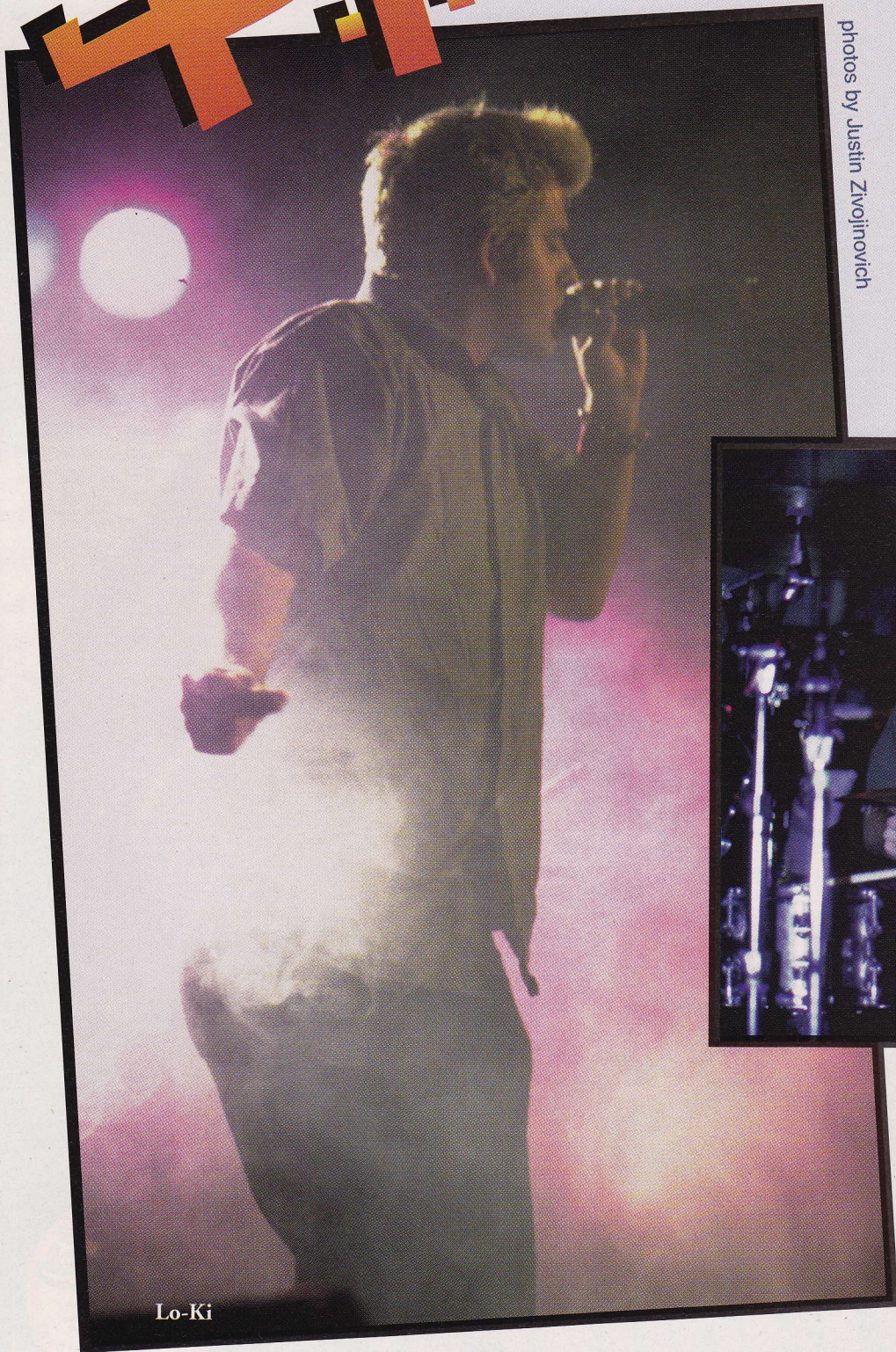


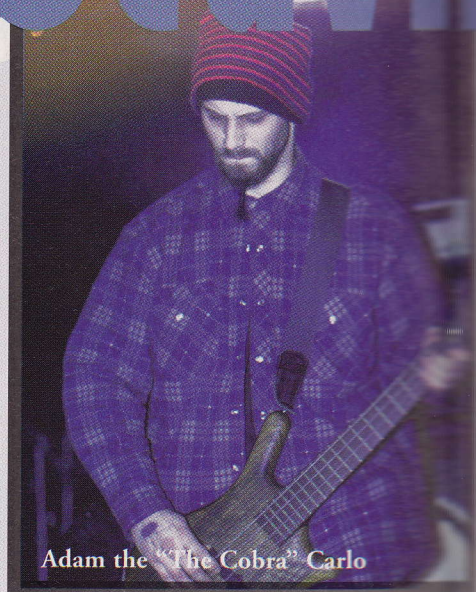
# Rock

# Weavin

photos by Justin Zivojinovich



Lo-Ki



Adam the "The Cobra" Carlo



AOR



DJ Spinn



# ing Tapestry Rap

by Jim Kelly

**m**uch has been made of what many see as the sorry state of hip-hop over the past few years. Pundits and practitioners alike bemoan the lack of innovation and creativity. So if the steady diet of Puffy Meals has left you yearning for something meatier, maybe what you need is a big, double-decker serving of B.T.K.

"We'd like to give people a form that they're used to that's very attractive and shiny, but yet has a fuel injection of 'nutrition' in it," says Stone Groove.

"Yeah, like fast food that's good for you," adds Lo-Ki.

Lo-Ki and Stone Groove are the creative masterminds behind the Toronto hip-hop group B.T.K. And on the evidence of their full-length debut *Birth Through Knowledge*, it's clear that they are on a mission. Their goal is to

shake things up a little by injecting some much-needed creativity and a sense of freewheeling fun into the homogeneity of the contemporary hip-hop scene.

"I don't really think about it, but I suppose there is a positive thing that we are trying to get across," says Lo-Ki, "not lyrically necessarily, but musically."

"It's more like 'enjoy music, enough angst already,' Stone Groove clarifies, "enough gangster-ism. How about some good old-fashioned fun?"

"Yeah, and party music," agrees Lo-Ki. "I'd like to make smart music that's fun, and fun music that's smart."

"They don't have to

be separate," says Stone. "You get the incredibly intelligent politicized stuff that just bores you to tears and you can't dance to maybe."

"And then you have the insane booty rhymes that mean nothing but 'boogie'," adds Lo-Ki disdainfully.

One of the ways they are trying to liven things up is by mixing things up. Blending elements of pop, rock, soul and even heavy metal with the samples, scratches and beats of hip-hop, B.T.K. delight in blurring the boundaries between these sounds. "We kind of run afoul of the categorizing dilemma," says Lo-Ki. "It's hard to describe and encapsulate what you are in a simple phrase, but rather than call ourselves a 'funk-rap-rock-reggae-hip-hop-soul' band, we just say 'hip-hop' as a kind of shorthand for what we are."

