

# VIVA! La Nerd Hip Hop Revolution!

text: PETE MISER photos: COURTESY THUD RUMBLE

Nerds run hip hop. Nerds run things in general but one might think that hip hop, with its popular images of thugs, platinum chains and fat rides, would be a culture in which nerds got sand kicked in their face and their milk money extorted. Fortunately, hip hop's player image is trumped by its insistence on skills and nerds are into studying and honing their skills.

I was reluctant to put DJ QBert in the nerd hip hop category when we first spoke, but the evidence is there. At 5' 5" [ish] he is height challenged. He is quiet, speaking in short reserved sentences that often trail off with a "you know" or, more often, with a silent assumption that you know, and he has a more than passing fascination with outer space and the music to be found there. Nonetheless, QBert is widely regarded as one of the illest DJs in the rawest, most vicious discipline of turntable music: Hip hop battling.

An informal survey of vinyl junkies on both coasts reveals that few DJs have influenced the current crop of turntablists more than DJ QBert. As a member of the legendary battle crew Invisibl Skratch Piklz, QBert, Mixmaster Mike, Shortkut, D-Styles, and Yoga Frog helped resurrect and reinvent scratching at a time when vinyl production was being phased out by the American music industry. By 1995 they had dominated the DMC World Championship so thoroughly that officials of the paramount DJ battle inducted them into the hall of fame and asked them to abstain from competing in the future. The Skratch Piklz are credited with inventing a whole new vocabulary of scratch that has contributed to the reemergence of consumer demand for vinyl records and the eventual preference

of the turntable over the guitar as the instrument of choice for new musicians worldwide.

As an individual, QBert has been at the center of the turntable music renaissance. His animated feature



film, Wave Twisters created a visual counterpart to his all-vinyl compositions. His involvement with music equipment manufacturer Vestax has resulted in the development of entirely new scratching equipment such as the QFO, the first turntable with a built in battle-worthy mixer. He continues to champion the recognition of the turntable as a musical instrument through Thud Rumble, the company that he and former Skratch Pikl Yoga Frog created in 2002. I caught up with QBert in October for a phone interview from his home in Hawaii.

**THEME: What made you move to Hawaii?**

**QBERT:** Yoga Frog, my partner, he's the genius in our whole scheme of life and shit. He was like, "Hey, why don't we move out to paradise?" and I was like, "Duh! Fuck yeah, let's do it!" It was the best thing ever. I love it. I hate leaving here. I look at my tour schedule and think, "this is stupid!" It's more healthy to be at home. Touring really kicks my ass. I'd rather be home practicing, perfecting my skills and being in paradise.

**What do you do for leisure?**

Well, it's strange, sometimes my job is leisure. I just made this new invention called the QFO. It's a turntable/mixer combination. You ever seen it?

**Yeah, I saw it on the Vestax website. What are the advantages of having a mixer integrated with the turntable?**

Well, it lets you have leisure when you're practicing. I live in Hawaii. I go to the beach and I can scratch and look at the waves and just kick back and relax. The music itself can be very leisurely!

**So you just listen to the master output, bring the QFO and the record and you can practice and mess around anywhere?**

That's it. You bring the QFO and an iPod with beats on it or a minidisc of a mix you made at home and you practice to that.

**Is that related to the Kutmobile [QBert's turntable equipped SUV] in any way?**

It's the next level from the Kutmobile! There's a little story on turntabletv.com that shows how I'm in the Kutmobile but it's too crowded in

there so we made the QFO. I can take that anywhere now.

**Vestax is selling the QFO?**

They just started about two weeks ago.

**Do you expect to use it in battles?**

You could if you wanted to. Of course, some people will want to be more traditional and just use the two turntable thing. The QFO is made for musicians—guys who go to the beach and bring a guitar, bongos, a violin or whatever. Now scratchers can bring a turntable out there, or wherever you want.

**What about outside of music? I'm wondering if your superior hand/eye coordination and dexterity lend themselves to other leisurely activities. Do you murder people at video games?**

I'm pretty good at Super Street Fighter. I play a lot of chess. I'm a big chess fan. I play one-minute speed chess games.

**Do you see any connection between strategy in chess and battling or music composition?**

Well, chess is known as the game of life. There are so many lessons of life that are in the game of chess. There is so much to learn from chess; applying the right moves as far as business, and everyday life.

**Have you ever played Scrabble?**

Scrabble is one of my favorite games! I play it online too.

**You're definitely from the nerd hip hop set.**

I am a nerd. Fuck yeah! Proud of it!

