



ALL GROWNS

Twenty-five years later and eight albums in,
the **BEASTIE BOYS** are still checkin' heads

BY WES ORSHOSKI

UP

Somehow, I just knew this was gonna happen. I mean, it had to. Of course it was going to.

After waiting for more than an hour for the Beastie Boys to amble into a spare dressing room backstage at New York's Hammerstein Ballroom, the 20 minutes allotted for the first interview for this cover story have been reduced to ten, and after Mike D and MCA spend the first few minutes going over the night's setlist—and with label execs waiting to speak with the band before they take the stage in roughly 35 minutes, or so we're told—the three wiseacres that comprise the Beastie Boys are pretty much impossible to reign in.

They're in the middle of their trademark interview shtick: One riffs, while the others think up witty retorts. Meanwhile, the interviewing journalist—me—struggles to glean a usable quote from the stream-of-consciousness babbling, and of course there aren't many. Well, that's not true. It's just that most of it has nothing to do with music, the group or its new album, *The Mix-Up*. And to some degree, that's okay.

Somehow, that tag-team wisecracking—an almost identical version of which you could have easily caught on MTV News in the mid '80s—has landed them on the topic of communication. Adam "MCA" Yauch dryly explains that the Beasties are exploring primitive means of communication of late—you know, semaphore, smoke signals—before Mike D (originally Michael Diamond) notes that he's thinking about building a system of pneumatic tubes under Manhattan through which he, MCA and Adam "Ad Rock" Horovitz could send notes to one another.

MCA: I've actually been tunneling. Did I not tell you about that? I'm doing a bigger tunnel so we can climb in.

Mike D: That's a great idea. So, to go to O-Scope [the band's New York studio], instead of me having to walk, I could just pneumatic tube?

MCA: Yeah. Your wife will put you in the tube and drop you in.

Mike D: Why do I need Tamra to do it?

MCA: You can't put yourself in the tube, because you gotta put yourself inside the thing.

Ad Rock: You could do it, because you could get in and pull the thing closed, and that would trigger the push.

Mike D: I don't know. It could be dangerous, because what if Davis [his son] does that to Skylar [his other son], and all of sudden he didn't want to be in the studio?

Ad Rock: I could send my cat into the studio.

See, here's the thing about interviewing the Beastie Boys: They're sort of like the Bo Jackson of music. If Bo played both baseball and football professionally, then the Beastie Boys interview and create music professionally. The whole question-and-answer process for them is like a game of free-word association, a chance for them to sharpen their wit. One thing's for sure: When they're being interviewed together, you're not going to get them to answer many serious questions or answer seriously. So when I begin to grin and laugh at how unwilling they are to be interviewed—"Somehow, I just knew this was gonna happen"—they of course cartoonishly defend their banter.

Ad Rock: This is some hot shit, though.

Mike D: This is quality brainstorming.

MCA: Someone's gonna get paid behind all these ideas.

Mike D: We're inventing shit—on your time.

Ad Rock: We're helping you, not just with this magazine, but with your personal life.

MCA: What you need to do is leave here and patent these ideas before we do.

Mike D: I'm gonna give you an advance on my book before it even hits the market. And that right there gives you the edge.

Of course I've asked for this. Well, sort of. The book Mike D is referring to is the scoring-chicks manual he mentioned a few minutes ago after I attempted to broach the subject of how life as the Beastie Boys has changed for them now that they're in their 40s (MCA's 42, Mike's 41 and Adam's 40). Foolish question in hindsight but here's what I got:

Mike D: So you want to know how we romance a woman? What the keys to success are? I'm actually publishing a book on the

topic, because I do know some of the secrets, and I'm gonna unlock those.

MCA: It's called *Mike D's Secrets to Porn*.

Mike D: Yeah, just for the men and women who want to get intimate with that special someone and they just haven't been able to connect. I'm just enabling—enabling the connect.

Ad Rock: How has life changed for us, sexually? I'm not having any problems. I'm good. I thought, after 40, you never know. But I'm good.

