

Kickmag Exclusive Interview With Lifesavas by Tamara Harris



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In the spring of this year a modern-day sequel to the blaxploitation classic *Superfly* came from Portland, Oregon's Lifesavas. *Gutterfly* is the second album from Vursatyl, Jumbo the Garbage Man and Rev Shines rapping and producing as survivalist soldiers dressed in slick '70s gear and armed with a funk/soul schemata transplanted from that era into the hip-hop aesthetic. Concept albums in hip-hop do happen despite the genre's birth as music to rock club crowds into a call and response euphoria. But no one has used Curtis Mayfield's street symphony to create a new soundtrack incorporating everyone from Vernon Reid to Smif n Wessun to tell the story of dodging police and the vicissitudes of making a life and being an artist in the fictional Razorblade city.

After years of working the underground as an opening act for others their first full-length project *Spirit In Stone* came out in 2003 on Quannum as well. *Spirit's* fluid lyricism and breezy beats reminded some hip-hoppers of the defunct Freestyle Fellowship and the daisy-age legends De La Soul. Those influences are almost inescapable for them because they met each other while living through the Golden Era as two rare followers of fat laces and the boom-bap in a city not known for Black culture or hip-hop. Fear of not being able to satisfy the fans after a splendid debut known as the sophomore slump eluded their reputation with the funk-focused aural diorama designed from memories of *Superfly*, *Sweet Sweetbacks* *Badass Song* and how the Black bad guy can handle his struggle

whether it be arresting his profession of selling drugs or being rappers working in a skewed industry.

Seeing them dressed as characters from the Gutterfly soundtrack takes some of the real out of the realism in 2007 because no one wears those clothes anymore. But the blatant costume effect makes you realize that they have increased their entertainment potential while telling a story. They get your attention with the dated glare of big-winged polyester shirts and tell you about rapping their way out of city of fork-tongued people. For lack of better words, some critics call them "conscious rappers" because of superficial sonic similarities with other groups who don't spit the "B" and "N" word every other beat. But they do not favor any one artist to the point of obvious homage but have a certain funk-based groove to their music that is accompanied by realistic lyrics. And now that the album has been out and the gigs keep coming the group are already planning their next project. In this interview Vursatyl clarifies the meaning behind their latest concept piece and the origins of Lifesavas cred as the band who saved many doomed evenings by performing before they realized their own headline potential.

How did you come up with the name Lifesavas?

The name really evolved out of the way we became a group, doughboy and I started like filling in for another group and that group had just started to miscommunicate and breakdown and me and jumbo we had a project on shy records just songs with me and him. And we started filling in but that group couldn't make it and the club promoters or whoever it was that was throwing the show would say "glad you guys could make it, ya'll are lifesavers if ya'll hadn't made it we would've had to cancel the show what wouldn't known what we were going to do for the opening act, it just stuck because that's just how we started getting shows was by filling in.

What is the concept behind this Gutterfly album? At first I thought it was a real blaxploitation movie?

That's basically the idea he is a fictitious filmmaker what we tried to do is create a movie inside a movie so we had to come up with you know basically the evolution of how this Gutterfly movie got made transition into the actual film which plays out through our songs through the album. The story of Gutterfly is that this director Baraka Feldman and everything else that proceeds he hooks up the Lifesavas and has this vision of this film and basically passes it on to Lifesavas. We take it and create this movie within a movie to actually come to life a film inside of a film.

What about making a real Gutterfly film?

It's tough because the resources are not there. What we're trying to do is film several what you call shorts, and uh trying to compile them into a sixteen, seventeen minute movie. But we've already shot a few different scenes it will obviously be comprised of certain songs that are on the record you know dialogue in between songs tied in so people can get the idea of the overall movie don't have the resources to shoot a two-hour movie but we definitely are going to try to come up with a seventeen-minute film.

Who are these ghetto superheroes and what do they do?

We all kind of have our super-powers if you will, you know our traits. So with Bumpy Johnson I'm kind of like the uh here to make that more practical. Bumpy Johnson's thing is that he brings a real old school approach to handling business he is the enforcer so theres three brothers you know three friends uh Bumpy Johnson, Sleepy Floyd and Jimmy Slimwater. Sleepy Floyd is the con man you know he kind of has he knows how to play mind tricks kind of manipulate your mind. And Jimmy Slimwater is a wiseguy he's the troublemaker but he has a knack for fooling people so you know he has real weird

characteristics. That's the basic theory is that we blind those forces to come against Pharoahe and kind of manipulate the system. Pharoahe has all these people of the town basically the city subjected to we kind of use our savvy our superpowers our abilities to you know take Pharoahe down.

Jumbo has his own way of doing things, how did you decide who to bring on the album? Like using Oh No for example?

What Jumbo and I really had to do was approach the album like we were casting for a film. We wanted to work with producers who could deliver beats that were very much their own but sounded like something that you would hear Lifesavas on. It would be a good transition from the old album into the new experience and still feel you know like still Lifesavas and vibe on it. We really wanted to expand our gamut of Black music and funk is all through it.

How did you all bridge the gap between hip-hop and rock and roll? You have a nice collaboration with Fishbone.