**Me too. I feel like nerd hip hoppers are going to start the revolution!**

That's it. When people apply themselves, those are the best heads. If you have a hobby and you really apply yourself then you get really good at it. Definitely people like us like to do some weird shit!

**How would you describe what you do to people who don't have any experience with turntablism?**

It's pretty hard to explain to someone. It's a strange thing I do. I take the recorded sound, put my hand on the record and move it forward and backward and play with the pitch of it to try to make weird sounds. I try to turn those sounds into something musical that has rhythm.

**Do you generally consider turntables to be more of a rhythm instrument or a melodic instrument?**

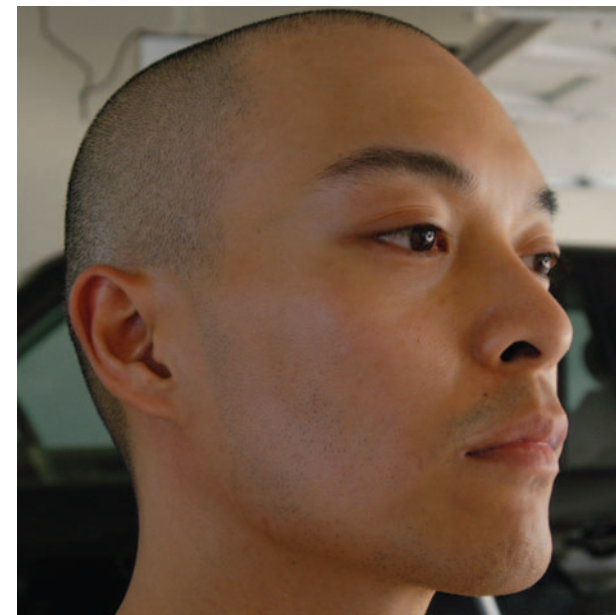
Definitely both. Drums are melodic. Just because they're rhythmic doesn't mean that they're not melodic. It's up to the musician to make every aspect of music come out of the instrument, rhythm, melody, harmony.

**You have an interest in musical styles outside of hip hop—or are you of the philosophy that music is music and shouldn't be categorized by genre—**

Well, you have to separate it by genre in your iPod—

**Right, but I'm not aware of many turntablists who cite other genres of music as an influence as often as you do. How do you see them as influences on what you do?**

There are lots of ways to learn from jazz musicians, rock musicians, people who play sitar, everything. Say Miles Davis. The way he used



silence. He was very poetic in his playing. The notes he used were rounded like in Indian music where straight notes aren't used so much. It's more of a round note. [QBert sings a note that bends down in pitch and slides back up before tailing off.] Coltrane. Thelonus Monk. The way he'll keep playing a phrase and keep flipping it. He'll keep playing the phrase over and over again but it'll sound different every time.

**It's deep to hear how seemingly disparate musical styles inform a person's musical identity. Do you find that you have to go outside of hip hop to come up with new directions for what you do?**

Absolutely. I'm always looking for influences.

Sometimes I even try to look for influences in outer space. It's definitely gotten me into some crazy theories about life.

**Are you the Sun Ra of turntablism?**

I don't know about that, but I used to check out the net for guys who had been abducted and had been to outer space and gotten to hear what music sounds like on different planets. I never heard anything but I have learned a lot about advanced civilizations on different planets. The really advanced races are all about love and their lives are about helping each other. It got me to be very spiritual and it got me into a very peaceful mindset.

**Tell me about Turntable Timmy.**

That's my friend's book. Everybody thinks I made it but I just helped him out with some cuts on it. I did some cuts, Doug One did the art for it. Doug is the artist for *Wave Twisters* and he does a lot of the art for our record covers and things like that.

**Do you plan to do another album soon? Similar to what you did on *Wavetwisters*?**

Absolutely! But I'm trying to look for something different in my head. I'm waiting for that little evolution to happen.

**Tell me about Thud Rumble. Is that your crew name? A company?**

Thud Rumble is a company owned by me and Yoga Frog that specializes in scratch DJ products.

**So you two are business partners in Thud Rumble. Is there a non-creative partner who is all about the books and one who is more responsible for the creative direction of the company?**

Yoga Frog is pretty much the business end of Thud Rumble, and I'm the artist, but he has a lot of creative ideas too.

**Do you consider yourself part of a crew at this point?**

Not really. Invisibl Skratch Piklz broke up in 1997. That was it.

**Describe what you would consider an ultimate collaboration or fantasy music project.**

Shit, that's a good question right there. I guess bring the Invisibl Skratch Piklz back and do something with all of us now that we've all gone and done our solo things. I'd like to see what happens with all the stuff we've learned. That'd be the thing I'd like to do again. All scratching. ■