Before we've made any ground, the band's publicist approaches to end the interview and nudge the band out the door. Yet they insist on giving me a chance to ask a few more questions: "We've been bullshitting. Give 'em a few more minutes," says MCA. But when I look over and see another impatient minder at the door, to their surprise I suggest that we stop there and set up phoners—as in phone interviews.

MCA: Foreigners?

Mike D: "Cold as Ice!" [*Humming the song's intro*] Dunt-nunt-nunt-nunt-nunt-nunt-nunt-nunt... Let's talk about Foreigner.

Ad Rock: He doesn't want to, man. It's not on his list [looking down at my notebook].

Mike D: Alright, come on, just pick a question.

Not expecting much, and picking something off the top of my head—instead of from my list—I ask them what they're more excited to hear these days, the new Arcade Fire album or the new Nas record.

Ad Rock: Nas excites me more than Arcade Fire.

Mike D: I bought both records on iTunes. You can check my account.

Ad Rock: You downloaded them? Whoa.

Mike D: No, I didn't. Tamra bought the CD, so I loaded in the CD. And Nas' *Hip-Hop is Dead*, I bought the CD. And, largely, he delivered. The whole album wasn't off for me but he delivered. Arcade Fire, too. I'm not shittin' on them.

Having their attention, however momentarily, I try to rattle off one more question, and bring up the press conference they held the day before, during which a group of writers, mostly from fanzines and websites, repeatedly brought up the trio's race and prodded them for their thoughts on hip-hop. One interviewer from South America asked in an odd, round-about way, if they were disappointed that more white rappers had not found success. Other questions seemed intended to get them to bash current hip-hop, especially Southern hip-hop, which they wouldn't do. I ask whether they find it strange that, 25 years into their career, they're still being asked about race.

MCA: We get that every time we tour.

Mike D: And it's really outside of America, because I really think that now we're at a point in America and American culture where it's like hip-hop is such an integrated...

Ad Rock: We gotta go, son. [*MCA laughs*]

Mike D: If you're starting a band, you're going to be influenced by whoever—The Who, Bob Marley, Pearl Jam, Arcade Fire, whoever. You can't help it. It's in your blood at this point.

Having bullshitted their way through the entire ten minutes and then some, all three agree to talk more—and more seriously, hopefully—on the phone the following week. While that week ends up being a month, when each of the three pick up the phone, they temper the jokes and promise to give me something I can use. And they do.

If they didn't really care to talk about it backstage at the Hammerstein, here's what you should know about *The Mix-Up*: It's a collection of 12 tracks born out of a bass riff here, a few jams there or a couple ideas pulled together, all recorded at the band's Manhattan studio, Oscilloscope Laboratories. While working on the tracks, Diamond, Yauch and Horowitz all agreed to show up to Oscilloscope in what the latter refers to as "jazz-cat mode": the same suit-and-tie look that has carried over onto the group's current tour.

"We came up with guidelines," Horowitz says later. "It had to be late-'50s or early-to-mid-'60s suits, mod and Rat-Pack suits. And we had casual Fridays, but it had to be period-casual Fridays." Every day, the three tried to top one another with a new eBay find. And the dress code was all encompassing: When long-time collaborators Money Mark (keyboards) and Alfredo Ortiz (percussion) came in to record their parts, they too had to don the monkey suit.

"It was cool, because it gave you a different demeanor and a different outlook on your morning," laughs Ortiz. "When you get up and put on a tie, you're like, 'I'm going to work.' This is how it used to be back in the day when Old Blue-Eyes was going to the studio: He got up, put his suit on, put a tie on and put his hat on, and that was cool. But after a full day of recording, I have to admit, it was nice to get that suit off."

Ortiz, who made his recording debut with the group on *The Mix-Up*—after performing in the touring band for over a decade—even plays on trash cans and ladders at different points on the album, which he says is an example of the trio's anything-goes approach.