After having provisionally met up on a Toronto subway train, the two like-minded MCs eventually teamed up in 1993. "It was really just the two of us, back in the day, in drum machines and stuff like that, so we've kind of accumulated people as we've gone along," explains Lo-Ki. They eventually

settled on a kind of hybrid formation, built around the typical hip-hop nucleus of the two MCs and a DJ – DJ Spinz – complemented by the more traditional rhythm section of bassist Adam "The Cobra" Carlo and Matthew DeMatteo on drums. (DeMatteo also doubled as record producer, but his outside production duties with the likes of Big Wreck, Ashley MacIsaac and Edwin have since begun to take up so much of his time that he recently left to pursue producing full-time. He was replaced by new drummer AOR.)

In 1995 the group released the indie EP *Birth Thru Knowledge*, with the funky track "Superchile" receiving heavy play on MuchMusic. It eventually won Best Indie Video at the 1997 MuchMusic Video Awards. On the heels of that achievement, 1998 saw the release of the full-length CD, which carried over the four EP tracks and added six more tunes.

The songs range from the pop flavours of "Things Gotta Change" and "Peppyrock" (described by Lo-Ki as "Children's Television Workshop on acid") to the funk-soul of "Superchile" and "Rigamarole" to the heavy metal-tinged "Boilermaker" (inspired by "an overwhelming love of Sabbath," says Stone Groove). And for good measure we get doses of humour ("Roadtrip"), horror ("Bad Trip") and herb ("Corncob Pipe").

To be sure, B.T.K. take some of their cues from the groundbreaking groovy stews of groups like De La Soul. Alongside hip-hop's orthodoxy of beats and scratches, we find guitars, keyboards, horns and strings all playing a role whenever they're needed; sometimes sampled, sometimes played straight, and sometimes from DJ Spinz "droppin' a cut" from a record. The impression is often one of sonic graffiti. But is it rock-soul graffiti sprayed on a hip-hop wall, or the other way around? Perhaps a new phrase is in order: Hip Pop?

