



COSMIC SLOP

A COMPANY FLOW RETROSPECTIVE



by Roosevelt Franklin (Golgo 13)

I got stopped by cops on my way to the Bowery Ballroom cuz I popped the top of my Guinness in the street. I coulda got locked since I didn't have I.D.. I gave 'em a fake name, address, etc. which came up blank on the undercover car's computer. I got away again but it's getting too close. I'm afraid my day is coming sooner than later. I don't know how much longer I can keep this up.

I just wanted to get off the street after that. At the spot, I seen Jab, prez of Fat Beats; gave him a pound. Jean Grey (Whut Whut) let me kiss her on the cheek. I smoked a leaf with Lifelong and Poisen Pen of Stronghold, then built with Ill Bill and Mr. Live. The house was jam packed and Cucumber Slice was on the wheels of steel. I felt like the President again. I was still nervous, but anybody'll get petro when po-po approach. So many pseudonyms over the years for stupid shit, it's hard to keep track. 2 or 3 of 'em got warrants, too. Who needs this shit? I ain't no criminal. Hell if they get me.

With the opening sequence of "D.P.A.(As Seen On TV)" playing through the Ballroom's speakers, Company Flow hit the stage. It'd been almost 3 years since all 3 worked together. The group had officially broken up just a few months before. This was their last show.

RED HEAD KINGPIN

It started with a smart ass kid named El-P. Inner

city latch key native New Yorker, he's the type to get kicked out of 2-3 different schools but still snag his G.E.D. at age 16. Better yet, he scored in the top 5 percentile of the country. Trying to do it since the days of the Fat Boys, he was making beats as a freshman and rhyming by age 11. He interned for a music lawyer and settled on engineering school after the last school for the gifted he attended expelled him. By the time he got to college, he'd already run with the pros, so out the window went institutionalized education. The next step was perfection.

Under the name Company Flow, he put out his first single "Juvenile Techniques" on Libra, a small indie record label where Bigg Jus was an employee. He and El clicked. Since Jus had no place to stay at the time, he became another of El's roommates. Their loft had a mini studio they used to concoct beats together. Mr. Len came into the picture as the DJ for El's birthday party celebrating the first record by Company Flow. Mutual musical appreciation brought all three together like the Musketeers sworn to protect the honor of the crown. They had to go underground, though, to complete their mission.

Open mics, college shows and tapes sent in to the Stretch Armsrtong and Bobbito radio show got them early notice. The single "8 Steps to Perfection" broke them through. Jus came up with the song concept, hook and arrangement while El did the beat, reflective of a process the two would use to write songs in the future.

Company Flow released the single independently which quickly became the group's m.o.. It's success encouraged them to put out an E.P. Hooking up their own manufacturing and distribution, in late '95/early '96 they released it on their self-owned Official Records. Labeled as 'Company Flow featuring Bigg Jus' with the idea being to establish Jus down the road as a solo artist, it eventually moved 30,000 units, ALL VINYL. Much of this double vinyl E.P. was sold out of a baby Fat Beats operating from a basement storefront near Alphabet City.

The start of this record store was symbolic of a crucial time in Hip-Hop. The independent scene, like the punk rock/alternative music scene of the eighties, began to blossom and create its own support system. College radio and then the internet gave precious air time to artists who couldn't get play on mainstream rap outlets. Not many rap artists knew how to put out their own projects independently. Company Flow was among the first to come along and figure out how to work the system via retail, radio and internet to make it happen for self. The consciousness had begun to shift and they were at the head of the class. Heads were discovering they didn't need the major labels to put music out. They could do it themselves, have it sound how they wanted and still get paid, more than if were fucking with a big label. Being indie was the shit.



photos by Laura Wilson

INFLUENTIAL SCIENTIFIC P O W E R

It wasn't long before the major labels came to them based on the numbers Company Flow's double vinyl E.P. sold. All offers from the big boys were turned down. Co-Flow had no opposition to blowing up, it's that the labels didn't step correct. Co-Flow, in fact, flipped the script by coming up with their own version of a recording contract to present to potential pimps. Can you get to that? None would offer what the Company wanted- ownership of their own masters, 50% of net profit off the album's sales, etc. Along came Rawkus, the only label to ante up.

EL-P: Rawkus was completely unknown at the time. They were trying to find their niche. They were trying to find something to get behind that would mean something or that would blow them up that they could concentrate on. They saw the value in saying "OK, we'll do a 50-50 deal. You can own all your masters, publishing, etc.. We'll do it because we need what you have. We need to be attached to this movement."