"We would all just show up and start playing immediately, and our engineer would turn the computer on and start recording," says Mike D. Grooves from Tuesday were copied and pasted onto stuff from Thursday. The goal, if there was one, he says, was to create "that great rock album with the crazy beats on it."

"When I first heard one of the songs," says Ortiz, "I was like, 'Hey, that sounds like the bassline to En Vogue's 'Hold On.' They even had like this Bauhaus-sounding song. They were trying to be all funky, and together we were experimenting, trying to take it in different directions. Everybody goes home and kind of just brings in their own ideas, and everybody listens to something more than the other. Nothing's really planned. I bring a dif-

ferent light and Money Mark brings a different light. And between the three of them, it just kind of blends together. Ad Rock is the kind of guy who's listening to The Buzzcocks, Mike D would listen to Arcade Fire and MCA would throw on some salsa. That's the diversity of them. When you have those three vibes, you're gonna get *The Mix-Up*."

Of course, that hasn't necessarily translated commercially: While still relatively new, *The Mix-Up* is on track to becoming the biggest dud of the group's career, numbers-wise. While each of their previous records have sold more than a million units in the U.S., the new disc has moved less than 150,000 copies in the States. Their previous instrumentals disc, 1996's *The In Sound From Way Out*, has moved 421,000 domestically.

If they wanted to do something different this time around—after issuing the pure hip-hop disc *To the 5 Boroughs* in 2004—originally, none of them thought that that thinking would manifest into a vocal-less disc. And that's probably going to change very soon, kind of.

The Beasties are working on a new vocal version of *The Mix-Up* featuring the likes of former Pulp frontman Jarvis Cocker, Lily Allen, M.I.A. and Mark Ronson. Each new track will either find the selected guest layering their vocal over the current track or remixing the song altogether. The Beasties themselves won't really be involved, beyond sending the artists tracks. "We're just asking people to do their own thing," says MCA, who adds that the band has been filming the shows supporting *The Mix-Up* and will possibly release a visual companion to the instrumental record. What that will be hasn't exactly been defined yet.

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If *The Mix-Up* offered the group a chance to kick out the jams—or funk—it's also inspired a significant change in how it tours, one that compliments each individual Beastie Boy's life as a fortysomething. To support the disc, the Beasties played a pair of shows in the bigger U.S. cities, with one night dedicated to a mix of hip-hop, punk and funk, and the other to instrumentals. Here's the wholly Beastie Boys twist: For the latter shows, dubbed "gala events"—after a track on the new record—the band asked fans to dress appropriately—no jeans, sneakers and especially no cargo shorts.

Of course, some have obliged, and some haven't. The Hammerstein gig was one such gala event, where a few hundred among the

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— Adam "MCA" Yauch

Photos: Wes Crisovski



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to find out

thousands showed up in ties, jackets, loafers and cheeky tuxedo t-shirts. There were even a few dozen women in ballroom dresses and heels.

"The gala event and the regular show are two different kinds of shows and two different audiences," says Mike D. "We get this nice, shared experience at the gala event, where the people who are coming really want to hear us play stuff we've never played before, or don't usually play. Those shows are for the heads, the regular shows are for the peeps."

"Doing the shows with more hip-hop in 'em," says Yauch, "reminds you of the energy of doing that show: You have to think about which songs you like playing and which lyrics you like saying, so it puts you in the right frame of mind for writing for the next record"—and by the time you read this they will most likely have already begun initial work on that disc, he says—"Doing the gala events just gets you in the mind of playing."

By stopping for two nights in cities like Boston and Chicago, touring has become less of a grind, and more welcoming to their families. All three of the Beastie Boys are married. Mike D has two sons, while the gray-haired Yauch has a daughter, who has traveled with the band. With a laugh, he notes that on their recent European tour, she had more fun hanging out with the crew than traveling or even watching her dad perform.

"It's definitely a little different," he says of life on the road now. "When we were 18, 20 years old, we were going out to clubs every night and getting wrecked, but I'm definitely enjoying the family life and spending time with my daughter and my wife. I'm happy with where I'm at. I'm not longing to be going out to a club and getting wasted till six in the morning."