Though they may occasionally use found samples, these guys are more like sonic cultivators than musical hunters and gatherers. For them, the emphasis is on creating over borrowing.

"People can come along and work in found sound, but it's kind of vampirical in a sense," says Lo-Ki. "It doesn't change the fact that we didn't make them in the first place."

"Maybe what they're doing is a little more like arranging as opposed to actually writing," Stone Groove suggests. "It keeps reminding me of this live Pink Floyd video I saw once. The guys from Pink Floyd were pointing out all this electronic equipment they had, but what people need to realize is that the machines don't come up with the ideas."

Though their songs incorporate samples, they are mostly in the service of the larger musical idea. Just because something was sampled doesn't mean it was borrowed. So what are the ingredients of this sonic stew? Exactly how much of the recipe is fresh ingredients and how much is sampled stock?

"It's really 50-50," says Lo-Ki. "Basically, we lay down a structure that I've worked out with beats and stuff like that, and then everything else comes in on top of that. Sometimes we'll then throw away the original structure. Once all the live instruments have been put in, sometimes they end up filling most of the space. Other times we just pile it on."

"But I've always been striving for organic-sounding music even when we're using samples," explains Lo-Ki. That organic vibe is there from the moment the disc begins to spin, with the gut-bucket acoustic guitar intro to "Corncob Pipe" which is actually a sample of Lo-Ki's playing (the track also features some lead guitar work by Big Sugar's Gordie Johnson). "A lot of times we're sampling stuff that we've done ourselves. When you sample a phrase like that, it creates kind of a different feel to it," Lo-Ki says. "Because when you sample something and loop it, it just has a certain feel that is



Stone Groove





more hip-hop than if you just had someone playing it live. It's a combination of a phrase or two of human playing, but then just being repeated, that kind of gives it that feel. That's what I mean by kind of 50-50."

But on other occasions, a song idea might start with a sample. "Just some sort of hook that inspires other ideas off of it." There are times when serendipity stirs the pot. "We used to sometimes record on tapes that we'd just find – we couldn't afford to buy tapes," explains Stone Groove. "I remember we used an Ella Fitzgerald tape once, on a four-track, and so there remained some stuff from the other side woven in through the song, and it was all backwards, of course – some backwards string sections from an Ella Rogers and Hart thing. And we went 'wow.'" Lo-Ki mock-admonishes his partner: "But you see, when you're saying that, you have to say it like we did that deliberately." And Stone comes back without missing a beat: "Yeah, well we did it deliberately, of course."

When they do use found samples, they veer away from anything that is too obvious or well-known, preferring things they might find on "obscure, bizarre, bargain basement albums." Their reasons may be partly artistic or aesthetic, but they are also certainly based in the practicalities of copyright approval. "The record company is very stringent about having to have that stuff all settled," says Lo-Ki. "Packs of lawyers sitting in rooms, listening," says Stone affecting an ominous tone. "There's a whole list of famous songs that have parts in them that I'm dying to sample," says Lo-Ki. "But we can't. And I'm afraid to. But one day..."

But as necessity is the mother of innovation, they have developed a way of hip-hop-scutching around these kinds of constraints.

"Most of the time we'd just recreate it anyway, as opposed to actually using the sample," says Stone. "We've sampled ourselves pretending to be different bands, like a heavy metal band or a country band."

"Yeah, you'd be surprised," adds Lo-Ki. "There are very few [found] samples on the album."

They use this method to great effect, mimicking, for instance, a guitar lick that sounds like something from an obscure Stax b-side, and then sampling their own recreations to use in a song. To get those authentic sounds they took advantage of as much era-specific gear as they could dredge up, including a vintage 24-track soundboard, an old Neve console and vintage microphones.

But what about the track "Peppyrock," which features an obvious sample taken from the Beatles' song "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band (reprise)," namely, the drum intro and Paul McCartney's "one, two, three, four" count-in? Surely clearance for that couldn't have been easy – or cheap. "You see, that's where you're wrong," comes Lo-Ki's proud up-braiding. "That's one of the songs that we re-did. We found the same kind of microphones that they used, we used the [drum] kit that they used, we tried to use the same type of room that they used; we really went out of our way to recreate the sound. And, as you can see, we were reasonably successful," he boasts. And rightfully so, having sonically hoodwinked my Beatles-soaked ears. "Having that equipment really helped. I think the compression units were

vintage, using the same type of compression that they used, stuff like that. Obviously the Beatles are one band you don't want to get caught copyright infringing." "Not with Michael Jackson owning it all," adds Stone.

