Truth Universal

FIRE FROM WATER

Sparking the rebirth of the New Orleans hip-hop and dance music scenes.

By Amy C. Quick

Reflecting on the scope of Hurricane Katrina's tragedy, music comes to mind. The personal healing of New Orleans's survivors will take entire lifetimes, but in the meantime, they'll salvage what they can. Many of them will rediscover their passion for music, and it's not all that jazz. Key players built the city's hip-hop and dance music scenes from the ground up. It's these performers, producers, MCs, DJs, promoters, and label managers who can turn their sense of despair into fuel for a rebirth. The ones *URB* was able to track down in exile spoke about their losses. Then about what they gained . . . a newly ignited commitment to their game. If water is what brought the city down, their fire is what will give it new life.

"I'm all about forward movement"

Truth Universal faced a major setback as a self-described traditional (turntable and mic) hip-hop MC when virtually all his possessions succumbed to Katrina. Besides his house, clothes and pictures, Truth lost his records, MPC, 1200s, recording equipment, computer, and a lot of recordings. Truth makes hip-hop that reflects his New Orleans background but sets him apart from the dirty South rap that rules the lower half of the country these days. He didn't write any songs for a few weeks after the disaster but "I'm really focused on music right now," he wrote via e-mail from Houston after evacuating to Ruston, Louisiana, the Sunday before the storm with his wife and daughter.

DJ Quickie Mart and DJ Lady Fingaz

Truth's political consciousness, always evident in his music, has been fueled by the mishandling of the hurricane crisis by the government, and the destruction of the place where he spent nearly 30 years of his life motivated him to keep his career going. "Not that I wasn't already," he explains, "but I'm all about forward movement now and my hustle is harder." He has an album dropping on January 24, *Decolonization* on Dragon's Breath Records/Day by Day Entertainment, featuring a single with Zion of Zion I.

"It will be like we never left"

Progressive underground hip-hop label Media Darling Records (MDR) suffered a great blow when its artists were forced to evacuate New Orleans and spread to various parts of the country. MDR boasted artists who held down popular weeklies, and shared a business relationship with Headz Up! NOLA, a production company that threw hip-hop shows with big-name acts alongside MDR artists. "To have this [crisis] happen to the entire music community makes me hope our ties are very strong," said part-owner of MDR Jeff Chambless, "so when we come back, it will be like we never left."

Chambless, who shares ownership of the label with Nathan "DamNathan" Tape and PJ Horrigan (the owner and manager of Headz Up! NOLA), is temporarily relocated to San Francisco along with Horrigan. MDR is determined to continue putting out music, touring and throwing shows while spreading their roots in San Francisco. But Chambless has definite plans to return to New Orleans at some point. Horrigan has expressed interest in starting a Headz Up! SF and eventually splitting his time between San Francisco and New Orleans.

Chambless and label signee Quickie Mart rode out the storm in Baton Rouge, where Quickie was performing a show. They were joined by Horrigan and Quickie's girlfriend/fellow MDR artist DJ Lady Fingaz (*Southern Belle Breaks*), who evacuated the Saturday before Katrina hit. When it became obvious that there would be no quick admission back into their city, Quickie and Lady Fingaz headed for her family's house in Little Rock, Arkansas.

When *URB* caught up with the couple, they were in Little Rock but feeling transient, thinking of a temporary relocation to the West Coast. Lady Fingaz feels she and Quickie were blessed for living on the second floor of their home. She was able to recover a lot of possessions, including her record collection, but their apartment has been made unlivable by mold and water and structural damage, and Quickie lost miscellaneous studio gear and about 3,000-plus records.

