

EXPANSION TEAM

Thievery Corporation's Rob Garza and Eric Hilton continue to grow - and globalize - the nightlife empire they began 13 years ago.

By Justin Hampton

Whoever said that one couldn't mix business with pleasure apparently hasn't rubbed elbows with Rob Garza and Eric Hilton, whose smooth and classy polyglot approach to downtempo electronica as Thievery Corporation has launched the careers of a thousand soundalikes. Of course, it helped the duo's creative independence early on that they

the eve of their latest release, "Radio Retaliation" (ESL Music), to discuss their ongoing innovations in a nightlife industry to which they've so uniquely contributed.

South Of The Border

Although Garza owns the label 50/50 with Hilton, he doesn't hold any shares in the



Eric Hilton (left) and Rob Garza of Thievery Corporation.

Lounge. Until about four years ago, Garza never expected to own any clubs. That is, until he visited Playa Del Carmen, long promoted as the prime destination alongside Tulum in the Riviera Maya district. While visiting, he met his current partners in the club, Alejandro Gamez and Alberto Martinez, at a corner bar. Both Alejandro and Alberto were as new to nightclubs as Garza, yet all felt Playa could use a sophisticated establishment. "There were lots of corner bars and places that were just kind of very low-key or people with just kind of DJs that were playing a lot of generic kind of music," recalls Garza. "And we just felt that [we could] get everybody from the locals to people who are visiting Playa, but who

are kind of savvy [about] different artists and styles of music."

In terms of promotion, musical programming and overall vibe, La Santanera couldn't be any different from the Lounge. A lush upstairs terrace provides the perfect ambiance to down your Dos Equis, while downstairs is a no-frills dancefloor that's hosted jocks ranging from Truby Trio and Nickodemus to Josh Wink and Gui Boratto, and they can take the party all the way to 7 a.m. The kitschy flyer and web design suggests these guys take little but the party too seriously.

Explains Rob, "When we got there, a lot of people were trying to do things that were very European-looking or copying things that were happening in Indonesia. And it

could fall back on the success of Washington, DC's Eighteenth Street Lounge. Thanks to the foresight of Eighteenth Street Lounge's market strategy - a low-key, high-class lounge promoted strictly by word of mouth - Thievery managed to buoy their careers and their label, ESL Music, without major label backing. It was a novel move at the time of the Lounge's foundation 13 years ago, and utterly prescient of the diversification music groups must embrace in the post-digital music economy. But Garza and Hilton haven't stopped there. Hilton has continued to develop music-themed bars and restaurants in the DC area with his partners, while Garza has established a foothold in the Mexican resort market. We caught up with both of them separately on

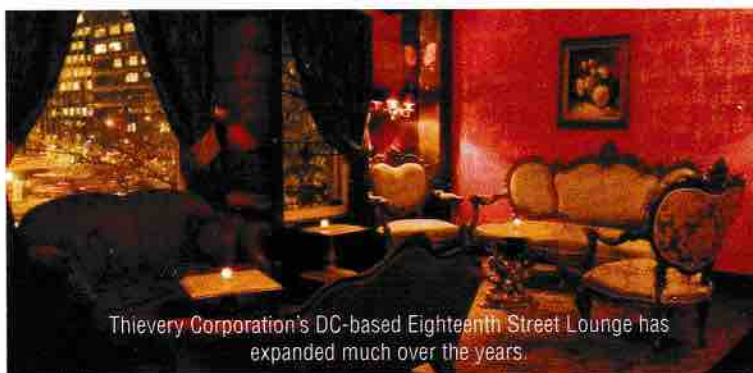
seems like nobody was really focusing on Mexican culture down there. So we kind of just wanted to take all these aspects of the native culture and just do them kind of lo-fi."

Aside from a Japanese-Mexican fusion restaurant called Diabli-to Cha Cha Cha, that's all Rob has on the ground so far. But there are plans to break ground elsewhere in Riviera Maya, a subject about which Rob keeps mum. In the meantime, Rob allows his partners to handle the day-to-day in the area for now, gracing his own turntables for 2008 NYE as part of Thievery Corporation, an experience he enjoyed immensely. "To play at the club - especially New Year's down there - it's pretty insane. The streets are just packed with people and it's hard to move through."

Capitol Gains

When many of Eric Hilton's friends were making the jump to NYC, he figured to stick

around to see what fortunes he could make in his hometown. Since starting up the lounge with partners Yama Jewayni, Aman Ayoubi and Farid Ali, he's managed to create practically a cottage industry of musically inspired, pop-culture informed



Thievery Corporation's DC-based Eighteenth Street Lounge has expanded much over the years.

eateries and lounges throughout the DC Metro area. At 14th and U, Hilton's just opened up Marvin, a combination Belgian-soul food restaurant and upstairs club inspired by DC-native Marvin Gaye's sojourn in Belgium. And down the street, Hilton is planning

to open a Jamaican patties restaurant with a dub music soundtrack named Patty Boom-Boom as well as The Gibson, a bar/lounge named after the late jazz pianist and ESL regular Elsworth Gibson. Hilton mentions about eight

properties he and his partners either own or are currently developing in DC aside from the Lounge, which makes one wonder what keeps him at it after succeeding with his musical passion. Apparently, the nightclub world is something of a passion for him, too. "I re-

ally like the idea of community and knowing a fair amount of people where you live.... It's a very simple human need, and I think places like these fulfill it," he says. "These are independent businesses that are launched by people who live in the neighborhoods and that's something that I really believe in."

Eighteenth Street Lounge itself has expanded much over the years, boasting a brand new sound system and an expanded dancefloor created by taking over the adjacent floor in the next building and removing the wall. Looking around DC some 13 years later, Hilton sees a heavily saturated nightlife industry buoyed by power brokers angling for federal cheese. One of his properties, Dragonfly, was recently converted into a bottle-service establishment called Current by the management service hired to reorganize the place, but Hilton personally finds it distasteful and vows never to bring it to

the Lounge. "To me, that's like MTV culture. It's like what you see on TV with [all the] excessive consumption. It's just horrible. I couldn't participate in that."

Although Hilton's focus has been mainly on restaurants, all of them have some tie to music, and all have trusted crews that can operate independently when Hilton is off on tour. Hilton spins off some of Thievery's influence into their creation, enthusing over chores like programming 30 hours of soul music for Marvin. And Marvin does have a dance space above the restaurant, separated from the eating area.

"The first floor is just the restaurant, and it closes at midnight on the weekend no matter what. And upstairs is the bar and the hangout, and that's open until three," he says. "So you never introduce that club element into the restaurant itself. If you try to share the same space, it's not gonna work." The duo hasn't always seen success in their business ventures, however. Hilton and Garza faced stiff resistance from Vegas' staunchly mainstream culture when Mandalay Bay contracted them to provide music and DJs for the Mix Nightclub. But one can't fault them for continuing to rule in the ultra lounge niche that they've done much to create. Hilton himself chuckles to think about it. "We always thought the whole lounge thing was kind of funny anyway, because really, all a lounge is is a room where there's some furniture and people hang out and have a drink and hear some music and talk...."

"With Eighteenth Street Lounge, you still had a dancefloor and [there's] still great nights where it kind of felt like a house party. So it just wasn't like this boring lounge where people just sit around doing nothing. So, I don't know. I think lounge is a very innocuous word with a lot of meanings attached to it. You could go many different ways with it."