That was probably one of the most natural processes because Fishbone they are real hip-hop fans. Norwood he's a real hip-hop fan in love with hip-hop. He knew of Lifesava he knew our music and enjoyed our music so when we reached out to them they came over to the house and it was there was a stream of coincidences first of all they had already been kind of messing with the concept of a song about dreamers for their album and we were saying was we wanted to do this song about people not giving up on their dreams. So once we showed them the direction we wanted to go it was magic they just jumped and it just took off. It was the most effortless process on the album and you know rock is so much once again it's so much a part of hip-hop's experience. It didn't take any extra effort it just seamlessly came together.

So when you say that rock is a part of the hip-hop experience can you elaborate on that?

In so many ways, first of all rock as a genre was always so much of a free-spirited and could be used to speak against the system. Even to play music with an energy and an angst you know that kind of frighten people is our perception going back to even like Little Richard and Chuck Berry it was like a really cutting edge music obviously and a gazillion different voices and I think hip-hop fell in line but then once hip-hop really found its roots from like a group like Run DMC, Stetasonic, guys are taking rock records even Boogie Down Productions are sampling rock records and making some of the most classic hip-hop music. Run DMC went on to call themselves the kings of rock so it's always been a marriage between rock and hip-hop you know they are really are from the same spirit.

One of my favorite songs is "Double Up" tell me about that?

It was definitely Bumpy and Sleepy and we really wanted to jump into character in terms of the direction of the song. It's about us going back in and coming out stronger the second time being that this is the second Lifesavas album. And through that we wanted to touch all different things that Jumbo and myself have gone through talking about being bruised by the industry on some level. Being taken being hoodwinked if you will getting to the point we have to even sell our own CDs gotta bootleg twice just to have enough money to go buy school shoes for our children. The process of saying this is how it came the first time we're going to gamble on this situation one more time and this time come out stronger. We're going to go in here and make a name for ourselves this time.

Since you mention what "Double Up" is about what is it that artists like you have such a hard time in the industry?

He talks about how artists like him who have a certain kind of passion and don't follow trends are having a hard time getting the greater rewards of the industry. Nothing he said right there really struck me and I realize we do have to have economy.

Do you think hip-hop is dead?

Never that as long as there are groups with focus that show the focus and there are plenty of them out there. Those artists very much embody hip-hop. I think that the statement hip-hop is dead is an important one because it starts a dialogue to get us talking about what happened in terms of the public's perception of what hip-hop is. I think the public's perception of hip-hop they're not really getting a chance to see the balance in hip-hop they're not being fed that on TV. That shelve they get to see that's what hip-hop was once about but that's no longer what a lot of us consider to be true hip-hop. if anything it's definitely changed.

How did the "Night Out" song with George Clinton come about?

Again that's another character-driven song we still have actual events that are going on in our lives but George Clinton again the goal of the album is to keep it funky we wanted to reach for the stars and shoot for the moon George came through and put his funk all over it and it feels like one of those Brides Of Funkenstein type joints."Night Out" is the centerpiece of the album in terms of the cinematic value of what we were trying to say because the song talks so much about a journey it really paints so many vivid pictures we feel that that song is the essence of our experience in Razor Blade city or a desolate city like Portland where there is so much of a struggle to just try to be credible artista and uh as well as being young Black men in the average urban city. You know stuff that they go through being trailed by the police even with your babies in the car and being falsely accused and searched being chased or shot at and caught up in a system that's beyond your control and still doing all that and making it funky and making a party it's very much a centerpiece of the album.

What's the scene like in Portland?

(laughs) We get that a lot. Since 1981 there were rappers around here with b-boys and crews. It's taken so long just to be credible so the rest of the world acknowledges that this is actually good. But it's a good scene out here a lot emcees lot of dope females out here. We got a female DJ out here, DJ Beyond There, a dope female group called Siren's Echo out here hip hop group One Last One Thing kind of Floetry but not that type of not that style of music more straight ahead hip-hop a long list of emcees male emcees it's a good scene out here.

You all taught an after-school class on hip-hop history how was that? who were your students and what was the biggest misconception they had about hip-hop?

It was fun we just kind of fell into it when we got off of tour we got a call that this community center here called Self Enhancement and Self Awareness they were teamed-up with this advertising agency that wanted to donate some money into a program. One of the guys at the agency had taught a hip-hop class and was looking to do something like that in Portland. They asked us to come down and share some ideas and we put it all together a nine-week course highschool kids at my old highschool Jefferson highschool that's like the hood highschool in the middle of the hood and uh and we just put it on for the kids. A history class so we brought in as many of the forefathers that were there at the inception of hiphop to the kids as well as you know the documentaries and stuff to be the syllabus if you will what the kids took home Charlie Ahearn and Fab Five Freddy and they came in and did a screening of Wildstyle for the kids. The father of the scratch DJ Grand Wizard Theodore came in and told a story. Many other artists were actually brought in. We're going to do it again this spring it's going to be incredible. It was mostly guys the class was kind of balanced through kind of half Black and half white because we opened the class up to crosstown high school called Grant highschool we left them come. I think the biggest misconception is that is to be hip-hop you kind of

have to be what's on TV or what's on the radio.

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