

Up your Ronson

Mark Ronson

By: Stewart Dalley

New kid on the block here Mark Ronson is anything but in his adopted home of New York. There Mark Ronson is the king of the exclusive VIP circuit; he's the DJ all the stars want at their parties. Essentially there isn't a launch party that goes off without the ex-Tommy Hilfiger model manning the decks. He's also DJed the world over with P Diddy, he's engaged to one of Quincy Jones' daughters and has taught John Lennon's son, Sean, to play guitar. Make no mistake Mark Ronson is no normal debutant artist.

His celebrity status may not be currently recognised here but that is all set to change with the release of his debut album 'Here Comes the Fuzz', on which he's recruited a stellar cast of collaborators, in the shape of some of his homies. Namely, A Tribe Called Quest's Q-Tip, Sean Paul, Mos Def, Tweet, Nate Dogg, Ghostface Killah, Rivers Cuomo from Weezer and MOP. In the case of the latter it was one of those bizarre coincidences that happens to us all at times (although maybe not quite like this) that led to them being on his debut album. And to properly tell the story we'll need to rewind to 1976 and London.

Born in London to noted music industry socialites Mark's childhood was full of wild parties, which, as he tells us, he has mixed feelings about. "As a kid it was kind of great 'cause you'd wake up in the middle of the night and there was music playing and people hanging out in the living room and I'd go down into this giant grown-up playground. But then you start to think to yourself 'why didn't they wake up to 3pm the next day'. So it was like a bit of both, it was definitely a cool environment to be brought up in, but...."

While those early introductions to the showbiz lifestyle has left Mark with conflicting emotions about his formative years there are some special guests at those parties that he does hold a soft spot, like Robin Williams - who at one of those parties tucked Mark up in bed; a big treat for a kid with a massive interest in the Mork and Mindy TV programmes.

Whether it was those wild parties to blame or just a natural break up, at the age of eight Mark's mother upped sticks to New York, taking Mark and his sisters with her. Before long she remarried to eighties rocker Mick Jones of the group Foreigner and the parties recommenced, albeit a little less wild, but none the less 'A' list. As a growing boy in New York, Mark counted the likes of David Bowie, Paul McCartney and Bruce Springsteen as family friends and being surrounded by the music business his whole life I suppose it wasn't too much of a stretch of the imagination that Mark would be drawn towards the rhythm.

A multi-instrumentalist, playing drums, guitar and keys, Mark is quick to point out that he's not a child prodigy, in fact he pretty much sees it as an extension of his DJ skills, as he explains. "I'm not like some kind of Julliard prodigy or something, I've been playing guitar and drums since I was a kid and a little bit of piano - I used to play in bands and stuff. Sometimes its good to have that musical background that you can use to supplement your stuff - like the difference between Dr Dre's sound and a lot of other people's is that he'll take a sample and completely replay it with a band and that's why it sounds so crisp. Not that I've went for that sound all the time but you definitely have an advantage if you can play the shit."

It was at the age of sixteen that Mark got turned onto the power of the DJ, and it was the art of the hip hop DJ that really inspired him to take to the decks - especially given that he was living at the very heart of the city that invented hip hop, New York. Although as fate would have it, it was his birth father, back in London that provided the necessary tunes that would later go on to set him apart from his New York DJing counterparts. "My dad used to manage bands and was heavily involved in the music industry. Subsequently he had a massive record collection, so when I started DJing I got a lot of great records out of his collection

from the likes of Grandmaster Flash to Stevie Wonder and Roy Ayers and all that kind of shit, as well as some killer rock stuff." And it is that wide spread of musical heritage that Mark sees as setting himself apart from many other DJs in the US. As he says, "New York gave me a really solid hip hop foundation that I might not have had as strongly if I'd lived in the UK cause in New York hip hop is fucking everywhere. But the great thing about growing up and living in England, you really get a good variety of music. You get a lot of pop, which is throwaway, but you also get everything from Loose Ends to Soul II Soul and Happy Mondays to the Stone Roses and shit like that, which is like a big pot to my musical background. As a DJ I like to throw in some shit, you know if its got a good groove to it I don't see there is a reason not to throw it on cause it doesn't fit a certain genre. When I do a set its not like I'm like 'hey isn't that amazing how I mixed that Nirvana track with that Beanie Sigel record' - its not about me I just want to open people up to something different."