"The Fire In Which You Burn" single became the test to see how Rawkus would handle themselves. Recorded as the Indelible MC's, the classic collabo featured guest performances by J-Treds and Breeze of the Juggaknots. Rawkus did they thing. They cemented their relationship with Company Flow who, along with Shabnam Shadeeq, became the first artists in Rawkus' stable to help make Rawkus the powerhouse they are today. Before then, the label had fucked with a bit of everything: rock, dancehall, drum and bass and occasionally a little rap. Financially, they weren't doing well. This is despite their not so well known backing by Rupert Murdoch money due to the label's close connection to the media mogul's son. Rawkus hadn't figured out yet many of the details to operating a business.

EL-P: I hooked Rawkus up with some of their first

distribution. I had to link them with Fat Beats (distribution service). I had to go there and be like, "Yo, this is me. Just do this for me. Hook my record up". They didn't wanna fuck with Rawkus.

When Rawkus began to license the trio's music, Rawkus became seen as an underground representative, some type of out the basement production/ independent music label; tres chic. Their new image was inspired and influenced by their association with Company Flow. Rawkus would capitalize (cannibalize?) off this illusion until it was parlayed into their being perceived as a spearhead in the rejuvenation of Hip-Hop culture.

THE MORE EMOTION I PUT INTO IT THE HARDER I ROCK

After a few singles released like psychoactive chemicals into the system, in the summer of '97, they unleashed the masterpiece with the Funcrusher Plus album. A combination of the E.P. with an equal amount of newer material, it's considered classic like the first by the Wu, De La and the Main Source. Critics praised the groundbreaking uniqueness of this hip-hop hallucinogenic. Denoted as the start of something different, this innovation in rap set a standard that said shit would never be the same again. It announced a new era, a reintroduction to a new generation of the original elements that make up this thing of ours.

A cornucopia of warped samples, paranoid sounds and home made beats finessed by actual arrangements, the album's packed with heavy emotional content and raw authentic grittiness. Its ruggedness is balanced with bugging out. Made for heads to nod to, the LP's undanceability has an extremely funky weirdness to it that crackles with uprock energy. Joints like "Blind", "Vital Nerve (feat. BMS)", the separate single "End to End Burners" were made specifically with the B-boy in mind.

EL-P handled the majority of the production while Len and Jus each handled their own solo tracks. Taking the sobriquet "Space Ghost", the DJ pieces are on some Deep Concentration, outer limits what not. His methodical style of scratching, like Coltrane killing a note or the Funkadelic band vamping, testifies to his using the turntables as a musical instrument.

Linguistically descendant from a lineage that includes Kool Keith, Organized Konfusion and the Treacherous Three, Funcrusher's wordy rapping pushed the envelope on what could be done micraphonally. Their cybernetically enhanced ebonic poetry utilized hyperliterate lyrics, off beat timing and high vocab. It gave them an air of verbal sophistication when the trend was to grunt, bark and pay someone else to write rhymes for the artist.

Their next level stylings, sprinkled with graf lingo and filtered through a left of center political phi-



COMPANY FLOW

F U N C R U S H E R P L U S



losophy, painted an illbeint scenario for the B-boy of the new millennium. Sonically, Funcrusher Plus was an apocalyptic futuama. On one level, it spoke to depression and loneliness, rejection and being outcast. It also represented non-cooperation with the system. It's artistically fighting against the corruption of the shitstem in an oppressive national security state prone to governmental abuses of authority. Company Flow is non-conformist in the capitalistic culture of Corporate America, the damnation alley of the global village. In the Earth crisis of this Industrialization, Hip-Hop is portrayed as the savior like Road Warrior.

The success of the album shone a light on a scene in hip-hop music reminiscent of the bebop era. Reacting to the commercialism of rap, heads were approaching the medium with a jazz like aesthetic in terms of tone and concept. With non-stop experimentation, artists linked up to record projects, disband and reappear at another session in a completely different formation. This school is known for reaching like Hendrix. With this one album, Company Flow spoke for a whole massive. Good luck finding it in stores.

FUCK MONEY MONEY MONEY MONEY MON-AY!!!

Kids were feeling them as far as South Africa. After touring the world in support of the album, however, Bigg Jus made that move on his predestined path as a solo artist.

For their next trick, Company Flow pulled a rabbit out the hat with Lil' Johnny From The Hospital. The all instrumental album featured equal production from Len and EL-P.

