

Hip-hop hooray

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Rapper Biz Markie performs during the 2008 VH1 Hip Hop Honors show in New York, October 2, 2008. REUTERS/Lucas Jackson (UNITED STATES)

Photograph by: LUCAS JACKSON, X90066

Preview

Biz Markie performs Friday at Olympic Plaza and Blist performs Friday at the HiFi Club, as part of Sled Island.

Mike Bell

When it comes to the world of hip-hop, now more than ever, we could use a little fun, we need a little silly, we would embrace a little goofy.

Eminem is stale. The Fresh Prince is dead. So. Long live the Clown Prince.

Yes, long live Biz Markie, the iconic rapper, singer, beatboxer and DJ who was dubbed the Clown Prince of Rap and was an integral part of the golden age of hip-hop. Thankfully, he is still around and still entertaining, even performing Friday as one of several smiley old-school rap stylists on the Sled Island Festival schedule.

And on an equally positive note, don't be surprised if you see getting with the Biz — bobbin' along with those who grew up with his seminal late '80s hit Just A Friend or his '90s collaborations with the Beastie Boys — a whole new generation of fans.

Part of the New York-born Marcel Hall's appeal is his lovable nature, but unlike many of today's MCs, the Biz is also kid-friendly. Hence his role as an alien in the film Men In Black II, and more recently his priceless appearances teaching kids how to beatbox on the Yo Gabba Gabba! TV series.

"I get so much feedback," Biz says of the show. "I can just go, 'Hey kids!' and little kids'll just sit down.

"Kids love me. I'm like Barney."

True. But Barney with an incredible amount of street cred.

For you can't talk about the evolution of hip-hop without mentioning Biz Markie's contributions. Top 10 hits and giggles aside, he was the first rapper sued for sampling, with his third album, 1991's I Need A Haircut, getting pulled from circulation as a result of successful lawsuit from musician Gilbert O'Sullivan, whose Alone Again (Naturally) was sampled in the Biz single Alone Again. That verdict not only stalled his career for several years, but it also drastically changed the way music was made, as his followup cheekily alluded to in its title, All Samples Cleared!

That tends to get lost in the fog of time, as does the fact that as an influential lyricist and rhyme-dropper, Biz rarely gets the props he deserves.

"I don't really care about the credit or anything," he says. "I'm just glad that I'm part of it and I can live within it. I'm just happy to be here."

As to his place in music in 2009, that's difficult to assess. Biz admits he's always been a "sore thumb — I always stuck out, I always did things from left field," but thinks there's still a place for his unique and, yes, fun style.

"Hip-hop's got so many different faces," he says. "You can go anyway you want to. You can be krunk, you can be gangsta, you can have fun, you can be a lyricist, you can do anything you want. Hip-hop is a world — it ain't just one dimension, it's like 95,000 dimensions," he says before acknowledging that for far too long the focus has only been on the thug side of the music. "That's cuz radio and video that's what they wanted us to portray to try to kill us. But we ain't goin' down."

And the same could be said for Biz — in fact, hopefully signalling a greater trend in hip-hop, he could be on the rise again.

True, much of his time these days is spent DJing, but he's also heading back into the studio soon to record an album of covers, much like his glorious mushmouth version of Elton John's Bennie and the Jets recorded with the Beastie Boys.

As for that relationship, which all-but resurrected his career after the Haircut fiasco, it's heating up again after several years lying dormant with Biz having joined them on stage recently.

"There was no beef or nothin', we just went our separate ways and did our own careers, you know what I mean?" he explains of the pause. "We always boys. We reunited again and startin' in probably August or September I'm gonna go back out (on the road) with them."

Well, perhaps after his Calgary show he need not worry about re-teaming with the Beasties, because if you're looking for local illustration of those returning fun to the hip-hop form, there's no better example than the trio Blist, whose own aspirations would make a coupling with the Biz a beautiful and natural thing.

"The original brainstorm for Blist was we were discussing who was going to take over from the Beastie Boys when they retire," says Sabo Forte, who formed the band two years ago when he hooked up with fellow MC Andor Voiceface. "Unfortunately we've been called a corny Organized Rhyme instead of a lovable Beastie Boys, but we're still working on it."

Catch them live and you'll see the superb threesome doesn't have too far to go. The group — which is rounded out by turntablist DJ C-Sik, a two-time local DMC champ — has been building a buzz opening for acts such as The Dudes, k-os and RZA, and rocking those spots with rousing, crowd-pleasing cuts that skilfully put the emphasis on having a good time, not a G-life.

"That's exactly what it is. We don't take ourselves too seriously, we're not rapping about . . . our stacks of cash," says Sabo.

"Ando and I are both '80s kids so we grew up in the golden era of hip-hop and it was all about the bbq style . . . with heads bobbing and everyone just having fun, and ending your rhymes with funny punchlines.

"I love a protest song but I also love a celebration song," he continues. "If we can find a happy mix between the two — conscious hip-hop and party rockin' hip-hop — that's the genre I like."

And it's a genre that, even locally, is getting a fair representation.

Sabo, who also comes from a punk rock background and is also a slam poet of note says the hip-hop scene in Calgary is relatively splintered between the N.E. crews and the downtown acts, which Blist is a part of. The former are "more G-unit, they roll harder" and the core scene, which also features fellow Sled Islanders Ricca Razor Sharp (described by Sabo as a "sarcastic MC") and the more conscious and acclaimed Dragon Fli Empire, is that mix previously alluded to.

As to whether or not it can gain momentum, grow audiences and become part of a larger return to the positive, old-school scene, Sabo isn't sure, just hopeful.

"It's not calculated by us," he says. "I mean, we're just doing what we like and if it happens to be that the shift in hip-hop music is going back to that era then that would have me smiling."

And teaming with one of its originals?

Well, that, too, would probably make Sabo smile, as he notes when he was first starting out and honing his skills his set would include a cover of the Biz's surefire party-starter Just A Friend.

"I'm sure there's some live recording out there that will come back to haunt me," he says.

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