Though some of their early influences that steered them towards rap and hip-hop were artists like Afrika Bambaataa and Grandmaster Flash, their range of influences is considerably broader. "Yeah, that's just the beginning," says Stone. "We've had lots of influences. I mean that's the first time I'd heard rap and that influenced me to love it. But equally one of the things that influ-

## The Team:

MCs Lo-Ki and Stone Groove, DJ Spinz, Adam 'The Cobra' Carlo on bass and the Mighty AOR on drums (replaces Matthew '5000' DeMatteo, who also produced the album).

## The Gear:

AOR uses a "mutt kit" but he uses an Ayotte handmade snare that he's very proud of.

DJ Spinz uses Technics 1200 turntables, and an American DJ mixer that he's very proud of.

Bass player Adam "The Cobra" Carlo is not very proud of his gear, but he plays a heavily stickered Fender P, through an Ampeg amp.

Lo-Ki and Stone Groove use Shure 58 wireless microphones, which they just recently started using. The new mics "make things much easier to romp around, which we like to do," says Stone Groove.

They also use a Panasonic DAT tape player for on stage intros and connecting pieces.

They use a very old Ensoniq sampler ("The salvation of many a frustrated musician, because it was affordable and it had a sequencer built into it – you didn't have to have a computer to run it," says Lo-Ki).

## The Secret Weapon:

B.T.K. exclusively wear Stanfield's underwear (with the reinforced crotch). "Good Canadian made stuff," Lo-Ki says. "We don't wear no foreign underwear" chimes in Stone Groove. And they advise all Canadian musicians out there to do likewise and boycott foreign underwear. No BVDs for B.T.K.

enced me was hearing Lou Reed's "Walk on the Wild Side" for the first time. That story-telling of the dark side and fun rap, and there you have maybe some of the seeds."

And Lo-Ki's path to hip-hop took him through musical terrain that was even farther afield. Having become disenchanted with popular music in general, he spent most of the 1980s immersed in experimental electronic music of the kind practised by Stockhausen and others.

"It's kind of funny, the whole experimental side, because I *hated* music. I really wanted to

wreck it," says Lo-Ki. "I hated the Beatles. I hated blues. Like, *hated* it."

"Yeah, I didn't like the Beatles either," Stone adds. "I think I was always averse to whatever was most popular."

"Yeah, there was definitely an element of all that involved," Lo-Ki concurs. "I don't know why I hated all that stuff, but I just wanted to destroy it. But now I'm completely, *completely* the opposite. I love the Beatles and I love blues, and I'm slowly learning all about it."

That aversion to whatever is most popular is likely what still propels them to take the path less travelled, and what keeps them striving to be different from a lot of what's happening in the mainstream hip-hop scene.

When it comes to writing their songs they don't subscribe to any hard-and-fast approach.

"It's a collaboration, and it goes so many different ways," says Lo-Ki. "The ideas come from every direction. There's really not one way that we write."

"You'll probably see much more collaboration on our next album," adds Stone, "because a lot of the material for this album was sort of dreamt up between us two before, and then there's more layering that's been added by the rest of the guys. But a lot of the basic structure was there already."

Though the MCs' style of rapping has been labelled "tapestry rap" in their bio, the phrase was really just an off-handed remark by the sarcastic-tongued Lo-Ki.

"The whole 'Tapestry Rap' thing is just something I said once to a reporter, but, you know, anything you can say will be held against you in a court of law," says Lo-Ki, ever the sardonic one. "But it was just basically describing the fact that when we rap, sometimes we're doubling each other, sometimes he's taking a line, sometimes I'm taking a line – it's just weaving back and forth."

"Yeah, we're just trading off, which is pretty traditional in hip-hop," says Stone. "Sometimes, though, I'm doing his lyrics, he's doing my lyrics."

Interesting, though, that even in conversation the two MCs seem to naturally fall into this tag-team style, with one of them seamlessly chiming in to add to the other's point, sometimes finishing the other's sentence, completing the other's thought. Observe what happens when I ask them about their approach to lyric writing, which they call "hieroglyphing," where the two would spend long sessions free-styling different lines of lyrics over an idea or a sample or a beat, recording it all as they went:

**Lo-Ki:** "We would use hours and hours of tape."

**Stone:** "And often times, it was such a shitty recording that we couldn't really decipher it. So we'd have to make stretches of imagination or create new things that sound alike."