EL-P: *Len had more of a hand in that album than he had with any other. For us, doing a production album, it gave us a chance to explore music. We're hip-hop musicians, the same way graf artists are hip-hop artists. We wanted to do music. We didn't want to make records.*

Rawkus, meanwhile, had started to become

successful. Promoting themselves as a leader in keeping the culture alive and true, they kept coming with consistently strong work. Artists like Mos Def and Talib Kweli, not to mention the first Lyricist Lounge album and the release of Soundbombing, a compilation of singles from their core line up, were getting the little label big fame. Coincidentally, the term "soundbombing" came from a lyric by Company Flow. The sequel, Soundbombing 2, included a Co-Flow joint they would perform at a rally in Madison Square Garden to support Ralph Nader's run for President. On "Patriotism", Mr. Len's heavy scratching cuts like poplocking as EL-P plays the role of America, rapping about how fucked he up is, pissing on the population responsible for his power. It wasn't long after this the Company decided to quit Rawkus.

EL-P: *We just stepped to them like, "We don't think it's the right situation. It'd be better if we just stepped off."*

We had already established an attitude. Company Flow started "independent as fuck" on some artistic, pushing forward, supporting unproven music shit. I don't think Rawkus had an attitude. What they did was kind of co-opted our attitude. That attitude that's now associated with Rawkus was ours and that's ok. We wanted someone to co-opt that attitude because we felt that needed to happen in the industry.

I'm not gonna dis Rawkus. Rawkus does their thing. Rawkus is becoming and trying to become what they always wanted to become which is a major player in the music industry. It just so happens that Hip-Hop is working for them. They don't want to be outside the game. They want to be a part of the game. That's all there is to it.

EL-P started his own label, Def Jux, and put out a Company Flow double 12 inch project featuring the debut of rap group Cannibal Ox. His Clockwork Orange like production for urban

survivors takes it there with monster tracks like "Simian Drugs (feat. Ill Bill)" and the Beatlesque "Simple". Just as it hits stores, the group breaks up. Feeling their mission had been accomplished and citing strong desires to explore differing star systems, Company Flow officially disbanded.

TIME'S UP

The chain smoking red haired robo symphonic composer is like a strange Dr. Frankenstein surrounded by the racks of electro computerized musical equipment in his home studio. Trained in trumpet, sax and piano, EL-P plays the sampler. The crates of vinyl around the room are his library of sound. This crib on the edge of Brooklyn is the maternity ward for a gang of artists about to emerge as recognized leaders of the new school.

Everyone on Def Jux owns their own masters, publishing, etc. All deals are one offs so that no one gets caught up in any long term brokerage. The label's designed to be a launching pad for other's careers, but also affords EL-P the playa positioning to do what he wants and not be fucked with. He's free to work with who ever and put out music he believes in. He's like Rza at the start of the Wu Empire. Both collaborated for the 2nd Lyricist Lounge album on a track that wound up on the killing floor. That won't be the case with the work he's put in on the soon come solo album from Zack de la Rocha of Rage Against The Machine.

EL-P invests his industry clout into the unknown artists that make up the label's roster, his own version of Uncle Jam's Army. Def Jux has already released a well received E.P. from Boston's underground prince Mr. Lif and a ridiculously good album (Cold Vein) from EL's new roommates Cannibal Ox. The Def Jux compilation, which includes the Co-Flo double 12 inch, hints at what's in store with tracks by Aesop Rock and RJD2. The near future sees projects coming through from the Weathermen and EL's own solo piece. He knows how to surround himself with talent.

EPILOGUE

They're all onstage with Company Flow during their final performance. At one point, I peeped most of the Arsonists, Non-Phixion, Stronghold and the Juggaknots along with Cage, BMS, J-Treds, Scaramanga, and the Def Jux roster all acting up like mourners at a wake in New Orleans. It was a scene, a microphone orgy on the Bowery.

I had to leave the Ballroom before the crowd could congregate on the concrete. I exited discreetly so's not to get caught up in the still captivated audience. The beast had made me squeak that night but I'm not in it for the cheese. Like a tiger taking a leak in the jungle, I tagged up a few doors and mailboxes on my way back uptown. Humbled by the rumble in the belly, walking to the subway had me peeping 'round corners for onetime. Got to get over is the philosophy like I just can't stop. Space Ghost is how I say goodbye.

...A U Y O

WHAT'S EATING MR. LEN

by Brillz

I'm not gonna front. This is supposed to be an interview. I guess I was supposed to prepare some real thought provoking questions to get under the skin of the former Company Flow member, DJ Mr. Len. But on the strength, Len's famalam. Perhaps this raises some conflict in regards to the journalistic integrity of this piece? Fuck it, I handed Len a cheap ass Radio Shack recorder and he went all out. A busy man, at what some would describe as a crossroads of his career, Len's got a lot on his mind.

YRB: How you felt about the last Company Flow Show?

