Jungle Brothers themselves. Flush from the success of 'Done By The Forces' the JB's set themselves up in the studio to record the follow up - the never released 'Crazy Wisdom Masters' project. The story goes that while mixing the album the reels went missing from the studio and the songs were lost forever. Commentators suspected foul play on behalf of the label, since they had let it know that a quick release of a new album was not in their marketing schedule. The tapes have since mysteriously resurfaced with tracks now being downloaded over the internet.

From there things went a little pear shaped with the label, although a much anticipated follow up album 'J Beez Wit' The Remedy' did eventually surface in 1993 it failed to catch the public's imagination, who had moved on to other acts in the group's absence. After a further two frustrating years in which the JB's fought to be released from their contract with Warner Brothers they emerged after a two year hiatus signed to old pals the Stereo MC's label Gee Street and a new chapter in their careers opened. 'Raw Deluxe' was released on Gee Street in 1997 to moderate success. Always a group to collaborate they later headed the call of Alex Gifford to provide vocals to his Propellerhead project - he returned the favour later when he took over the production mantle for the group's fifth release 'V.I.P'.

Since that time the JB's have featured on many a hit, collaborating as always to ensure their longevity and creative expression. Mike G takes up the story - "We just try to stay creative and stay original. Put the fun into it and be ourselves really. We did one of the first hip hop and house collaborations with Todd Terry and we've worked with the Aphrodite guys on a jungle

remix of 'Jungle Brother', as well as Rae & Christian. You know, we try to stay fresh by mixing it up a little. Cause if you just do the same thing over and over it gets kinda stale. So we try and get out there and embrace new cultures. And that's what it's about. Its not like it's a job, it's getting out there and enjoying and creating, cause as an artist that's what you do, you create. Cause once we cease to create we cease to exist."

2003 saw the JB's last album 'All I Do' (or 'You In My Hut Now' if you live in Europe) released through their own label, where they joined forces once more with the legendary Todd Terry to recreate some of the past magic they had once experienced together. The result is a hotchpotch of styles, drifting from Neptunes style hip hop to drum and bass, with a sprinkling of house. Although some critics couldn't get their ears round the release it represented exactly what the Jungle Brothers had been doing since day one.

This month sees them again get into collaborative mode, hooking up this time with underground bootleg producer Mr On in a reworking of his original bootleg of Q-Tip's 'Breathe and Stop' and Michael Jackson's 'Don't Stop 'Til You Get Enough'. Drafted in to fill old pal Q-Tip's shoes, following legal complications, the JB's set about the task with relish, as you'd expect from a group with such a long tradition of teamwork. As Mike continues; "We met with Mr On and a couple of his guys and we just tossed about a couple of ideas – they were working on something and they were like 'you guys would go really well on these tracks', so we got a listen to it and we vibed with Mr On and we just laid it down and had fun with it."

Now signed to Positiva/Incentive 'Breathe Don't Stop' is eventually out in legitimate form and with it comes a resurgence of interest in the JB's. Although only aged 34 the JB's career has spanned a turbulent fifteen years, which makes you think they are older than they really are – I guess they just started young. Today Mike G is having no thoughts of the past and refuses to bow to pressure on when his career is at an end, as he explains. "KRS One is doing it strong at 40 as is LL (Cool J) and he's 35, I'm only 34! For me I don't really think about the age when I'm on stage cause I'm enjoying doing what I'm doing. Once you stop enjoying yourself its like..." He lets out a disgruntled sigh before continuing. "It's like to hell with it. But for us, right now, we're trying to build our label with some different styles and acts, as well as keeping the Jungle Brothers engine running. We are working on a new album - we're only about four songs into it but we hope to get some more recording done soon with a view to having a release in the early summer and drop a single sometime around March. We've been working with Maceo from De La (Soul), Mista Lawnge from Black Sheep and I know Dres (Black Sheep) is going to come in and do a track, and there's sure to be some other guys, cause its like when we get within reach of them we snatch them up and pull 'um in."