

pimp

The image features the word "pimp" in a bold, lowercase, sans-serif font. The letters are thick and black. Above the letter 'i', there is a solid black circle. Below the text, there is a long, black, horizontal shadow that tapers to a point on both the left and right sides, suggesting a light source from above.

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QBERT

While those outside braved the bitter London cold, inside Cargo was packed beyond capacity - sweat literally dripping off the walls supporting the feverish audience. They had flocked, some dragged by over enthusiastic boyfriends, to witness the return of the undisputed king of Umicron Skratch: the mighty DJ QBert. P.I.M.P caught up with the man and his fingers of fury (surely worth more than the insurance on J-Lo's arse) before his mind blowing scratch showcase bent the minds of bedroom DJs forever.



Looking a little tired, Q is nevertheless in an upbeat and cheerful mood when we sit down in his hotel lounge. With multiple alter egos, DJ Lambchop could well appear - sporting a huge white afro - this half man/half sheep has a penchant for dirty electro beats and martial arts and what about the ubiquitous Scratchy Seal? (We later find out he's just chilling poolside back at the condo enjoying good times). This may sound ridiculous, and you would be easily forgiven in thinking that QBert uses humour and novelty as misdirection, an easy bump to his stage show and media persona. As it happens, you couldn't be more wrong. Q is undoubtedly the most innovative turntablist of his generation, the most talented scratch DJ that there has ever been. He remains modest, clear-minded and bursting with self-belief but without a touch of arrogance - the antithesis of today's debauched celebrity. These over-zealous descriptions aren't solely my scrawls: with universal respect, they've left the mouths of peers and contemporaries the world over.

Q developed his royal status pretty early on in his career. Back in the early 90s as part of the Rocksteady DJs and then as the Dream Team (flanked by now Beastie Boys compadre Mixmaster Mix), QBert won a string of DMC World Championships. After the request came to step down from the international battle circuit in 1994, he has since been inducted into the DMC Hall of Fame but insists: "The same energy of competing is still in me, I go home and practise all the time, you know, I'll get back to the hotel room and cut it. There's no missing it, it's still there. I'm always trying to evolve."

"Any musician or artist - they always improve until they die, like Shaolin monks. It's just part of life for me."

With a sprinkling of magic dust here and there, Q makes dope tracks doper. Over the last decade, he has collaborated with some of hip hop's heaviest producers and emcees. Perhaps most famously with Dan the Automator and Kool Keith on the critically-acclaimed Dr.Octagon project. Q even hints at the possibility of further adventures with the Doctor ten years after the first hilarious, but ever so slightly disturbing, 'Ecologist LP' was released on MoWax/Bulk. When asked about collaborations that have yet to transpire, his admiration for emcee heavyweights Rakim and Biz Markie shine through. He also reveals how once upon a time he turned down a job with Slim Shady himself. "Eminem wanted me to be his [tour] DJ one time, a long time ago, before he got big, and I was like 'who is Eminem?' - I didn't know."

However, Q's M.O is the progressive push of skratcH music as an artistic direction. From '94's Shiggar Fraggar pirate radio sessions (relentless noise terrorism from Q, Mix Master Mike, Apollo, Shortkut and DJ Disk!), via the now defunct Invisibl SkratcH Pk1z (Q, Shortkut and Mixmaster Mix), to his solo LP, the skratcH stalwart Wave Twisters and numerous battle records, released on his own Dirtstyle Records.

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Having moved his kingdom from San Francisco to the paradise retreat of Hawaii, Q has kept out of the spotlight over the last couple of years developing Thud Rumble with his buddy Yogafrog - a company which promotes the true essence of skratcHing: their culture, their lifestyle, their future. The latest project is the first ever portable turntable/mixer hybrid developed in collaboration with DJ-hardware giants, Vestax. The QFO is an impressive piece of kit that allows its owner to plug-in-and-play whenever and wherever he/she desires, complete with a solar powered battery pack and skip-less arm, well if a guitar player can wander and serenade...

QBert has been showcasing the QFO all over the world throughout the past year. Where Japanese wonder-kid, Kentaro (World DMC Champion 2004) gets busy on six turntables during his solo show, QBert packs light with his QFO and iPod.

As a definite key to his success, Q has always promoted a positive mantra of self-empowerment. Condemning the pessimism inherent in societies across the globe, he declares that: "World leaders wanna keep us down. They wanna make sure that we don't follow our dreams, but we gotta break out of that. There's a lot of hypnosis going on in the media and on TV." Adamant that everyone has potential: "Everyone has a heartbeat. Everyone breathes. Everyone can do whatever they wanna do," while noting that skratcHing has equilibrium of technical ability, rhythm and soul. Any other Zen secrets? Practice, apparently. Dull, I admit, but at the same time pretty inspiring. If you want that crown, you have to be more than a little obsessive about self-improvement, Q calmly states: "Any musician or artist - they always improve until they die, like Shaolin monks. It's just part of life for me."

Inspired by jazz legends Louis Armstrong, Miles Davis and Thelonius Monk and the genius of Jimi Hendrix, Q admires all who excel in their chosen vocation. "I'll read a book about Michael Jordan, try to find out why he is so good and then try to apply those things to what I do, and hopefully it works."

His performance later that night was an outer dimension showcase. The testimony is witnessing the 500-strong crowd bug out to an hour of pure scratching. Scratching turned 'eclectic, discerning bar goers' into a full on frenzied mob. Q's set never followed a self-indulgent path and I'm glad to say not one hi-hat-needle-tapping routine was involved. Now for all the scratch heads, the origin of the absurdly named hamster (cross fader reverse) switch, Q reveals: "Well, when we started there were no cross faders, just up and down line faders, so that wrist movement would be the reverse (to the regular cutting in motion). The Bullet Proof Scratch Hamsters were doing the same thing that me, Mixmaster Mike and Shortkut were doing with the cross faders but were calling it 'Bullet Proof Scratch Hamster,' so there coined the term hamster style."

As a subculture, scratching still isn't universally perceived as a valid musical expression. A definite skill and appreciated showmanship, but ultimately regarded as extra flava, the cherry on top. Qbert, YodaFrog and next generation cohorts (check out Ricci Rucker) aren't on this page; they've burnt the book - and if people are now open to the turntable as an instrument debate, then surely the manipulated sounds are music?

However, I don't think these DJs are worried about the overground perception of their culture. Qbert is safe in the knowledge that he has bridged a gap; post the original scratch trinity of Grandmaster Flash, Grandwizard Theodore and Grandmixer DST, and introduced a whole new generation to his progression and ear.

Words by Terence Teh
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Photo courtesy of Thud Rumble
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