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If more than a decade ago, the Beastie Boys were caught a little off guard by the appearance of VW minibuses and Deadheads in the parking lots before their shows, these days they're well aware of the fact that they've made inroads in the jamband scene—and that an album like *The Mix-Up* and gigs like the gala events will only further endear them to the Birkenstock set (*The In Sound from Way Out!* was perhaps the first true connection to the scene minus a few pot-smoking references on earlier albums).

"We got some numbers in our show that might make them happy," Mike D said backstage at the Hammerstein. "For instance,

'Shambala.' There's a lot of songs. I realize there's compatibility and incompatibility in terms of the setlists. But the dress code, I don't know how that's gonna go over," he quips, painting grins across the faces of MCA and Ad Rock.

MCA: We're definitely more into groove-oriented shit than, like, wailing.

Ad Rock: The Dead had two drummers, but they didn't utilize them in a funky way.

Mike D: Yeah, I feel like, "Where were the beats?" I know there was a lot of drumming, but where were the beats? Where were the butt-naked, raw, funky beats?

Ad Rock: It's weird to have two drummers and no beats. Know what I'm saying?

Mike D: On another note, James Brown had two drummers yet he never had them play at the same time, because his whole thing was that he would wear out the band. One band would have to stop, and the next band would have to kick in. Was it two bands or two rhythm sections? I'm not sure, but that was his whole thing: He would just drain 'em.

MCA: But the Dead had nice vocal harmonies.

Ad Rock: Yeah, I'm not mad at the Dead. The Dead had songs.

MCA: They have a certain feel to their shit.

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If they've done anything over a 25-year career, the Beastie Boys have definitely acquired "a certain feel" to their own "shit" as well. If the group began life as a punk band, its infant years found Diamond, Yauch and Horovitz gradually fusing the revolutionary sounds coming from the Bowery with those emanating from the Bronx. And while blending punk with rap seemed unusual or even unholy to some, it seemed natural to them.

"There was a commonality of energy and attitude in both musics," says Mike. "It's easy to look at the outward trimmings of each, and what people look like, and consider that they're very disparate forms of music. But when we were growing up, going to punk rock and new wave-type clubs, they all played hip-hop records as soon as they came out, and it all seemed to fit together very naturally."

With the Rick Rubin-produced juggernaut *License to Ill* (1986), the Beastie Boys became the first rap group to hit No. 1 on the *Billboard* album charts—with their debut album, no less. While songs like "Fight for Your Right" and "Girls" turned them into heroes for the younger generation, it also earned them something of a meathead tag. "There's tons of stuff that we said and did on *License to Ill* where we were joking around and it was completely misconstrued and taken out of context," says Mike. "We were joking around and unfortunately the jokes were too often lost. We sort of learned the hard way."

Three years later, the band reinvented itself with the ambitious *Paul's Boutique*, their first collaboration with beat squad The Dust Brothers and producer Mario Caldato Jr. If respected for its musicality, the album was a commercial disappointment. Afterwards, the Beasties dropped out of site, using a label advance to build its own studio, where they would spend three years reinventing themselves through the songs that would comprise their resurrection, *Check Your Head*.

"The record company people never asked what was going on, they never came to the studio," says Caldato. "We recorded whatever we wanted to, edited a lot of stuff, listened to a lot of stuff—that's why it sounds so different, because tracks were done months—or years—apart and it was a collection of three years of horsing around in the studio. We put our hearts into it and that came through."

In that time, Yauch would travel to India, which would later spark him to create the Tibetan Freedom Concerts, Horovitz would dabble in film and Mike D built a house. The tour for the album—the group's first since playing arenas on the *License to Ill* tour—marked a rebirth for the group, who packed small theaters and clubs on the *Check Your Head* tour. By the time of 1994's smash follow-up, *Ill Communication*, and especially by the release of its follow-up, 1998's *Hello Nasty*, the group was a commercial presence again, while baring little resemblance personally to the caricatures they became throughout the '80s.