Upon the couple's return to New Orleans to assess damage, Quickie recalls that "seeing the clubs I played at, and studios we've worked at, underwater and destroyed was quite devastating and rough to deal with." He's disgusted by the lack of planning by government leaders that led directly to putting his career at a screeching, if temporary, halt. Venues where Quickie held residencies have no plans to re-open, and a month-long Media Darling tour scheduled for November was cancelled. The income he once earned as a celebrated local DJ now consists of Red Cross donations and food stamps, but still he looks ahead to his new 12-inch MDR release and future tour dates for his side project, New Libation Orchestra. "This experience has just made me more passionate about the music I make, and it makes me want to create even more of it," said Quickie. "I'll never take it for granted."

MDR artist Soapbox didn't evacuate his home in the Eighth Ward until forced to on the Sunday before the storm. After fleeing to Tupelo, Mississippi, he moved on to Gonzales, Louisiana, then finally San Francisco with his four-year-old

Soapbox

son. His losses are substantial, as the rapper had his hand in a lot of different interests . . . paintings, sketchbooks, his computer, a screen-printing press, most of his rhymepads and show discs, and an entire jewelry studio. Soapbox is finding it difficult to focus on writing. "I used to rhyme about the city I lived in, the experience I had there; a lot of that inspiration is gone for the time being," he admits. Despite his career's interruption, he anticipates a new full-length; his MDR 12-inch, *The Soapbox Platform*; and a reforming of his crew, the DomeCity DustCrushers.

Soapbox points out the closing of the universities and lack of student audiences as an obstacle to rebuilding the New Orleans hip-hop scene. He wonders if the hurricane disaster will turn the focus of the city's hip-hop away from the bling and towards "realer" issues. If nothing else, both he and Quickie Mart hope the shared experience will fuse the city's mainstream and underground hip-hop cultures, making a stronger scene for all. "The gangster industry rappers and the underground culture need to realize that they are part of the same spectrum," observed Soapbox.

"Start small and bring it back"

Although he hasn't lived in New Orleans since 2001 for family reasons, famed rave promoter Disco Donnie remains an integral part of dance music in that area. He was enjoying a slow return of the scene in the past several years following his well-publicized battle with the federal government's "crack house law," with ever-bigger parties drawing the masses back in. Post-Katrina, he acknowledges the reality of having to "start small again and bring it back."

Small means that Donnie's signature event, the massive Voodoo Music Experience, had to be moved from its annual New Orleans home to Memphis' Tom Lee Park and turned into a benefit for the New Orleans Restoration Fund. But a special invite-only event, honoring the relief workers, will be held in New Orleans proper.

But more than just keeping the party going, Donnie envisions the advantage of pooling relief resources and bringing some attention to the generosity of the community as a whole. He started Dance Community Cares, a corporate account with the Red Cross allowing promoters, artists and fans of the scene to donate money and time, hoping it would "help shine a light on one of the many positive aspects of our community." The fund will also aid in any future U.S. crises that may take place.

Fanning the Fire

All of the displaced artists *URB* was fortunate enough to locate agreed that their drive to make music has only intensified in the face of Katrina's destruction. Help keep the flame lit by supporting the music artists of New Orleans and these relief efforts and resources that target them specifically:

The **MUSICARES HURRICANE RELIEF FUND** provides financial support to musicians and others involved in the music industry. To apply for assistance or donate, visit *www.grammy.com/musicares* or call 877-626-2748.

NOAH is a Houston-based collective providing employment and relocation aid for all types of music artists displaced by the hurricane. To request assistance or donate, visit noahleans.com or call 713-805-9118.

DANCE COMMUNITY CARES is Disco Donnie's transparent Red Cross account for dance community members. To volunteer or exchange ideas, visit *www.dancecommunitycares.org*.

The **BACKBEAT FUND** gives financial assistance to most types of music artists. To seek help, visit *www.backbeatfund.org* or call 800-417-2014.

LOST NEW ORLEANS MUSICIANS is a Google group with a forum for club owners and music artists to post their contact information. Visit *groups.google.com/group/Lost-New-Orleans-Musicians* or perform a Google search for other groups with similar purposes.

HELP COLLECTIVE collects funds that go directly to the members of Media Darling Records. Visit *www.themerchgirl.com/helpcollective.html*.