

ROCKit.
KUTTIN' IT WITH KURT



REDNECK GAMES

KUTMASTER KURT

TEXT BY JOEL MARASIGAN

Hip hop music had a universal fiber when it was—in the spirit of MTV—brand-spanking new. Hip hop was sung and chanted. Hip hop was more than just music. It was a style: a life style, a spirit, a feeling. Today's hip hop has lost a little of its elegance and originality mainly because artists exaggerate the "money, hoes and power" stereotype. There are a select few who remember hip hop's roots and its intentions. There are a select few who are still accepted when they remove their headphones and backpacks and don the pink fur, ice the grill and jump in the Range.



ZNR: What influences did you take from the Bay to Los Angeles?

KMK: I think the people in the Bay are pretty open-minded about stuff. I think they have more of a kick-back vibe. It's a more eclectic scene.

ZNR: What's good about commercial hip hop?

KMK: I think it's fun. You can go to the club and party. The videos are pretty funny. It has become a big parody in a way—a parody of itself.

ZNR: What's good with less-commercial music?

KMK: It presents something in a different way. In general, but not all the time, it's truer to the original form of hip hop that came out in the '80s. That's what I grew up on and that's probably my strongest influence.

ZNR: Who is a commercial hip hop artist that made it from from the underground?

KMK: Xzibit.

ZNR: Dilated Peoples?

KMK: They're trying to. They haven't quite done it yet. If you've gone gold or platinum, then you've broken out—like The Roots, Mos Def, Talib. There are groups who keep to that style and eventually break out and reach a bigger audience.

ZNR: Anything good or bad about that?

KMK: It's bad when you alter your style in a way you don't like. If you don't mind so-and-so singing on your hook and you like the way the song comes out, then that's fine. But if you're doing it just to sell records and you're not happy with what you've made, then it's a problem. It's a personal thing for the artist. They have to live with themselves, what they're doing, and what they're representing to the world.

ZNR: What have you done that our readers might not know?

KMK: "Work the Angeles" by Dilated Peoples. They probably blew up from that song. It put them on the map. Kool Keith and I toured with the Red Hot Chili Peppers. I did some remixes for The Beastie Boys. I did a remix of "In the End" for Linkin Park that was basically the most-played off the *Re-Animation* album.

ZNR: How did it feel to be involved with the success of those projects?

KMK: I thought it was cool. First of all there are a lot of popular and successful artists who are fans of my work, but there aren't too many who have reached out to me and asked me to work with them. So I feel good that Dilated and Linkin Park reached out. You never know, Britney Spears might be a big Kool Keith fan, but she'd never admit it and never ask us to do anything.

ZNR: The relationship between you and Kool Keith was strained at one time. Now you've released *Diesel Truckers* together.

KMK: I've known him when since he was Ultramagnetic. I helped him go solo. He moved from the Bronx and I moved from the Bay to Los Angeles in 1994. We started at Capitol Records and worked on the *Sex Style* album. Capitol dropped its black music department so we went independent. Prior to this I was also in the studio with Dan, "The Automator," and he heard a couple songs I did with Kool Keith. One was called "Dr. Octagon." He asked Keith if he'd like to do the project with me. These are the projects where Keith reinvented himself. After a while the success and certain people interfered with what we were doing on a musical level. For example, on the *Black Elvis* album, I did production and a lot of programming for it, but for whatever rea-

son they were like, "We don't want your name on it. We'll pay you, but you can't put KutMasta Kurt." That was like the beginning of the strain. At the time I wanted to wrap-up a project with Keith (the *Masters Of Illusion* project)—and because I had already been working with Motion Man (who was on the back burner for 10 years)—I had to finish *Black Elvis*. We still went on to do the *Dr. Doom* and *Masters Of Illusion* albums and I still helped with the *Matthew* album. But after that I was really just Keith'd out. He wanted to keep going, but I didn't like the direction and I needed to take a break. He wasn't too happy about that. I think he was hurt and he said things on the liner notes.

ZNR: All smoothed out?

KMK: We're professionals. We're adults. He realizes what I bring to the table. Maybe at the time he didn't. I realize what he brings to the table. The bottom line is when we work together we have really good chemistry. We may not get along—but nobody gets along. Keith Richards doesn't talk to the other guys in the group. Brothers fight but they're still brothers.

ZNR: What were some of your first records?

KMK: I've been collecting records since 1983. At the time I was picking up things like Twilight 22, Electric Kingdom, and the first Run DMC album as well as "Lookout Weekend" and Shannon's "Let the Music Play." Hip hop back then was incorporated with singing. All that stuff is still dope. With Sugarhill Gang, Run DMC and LL hip hop really started slowing down. By 1986 BPMs had come down from the 120s and 130s to the 90s. Someone put on the brakes. One hundred fifteen was like big Daddy Kane's "Raw."

ZNR: Tell me about Threshold Records.

KMK: My label consists of *Diesel Truckers*, Motion Man's album, *Schoolyard EP*, the reissue of Ultramagnetics, *Dr. Doom*, *Mathew*, *Dopestyle 1231*, and the new album *KutMasta Kurt: The Redneck Games*, (before the people who run the Olympic Games forced a legal name change the album was called *Redneck Olympics*) which is a compilation of stuff I did for Mos Def, Linkin Park, The Beastie Boys and others.

ZNR: What's good about having your own label?