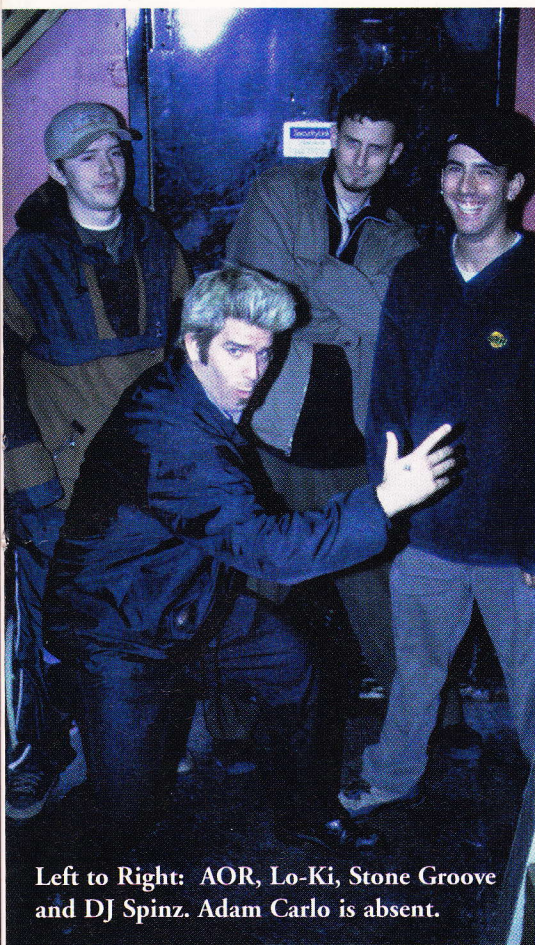
**Lo-Ki:** "Yeah, we wouldn't be able to hear the words a lot of the time, so we'd just kind of make up words to fit into those spaces."

**Stone:** "And that sound *sort* of like an approximation."

**Lo-Ki:** "And because of the unconscious patterns that you hear, the things that you think you hear, you get these kind of bizarre..."

**Stone:** "You get things that you wouldn't usually get with the original lyrics – things that are just much more unusual."





Left to Right: AOR, Lo-Ki, Stone Groove and DJ Spinz. Adam Carlo is absent.

Lo-Ki: "And you say 'hey that kind of sounds like I'm saying this incredibly bizarre, fucked up phrase' and hey ..."

Stone: "We'll take it!"

Lo-Ki: "Yeah, let's use that!"

That kind of interplay is obviously born of natural affinity and experience. Much the same way as the Stones' Keith Richards and Ron Wood play together, effortlessly filling the spaces left by the other, easily slipping into the other's shoes if need be. It's also obvious that these guys have a blast working together. "I don't think any other band that we've met has more fun than we do," says Stone. "They're always confused by us, that we don't hate each other more or we're not having less fun doing what we do."

While some of this duo's inventiveness has been decidedly low-tech in nature – such as the happy accidents from using old tapes – hip-hop itself has been a music that is partly a product of higher-tech innovations: drum machines, samplers, sequencers, etc. I wonder as this technology becomes more easily accessible for more and more people – for instance, anyone who can afford a guitar can easily afford a sampler these days – what effect will it have on the music?

"There's kind of a generally accessible sort of punk, do-it-yourself basement ethic," agrees Stone Groove.

"I personally think that's bad though," says Lo-Ki in a rare instance of disagreement with his partner. "I think accessibility levels the playing field, but with so much saturation, so many artists, people inevitably just get lost in the shuf-

fle. For me, it was really hard. I wanted the gear for years before I had it, and I really had to fight to get it. I had to save and scrimp, but if I hadn't had the drive to get it, I wouldn't be doing it now. I think that there'll just be a lot more people who just have it handed to them, and make stuff that doesn't really challenge anyone. People who don't necessarily have the drive will get involved and take up valuable real estate. I mean, there's only so much space."

"Yeah, but then again," counters Stone Groove, "I've had experiences with people like that – rich kids who've always had access to it, like a great studio in their house and equipment, and I just keep finding that what they come up with is generally not a lot. That hunger to get it, to create something has to be there, and if it's too easy somehow, I don't think you get the juice flowing. If it comes too easy then you're not going to come up with anything."

"Also I'm trying to discourage competition," says Lo-Ki laughing. "It's not that easy. Really. It's really, really, really hard." Then adds in all seriousness: "And it is."

"To try to come up with something original that's interesting or good," agrees Stone Groove, "definitely."



Jim Kelly is a Toronto-based freelance writer.

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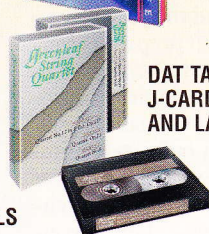
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