



PHOTO MICHAEL LAVINE

3RD BASS

White like me?

by Rosie McCobb

Time for some very creative visualization: let's imagine for a moment that we are teen rap sensation Vanilla Ice. We drive home (in our 5.0) from a hard day at work "on the streets," beating off armed gunslings with our bare hands, receiving gunshot wounds to five places in our head, and all we want is a little rest and relaxation. We sit down in our favourite chair in front of the TV and tune into MTV, when all of a sudden, our very own self-frosted pompadour and all— is being portrayed by some guy (V. Ice asks: who in the hell is Henry Rollins?) in 3rd Bass' video for "Pop Goes the Weasel," and we look like a certified goon. Logically, wouldn't you feel like having a word with the 3rd if you were in Ice's shoes?

According to the saucy and outspoken MC Serch, in real life Vanilla Ice hasn't approached them because "he doesn't have enough heart to do that." Heart, which Serch found necessary to spell out for me when I offered that Ice doesn't have the balls to say something ("We don't character balls as strength in rap. If you got heart, you can stand up"), is something that many other rap artists seem to lack as well. And because Serch believes that rap should be "confrontational," 3rd Bass has been known for "standing up and dissing people who exploit it [the music]."

"People always take us out of context," Serch says, "like we make records to diss people, which we don't. But I would like to see more artists who feel that if what someone is doing is a joke, get up and say it. Don't be afraid, don't worry about what the consequences are gonna be."

While the track "Gas Face" from 1989's *The Cactus Album* and the video for "Pop Goes the Weasel" are what have garnered 3rd Bass their reputation for making "dis records," what remains positive and original about them is the fact that they stand up for what they believe in through a dense maze of music, lyrics and sampling.

First and foremost, according to Prime Minister Pete Nice, is keeping their focus centered around "making records." When asked if he thought speaking his mind in a fashion more akin to what KRS-One is doing would be more effective, Nice says, "It's cool. I think you can

do something along those lines, but I think when you get too preachy, you lose a little bit of your edge, and we're not going in that direction. Via the records we can get across some of the ideas and what we'd like enacted in society, but it's not as if we're going to make ourselves some sort of pseudo-preachers. A lot of people who do that don't have the knowledge to back things up. That's a little bit of exploitation right there, because you actually start making money off of creating an image for yourself politically."

Lacking knowledge is certainly something 3rd Bass will never be accused of. Serch is a graduate of Manhattan's High School of Music and Art, and Nice graduated from Columbia University. Both *The Cactus Album* and their latest, *Derelicts of Dialect*, definitely have a strong '60s influence, musically and lyrically. Nice agrees: "Yeah, on the last album, on songs like 'No Static at All,' and the song 'Shimmey' has a real definitive '60s sound." The inclusion of speeches by such visionaries as JFK, Nice says, are there because a lot of those ideas "have been lost now in the '90s, and people forget most of the strides that were made in civil rights were made back then." As far as deciding what spoken word pieces to include on the album, Nice explains, "I don't think it was a conscious effort. Sometimes we just ended up choosing things for the simple reason that they sounded good. I just like the way spoken word records sound over this type of music. And as for these '60s philosophies: they enacted the most change in a small period of time, especially when compared to how stagnant and conservative things are these days."

Pulling out samples from speeches and music is something that is innately a part of the 3rd Bass sound. When asked how they actually go about choosing what songs or pieces to sample from, Nice says that it's a process of trying to find something that will match with the song, but will sometimes just end up stemming from a certain sound they like. "I'll just make stuff by myself and I'll play it for Serch, and if he likes it, then I'll build it from there. A lot of it is improvisation. That's why I think it's kind of related to jazz in that aspect, 'cause you never know exactly how it's going to come out."

Unlike many of the minions of rap groups, 3rd Bass aren't afraid to sample from or include music from songs outside their genre. On *Derelicts of Dialect*, selections from the Who, Blue Oyster Cult, Peter Gabriel and the Smiths (Nice says he wouldn't mind collaborating with Morrissey a la Public Enemy/Anthrax) can be discerned, as well as live outtakes. Because of their broad taste in music ("we listen to basically everything"), Nice comments, "It's moving into that area. On 'Word to the Third' we had a sample, but at the same time, a live horn playing. We even did a song the other day with the Brand New Heavies. However," he adds softly, "sampling will always be a part of the music form because that's what it was created by, and there's a sound you can get off records that you can't get other ways."

Rap seems to be enjoying a surge of mainstream coverage these days, which has afforded 3rd Bass the

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luxury of being able to tap their message out to the masses by way of appearances on shows like "The Arsenio Hall Show." "A lot of people are really into what we're doing," Nice brings up, "but a lot of times I realize that it's all just a big machine where you have to do things to get on the show... it's like politics."

How did their appearance on Arsenio's show go? Nice says, "I guess he was down with what we were doing, because he asked us to come back and sit in with the band the next couple of days, and then a lot of the guys in the band really liked what we were doing. So in that

respect, that was something that went against the whole workings of the machine thing. But then again, a lot of people who are the audience on that type of show don't know what the hell we're doing anyway."

This kind of positive exposure, however, doesn't seem to be truly helping those artists who deserve and need help. As we all know, lately every two-bit act with any semblance of the rap form seems to be inundating record stores and are featured on shows like *The Party Machine* and *Pump It Up*. But these acts aren't what Pete Nice would consider part of the kind of group 3rd Bass gets lumped with. He says that with true rap, "it's been getting coverage for, like, the past eight years. There just seems to be this cycle that comes and goes, and now, it's coming back to the street and the roots a little bit more." While this may be the case, Nice feels "it's really hard for people who are doing something interesting to get support. We have the MC Hammers, and this one and that one, but people are afraid to take a chance with anything different. Musically, trying to do something that's different *should* be the norm, but it's not, unfortunately."

As for the general attention the black community has been receiving lately in the form of sitcoms, Nice, not surprisingly, feels that "none of those shows really epitomize the larger cross section of the black community and what goes on in every day life." Although he hasn't seen them, Nice feels positively about the kind of stir films like "Straight Out of Brooklyn" and "Boyz n the Hood" are making. He says he hasn't been to any movies lately because "I'm working on a couple of screenplays myself. I've been working on something for a while and I don't want to see anyone else's movie while I'm doing my own stuff."

Presently, of course, Nice has little time for writing due to an intense schedule of interviews and touring. As far as that is concerned, he says that "some people have a clue as to what we're about," but there are those who totally miss the point. The main thing that I realized after chatting with MC Serch and Prime Minister Pete Nice is that aside from the focus on their ideas and politics, what they are actually most concerned with is being a good band, and all the other things are just small pieces of what makes a record enjoyable, enlightening and entertaining. ♦