KMK: A lot of artists are mad at their labels. I don't have anyone to blame except myself. There are advantages to being on a big label, like distribution and money behind your project, but I'm fortunate enough to make a living in music. I make between 50 and 75 percent of a project. I have creative control. I don't have anyone telling me how to make music. I do what I feel. I don't have anything against majors—I've worked with a lot of them—but Threshold is a creative outlet.

ZNR: Who is in your circle of producers? Peers?

KMK: The people who influenced me are those who started sampling. People like Mantronix, the Bomb Squad, Marley Marl, the 45 King, and Paul C are my foundation. My contemporaries are



Pete Rock, The Alchemist, and Evidence.

ZNR: Describe what you are making.

KMK: I don't try to keep to a certain sound, but I try to keep a signature. I think it's the way I program, chop and put things together. I use and reuse drum kits all the time, but I usually try to layer an 808 under my drum kick. I like to give a lot of changeups in my drum programs. Maybe there's something happening during the verse that's really unique. I'd make a special drum pattern just for that. Another thing I like to do that other producers rarely do is make a B section. If I have an A loop going on, sometimes I'll break into a B loop. "Work the Angles" is a good example.

ZNR: What are your three rules of business?

KMK: One, distinguish the difference between business and friendship. Get paid fairly. Two, people should be accountable for what they do. Sometimes you have to sue people. Three, take control of your stuff as much as you can. People are complainers. And just because you are an artist doesn't mean you can smoke weed all day. Some people do, but they have managers.

ZNR: Rules for an upcoming artist?

KMK: Define a unique and original style and do the hard work. Be humble and pay your dues. It rubs people the wrong way when you come out thinking you're the greatest thing since sliced bread. I've met people who act like they've sold a million records and I'm like, "Who are you?" I hang out with Mike Shinoda from Linkin Park and he's one of the most down-to-earth people I know—even after selling millions upon millions of albums.

ZNR: What's the key to making it?

KMK: Persistence. Flexibility. Keeping your identity.

ZNR: Could you mimic a song from Dr. Dre?

KMK: I could but I'd do my music and add a sound that would make you think of him.

That's what music is: people taking from other styles and reinventing them. Rock and roll was soul music from the South that was changed up. Hip hop is, in a lot of ways, sampled disco and funk records. It's all evolution. I can listen to any kind of music and trace where it came from. All the electronic music today is basically just Kraftwerk—like Planet Rock. For funk it's James Brown. You've got the Dazz Band and Bar-Kays but they're an offshoot of Parliament Funkadelic.

ZNR: Who's doing something new today?

KMK: Kanye West is doing something different, because he speeds up vocals. Wu-Tang did it first, but Kanye West took and ran with it. Timbaland. Premiere. N.E.R.D. are more. I don't think there's anything amazing with what they do but they know how to make the hit.

ZNR: Do you keep score?

KMK: I look at it like this: I started off as a music enthusiast and at some point I was able to make that my job and my career. Since I was able to do that I've accomplished something. If I get a gold record or a Grammy I'd be happy, but it's not my goal—maybe I should have that as a goal. Maybe I'm stupid! Only 10 percent of the music industry can quit a day job and do this for a living. I'm in that 10 percent. Then there's the one percent who are millionaires—the ones who are getting those gold and platinum plaques. The problem is people are trying to get into that one percent.

ZNR: What should a person expect to make?

KMK: There's no guarantee. The more I work the more money I make. The better work I do the higher prices I can charge for my music. Sometimes you're hot and a song will take off and more people will come to you. There are a lot of ups and downs. It's like a wave and I try to stay in the middle. One year you could make a hundred grand. The next year you could make 60, and the next you could make 20. You just

have to sit back and think about why you only made 20 grand.

ZNR: Is it more artists equal more money?

KMK: My preference would be to do one album every couple of years. But the way the industry is right now I don't think I could survive. There are so many artists, MP3s, and fickle kids. I'm not going to sell myself short. I have to produce quality faster but my quality comes from inspiration. I have to find ways to find inspiration. Money is not my inspiration, but when you have to pay your rent you find ways to create inspiration.

ZNR: What were some of your day jobs?

KMK: I delivered furniture so I could buy equipment and records. I'd deliver furniture in the day and spin at night. I worked at Taco Bell and Domino's Pizza. One summer some friends and I walked around looking for dirty cars to wash for \$10—all just to buy records. Even when I moved to L.A. I did some work at labels.

ZNR: What was the last job you remember?

KMK: I worked at 7-Eleven for a week. I got fired and they wouldn't even tell me why. I felt really low. How does somebody get fired from 7-Eleven? I have friends who give me shit about it.

ZNR: What would you be known for in music?

KMK: I'd be known as a guy who had a lot of integrity and who put out high-quality projects.

ZNR: What would be your perfect car back then?

KMK: An Integra. My car right now is a piece of shit. I could get a new one, but I'm not too flashy. But I'd like a Jetta or an Accord—maybe the Hybrid.



Redneck Games / KutMasta Kurt

The original name for this compilation of Kurt's 22 hottest tracks was *Redneck Olympics*. The title caused such a controversy he was forced to change it—but he's used to remixing shit to make it hotter anyway. In short, past releases from the Beastie Boys, Dilated Peoples, Mos Def & Diverse, Linkin Park, Del & Mr. Lif, Planet Asia, Titan f/ Motion Man, Rasco, Blackalicious, Grand Agent, PMD, 7L & Esoteric, Resorte, and Kool Keith that have been Kurt'd. It's for all you backpackin' and hip hop-lovin' people alike.