Len: *I thought it was cool, kind of emotional, a little sad, ya know? Been in a group for dumb long, finally say it's all over - big change. All in all it went well. It was kinda cool having Jus back up on stage, and to have all three cats doin our shit. It was good to see all my other peoples up there, but on that last show topic, afterwards, I got some feedback. A certain writer wrote some shit for the Village Voice. I always knew people kinda dickrode L as the main frontman or whatever and that's cool, but in the article, dude biggin up LP like he did everything all by himself. If that's how people view it cool, I know the truth, I know what my*

contribution to the group was and contribution to this music is. But it's like "LP parts Company and the two sidemen will be doin B lists albums" (what was said in the Voice). Definitely I'm insulted by bullshit like that. First of all, cats only write some shit like that because they know I'm on some intelligent shit and above just wildin out and woopin some writer's ass because of some shit that he wrote. They wouldn't write that shit about the Wu. Secondly, let my album come out before you diss it.

YRB: What's up wit the new project?

Len: *I got the Juggaknots, Jean Grey, Lord Sear, Mass Influence, I'm tryna get a track from L, Kise, Chubb Rock and Mister Live; some really interesting songs being done. Right now, I'm working on this song called Aborsheniqua.*

YRB: Aborsheniqua?

Len: *Yeah, it's kinda like a true story about this girl who wanted to have sex with me the same day she had an abortion. She was always pregnant, always getting an abortion, always just had an abortion. It's some interesting shit. It's a hip-hop album. I don't think it's as science fictionish as what people think I am or thought I was. I make joints. The beat sound hot, a motherfucka rhyme to it, it's cool.*

YRB: How was your day as Tigger's cousin on (BET's) Rap City? It seemed a little awkward.

Len: *It was really interesting. He didn't say much to me. He didn't know who I was. That's cool, I don't expect the whole world to know who Mr. Len or even Company Flow is, but respect my shit, money. I got up on your show-research and recognize. I'll even get conceited with it. As far as the background music that was played during the show, it was probably one of the better shows because it wasn't that typical shit. If I wasn't playing some CoFlow or CanOx shit, I was playing some white label B-side shit. It wasn't the same old bullshit. He definitely knows his commercial hip-hop shit, and maybe some basic underground shit. He definitely didn't know who the hell I was. And to say that I'm his cousin... if I made it that far, you need to know sumpin.*

The Crazy King

LUNE/TNS AKA BIGG JUS

by Roosevelt Franklin

Not satisfied with just MCing supreme, Jus became an A+R at 3-2-1- Records, the label he was signed to after departing the Company. When the label folded, he took the artists he signed and put his skills into his own label, SubVerse Records. Representing subversive actions throughout the underground, its focus is keeping the movement alive. He and his partners have put out product by Scienz of Life, Micronauts, Everliven Sound and Marq Spect as well as critical releases from Blackalicious, MF Doom and KMD. He's also been filming a B-boy documentary with Kane of Everliven Sound covering the history of this thing of ours.

LUNE has specialized experience in the culture like a sociologist. Conceived to be a full circle hip-hop group from the get, LUNE represented the graf element that influenced Company Flow's gumbo so lovely. His self-named track on Funcrusher, a poetic lecture of aerosol folklore, is a hallmark, royalty for a rare subject in rap music.

His knowledge of graf is fathomless like he plays chess with Phase 2. An orphan running the streets of South Jamaica, Queens since 13, he was often homeless and slept in the subway. This

self described full time professional eat, sleep, diewriter focused on bombing and insides, wrecking the E's, F's, J's, A's, N's, R's and all the Queens bus lines. His tag, LUNE/ TNS, came from a shortening of "alone". TNS was thrown up out of respect for the prez of The Nasty Squad, EL3 (R.I.P.).

LUNE: *Writing saved my life. I used to be homeless on the trains at a point in time when shit was real ill on the trains. It would be mad winters and shit, and I'd be sleeping on the subway where I can't necessarily sleep that night. What I'd do is write all night long and then sleep during the rush hour crowd. I'd look like a kid probably going to school. When I wake up, I'd write some more then go out and try to steal food. I've lived my life on the trains and I had nothing else better to do than look at all these names.*

This is Hip-Hop how I know it. For those who don't understand, this obviously wasn't made for you, so fuck you.

LUNE: *When I was first doing it, it wasn't even Hip-Hop. It was just that a group of A-alikes got together. Basically, it was a scene. In that scene you had breakers, writers, DJ's, MC's, you had uptown, downtown, you had the boros, and*



everybody came together.

It wasn't even called "Hip-Hop" in that sense. That was really a Busy Bee saying, "Hip-Hop ya don't stop". '81-'84, that's when it really started to gel. It's been going on since '74, '75. Right around the time when "Sucka MC's" came out (by Run-DMC), that's when I think it officially spread all over the city and became the movement. Even then, it wasn't Hip-Hop. To me, that terminology started happening in '85, '86.