It was those genre crossing DJ sets that quickly gained him notoriety on the New York club scene, which gained him access to the city's hip hop elite. Playing all the hottest parties, Mark was soon counting P Diddy amongst his friends, playing his 29th birthday at the behest of J-Lo, no less. "Whenever I see Puffy its like 'show time', if you know what I mean. It's not like there is much hanging around or down time. He'd always be in a hotel room finishing his album with a giant Pro-Tools set up. He's definitely a cool guy and he's got an empire to preside over and I'm sure it's going to take its stresses on anyone. But I never saw the super-bling Puffy that is jet skiing in Saint Troupe kind of vibe. With me it was like, 'come on let's go to this party and kill it'."

Now confirmed as a superstar DJ in the States, Mark assures us that as a hip hop DJ the money isn't all that you might think. "I used to get paid a lot more for DJing but since we are in a global recession right now it definitely trickles down to the DJs. At one point I was, I suppose, getting super pay but as a hip hop DJ you have a kind of ceiling on how much you get paid because you can't do a Paul Okenfold and play for 20,000 people because hip hop hasn't gone down like that yet. Although, I see it kind of happening cause being in London I see places like Ministry of Sound, which are iconic dance clubs, now have a hip hop night on a Friday."

With his celebrity status as Puffy's DJ fully intact and his diverse DJ sets gaining him notierity in the clubs of New York, it wasn't long before he came to the attention of hip hop stars MOP and we return to where we were - how he got all these stars on his debut album. "They called me because I knew their manager and they were like 'hey we've sampled this Foreigner song can you put in a good word?' My step-dad, he's a big hip hop fan anyway, so he was cool with it. When it was time to do the video I took my step-dad out to Brownsville, where they were shooting, to meet MOP. It was funny cause I didn't know exactly how it was gonna go down, whether they were going to be cool or if it was going to be a little awkward, but as soon as we got there they were like 'awe man, thanks....we didn't know about Foreigner and then we heard that song, which made us want to make this track, thank you for making that song'. They got on as if they'd known each other for twenty years."

As for the rest of the participants on 'Here Comes the Fuzz', Marks' also got a story to tell. "Q-Tip he actually DJs as well - he's got amazing taste in records - so I knew him from that. With Sean Paul, a good friend over at his label brought him by and I played him a track that I'd sampled 'Uptown Top Rankin' on and it went from there. Mos Def, lives in New York and he goes out a lot so he'll come down when I'm DJing. I remember one night I was DJing D'Angelo's second album launch party and Mos jumped on the mic' and ended up MCing the whole night, even if I went into stuff that was a bit less conventional... I think I remember at one time playing Human League and Mos was like, not full on rapping but doing that '1,2 y'all keep it moving' over the break and it sounded really cool. So I knew Mos from off and on and he just came by one night and I played him the record. I even had Jack White from the

White Stripes on the album at one point but there was a problem with getting clearance so I didn't get to have his work on there after all."

Being a DJ and a multi-instrumentalist created the perfect setting for putting together the album and it all came to fruition in a relatively short period of time, as Mark explained. "I spent a few months holed-up in the studio coming up with tracks and the material was quite eclectic. Like most of the stuff I do it starts with a beat through the MPC and then it can go pretty much wherever from there. I ended up with different kinds of tracks and I had an idea of people who I'd wanted to appear on them. People would come by the studio and put their two cents worth but as a DJ – well, hopefully if you are a good one - you'll have a good ear for who sounds right over what beat, the same way you'd mix an accapella with an instrumental. Every now and again I'd make a track and I'd throw on someone's accapella, like an old MOP accapella just to see how they sound on a particular track I'd made, but most of the time you kind of get a vibe."

The list of contributors is an impressive one, but don't get the notion that he's big headed about it; it's just his life, plain and simple. For someone who has always been surrounded by superstars having a few well known rappers and singers on his album isn't that big of a deal, they are on there because they are good at what they do. After all if he really wanted to show off 'Here Comes the Fuzz' could quite easily have been a superstar rockers meets the upper echelons of hip hop affair. Imagine it, David Bowie and P Diddy, or Paul McCartney and Jay Z – then again maybe that's the idea for the second album.

'Here Comes the Fuzz' is out now on East West/Elektra Records