Laughs Ortiz, "When I joined at the end of the *Ill Communication* tour, I came in thinking that it was going to be a big party. But after the show, it was kind of like, 'I'm going to my room, I'm going to chill.' It's like, 'Wait a minute, nobody's going out? Nobody's going to the bar? Nobody's going to go fuck shit it up?' So I had to find that myself. To this day, it's been that way."

Since 1990, the Beastie Boys have sold

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— Mario Caldato Jr. on *Check Your Head*

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more than 15.2 million copies of their major studio albums in the U.S. alone, according to Nielsen SoundScan. Through all of that, they remain as tight as teenage buddies.

"I think it's obvious to people that these guys love each other and enjoy each other's company and working together in every way," says Money Mark, (aka Mark Ramos-Nishita). "And that's impressive to me. In order for their thing to work, there can't be any attitude stuff. It would totally mess it up if these weird attitudes were clashing."

"With them, there's this ongoing negotiation, and it's cool to see when those guys are together. They each have their own shape in that triangle—and they fill it up. I think it's subliminal at this point: When they're backstage talking about an idea for this one riff that's gonna go on this one part of a song, they're all together." Confirms Ortiz: "It's a straight-up team. As much as they joke about basketball plays in interviews, they do that because they're a team—that's the way they think."

That said, if they're as close as brothers, they can bicker like them, too, says Mike D: "That bond enables us to keep going, but the fact that we do have a close relationship doesn't mean that we always all agree or even get along. Not unlike any family bond, sometimes you're not always going to agree. But disagreement or adversity is not such a bad thing."

"It's definitely more than just three guys coming into work and making songs so we can make our money," Horovitz says, recalling the recording of *The Mix-Up*. "We're friends hanging out, trying to one-up each others with these crazy outfits. That's what really made this album fun."

“It’s a straight-up team. As much as they joke about basketball plays in interviews, they do that because *they’re* a team—that’s the way *they* think.”

— Alfredo Ortiz

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Having toured with the band for some 15 years, Money Mark says a staple of its live shows has become young faces in the crowd. Because of its rich, diverse catalog—and because of all those party tracks on *License to Ill*—the Beastie Boys continue to pique the interest of new generations, in the same way as The Sex Pistols or Led Zeppelin.

“During one of the last shows that we did in Philly,” he says, “Adam Yauch looked in the audience and said, ‘That must be our youngest fan.’ There was this little kid on the shoulders of this guy. He must have been five years old, and was wearing these big ear-protector things, and his dad was rockin’. To me, in my heart, that’s what keeps it alive.”

MCA: It reminds me of some of the first shows I went to, when I was a kid. It’s definitely cool when you see kids like eight or nine years old, but a lot of times, you see kids out there who are 15 or 16, and it reminds me of when we were going to see hardcore shows. It’s good to see those kids, who aren’t jaded yet.

Mike D: If you had asked us over 20 years ago if we would we still be doing this 20 years

from that point, I don’t think any of us would have taken you seriously, but we look forward to doing it. And we already feel excited about the next record.

Ad Rock: I still think it’s weird that people like our band—that we, or anybody, could make stuff and people would like it. Ya know what I mean? I think about how much I love bands, and how much I would love to go see whoever—Minor Threat or Bad Brains, or current bands—the fact that people have that same feeling toward the shit we make as I feel toward those bands is pretty amazing. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to fully get that. It’s just weird.

At the end of my follow-up phoner with Mike D, there’s a pause and he says, “So does this mean you’re not as upset at us now?” referring to the band’s shenanigans at the Hammerstein. And that of course makes me laugh. “I gotta say, you got the good shit at Hammerstein. What we’re doing now is like whatever, not really of value, just the straight answer. You got the good shit. You got the Geraldo Rivera-type scoop.”

All is forgiven, of course. And somehow I just knew that would happen. I mean, it had to. Of course it was going to. ★



Photos: Wes Orshofski