



Uncle Jam's Army a.k.a. Leaders of the New School

TEAM DEF JUX

"... all you multi-media giant conglomerate super-companies are snatching everything else up and sucking the soul out of any company that had a good idea..."

By Roosevelt Franklin
Photos: Jon Decola

Many have 'em pegged as rap weirdos, somewhere in between intellectual savants and a gang of kids rhyming to battle their own mental illnesses. Multicultural like that crew the Warriors from Coney Isle, they're each representing b-boyisms for the new millennium like Generation Next do the X-Men. Their headquarters – a record label making music for a post 9/11 world, a cross between the soundtracks for *Bladerunner* and *Wild Style*. The mission is freedom, survival and getting pussy – the usual. Just don't call 'em underground.

A lotta know-nothings would like to describe their style as Jean-Michel Basquiat doing graffiti. Don't treat them as the sonic equivalent of art house movies for the Hip-Hop nation. Come at them like that and they'll take it like your calling 'em gay. Try this instead – they're Hendrix with a hoodlum

attitude, counter-culture mixed with urban angst highlighted by electric neon. Nonconformity is an understatement here. They do it their way – Burger King's collecting props worldwide, they're recognized as her-alds. Definitive Jux just may be the missing link to that new sound so many heads have been waiting on. Fresh, fresh, fresh, this treasure chest was blessed by a pirate named...

El-P a.k.a Captain Funk-A-Hoe

He's the Rza of this. The comparisons are undeniable. Not too many know that one of his main inspirations, though, was Prince. Check the changes in his song structures. The collegiate rhyming and offbeat timing make him seem like a jazz artist when really, he's trying to make pop like the Wu. A lotta cats may not get it, but El-P ain't no fool when it comes to this biz.

Rawkus Records caught a clue early on. They co-opted the "independent as fuck" image of his former group, Company Flow, until they could parlay their company into something juicy enough to sell to MCA. Manipulation is a many-splendored thing. El flipped the situation and Co-Flo's last record became his own label's first release.

EL-P: "I just wanted to put shit out that I liked. I was kinda disgusted with my relationship with Rawkus and where I thought they were headed. I just wanted to follow up on what I had originally intended to do, which was to come out with music and form a label that was absolutely 100 percent artist-friendly. We're not trying to recapture anything. Cats are trying to define something new. At the same time, the music reminds me of what I loved about Hip-Hop when I grew up in New York."

Squadron Supreme

The year 2000 brought the Def Jux compilation EP, introducing the first string to the community. Since then, Cannibal Ox has become an overnight sensation. Comprised of Vast Aire and Vordul Megillah, these lyrical avengers are a more urban form of Outkast with spray cans. Funky, futuristic, flow supreme, their storytelling is grounded in ghetto morality. They represent street nobility reaching for cosmic awareness. EL-P's crunkified soul-sonic production uncannily complements them like something meant to be. An instrumental version of their smash album, *Cold Vein*, is in stores now, while they're in the studio recording the follow-up. Their parent company, Atoms Family, are also in the wings waiting to swoop down on the unsuspecting.

Mr. Lif is Boston's underground prince. This dreadlocked ragamuffin prep-school graduate subtly references obscure literature and metaphysics like a younger KRS ONE without the lion's roar. His mellow drawn-out cadence can be hypnotizing, as witnessed by the track "Arise" off his EP *Enter The Collossus*, the label's first significant release by a solo artist. Constantly questioning society's rationale (and sanity), his observa-

tions are easily digestible yet clever enough to make even Nas take notice.

Aesop Rock – honestly, I don't know what the fuck he be talking about. His style is like Chunky's alphabet soup, random letters in the thick liquid. It's like he's just throwing words up against the wall. Then you realize this splatter technique creates a picture like Jackson Pollock. An art school graduate who paints and plays bass, he's much more into video games than he is books. Go figure. The critics love him, though, like he was the second coming of Jack Kerouac. Three releases strong, his future's as bright as the title to his latest joint "Daylight."

The newest compilation, *Definitive Jux Presents II*, orientates the newbie to the label's enhanced roster. RJD2, a producer who specializes in instrumentals, plays sophomore to cats like Yak B@llz, Rob Sonic (of Sonic Sum) and Murs from the Living Legends crew, the West Coast embodiment of this indie movement. For those who think they have the Def Jux sound nailed down, there's the wild cards Masai Bey and Camu Tao. Whereas others on the label spit ebonically enhanced poetics, Camu's more on some straight rip-your-head-off shit. Both he and Masai are part of The Weathermen, a supergroup whose members also include EL-P, Cage and Copywrite. Their menacing track "Same As It Never Was" is as incendiary as the 60's radicals whose name they share. You better believe they got an album project somewhere down the road.

Strange Days

If the industry was actually about music, you would hear these cats somewhere on the dial other than college radio stations. This here's big pimping, and boss hogs like Def Jam don't take too kindly to their intellectual property being fingered like fruit at the grocery. What made these kids think they could actually get away with legally naming their rap label Def Jux? Bitch better have my money.

EL-P: "We definitely got the call. We got more than the call, actually. We got the letter.

We were a little surprised, but whatever. I'm a businessman to an extent. I understand. It wasn't something that didn't cross my mind at some point. I'm not gonna sit around and be like 'Oh, that's so unjust.' Obviously, it was a play on words (done out of sincere admiration). I was a little offended, a little hurt because to an extent, Def Jam was the paradigm for my Hip-Hop existence. That's what I identified a label with."

Don't let the sob story fool ya. These cats are eating and they got clothes on they back. Since 9/11, mad labels have gone under: Tommy Boy, Loud, JCOR, Arista dropped Bad Boy, even Virgin's cutting its urban department. All that glitters ain't gold. Definitive Jux, the little engine that could, is not only maintaining but picking up speed and strength. Not only are they charting, they've risen to the top of the heap and become the best seller of their distributor, Caroline Distribution, with no plans for slowing down. EL-P finally releases his long awaited solo piece this spring. Lif is set to come back with a fulllength soon and Murs will be doing a solo album with production by Co-Flo's DJ, Mr. Len. RJD2's been holding out, but it won't be much longer. It's like these cats just can't stop.

EL-P: "You can't fire me. While all you multimedia giant conglomerate super-companies are snatching everything else up and sucking the soul out of any company that had a good idea, Def Jux – you can't fire us, dog. We may not be on your level, but trust me, we're not gonna just disappear at your whim."

