

# Vision Questlove

Hip-hop on a dance-music bill? The Roots' Questlove sees nothing odd about it.

BY JUSTIN HAMPTON



There's a certain satisfaction Ahmir "Questlove" Thompson can take in sharing the Area:One stage with a slew of artists and DJs that are drawn by and large from the global electronica scene. Granted, acts like New Order, Moby, the Orb and Carl Cox are separated by several large degrees from the commercial success enjoyed by most of this country's reigning hip-hop artists. But Questlove, the wild-Afroed co-founder, drummer, and principal spokesman for hip-hop collective the Roots, has a better memory than most stateside hip-hop fans, and he sees things a bit differently.

"Basically, I think dance music and the birth of electronica and all that stuff is the offspring of bass music and music that the Bomb Squad was doing," Thompson opines from the Roots' home base in Philadelphia. "It's just more dense and faster. Not to mention the subculture of dance music in Detroit. A lot of people fail to recognize that the birthplace of dance music, electronic music, is actually Detroit. A few brothers are ruffled over there because they're not getting their

props, but basically, I see them as one and the same. They're both black subcultures that started in and had underground beginnings. Hip-hop in New York, dance in the ghettos of Detroit and parts of Chicago."

Such is the point of Area:One, the 17-date urban music package tour concocted by electronica guru Richard "Moby" Hall and his management company, MCT. Eschewing the narrow genre-casting of most summer tours, Area:One casts a wide net through the music subcultures of dance music, hip-hop and alternative rock in an attempt to stress the common bonds all of them share in the modern age.

"It's much like what Lollapalooza did when Perry Farrell first produced it," says Marci Weber, Moby's manager and co-producer of Area:One. "It really shook up formats in

radio. It shook a lot of things up. It made a lot of people more open to different kinds of music. And I think we're at that point again. I think that it's kind of a reaction to the shows [Moby] had been put on, especially the radio shows. It was Moby in the middle of all this pissed-off drone rock. And as much as he might like some of the bands — they're all talented artists — it's so genre-specific and almost exclusionary in how specific it is. The whole point in doing this [is to expose someone to] somebody they may not have seen before."

While electronica generally garners a level of esteem in American music somewhere below the much more popular hip-hop, the two hip-hop representatives on the Area:One tour have already done much in their careers to prove that we can all get along. Atlanta fusionists OutKast crossed over to influence a wide variety of British dance artists with 1998's *Aquemini*, and have in turn funnelled a lot of electronica influences back into their sound with their latest release, *Stankonia*. And the Roots have been down with the sounds coming out of the clubs since British dance music impresario Gilles Peterson released their first album, *Organix*, in the U.K. "Gilles definitely put me hip to a lot of the movement that was brewing underground in London," says Thompson. "But I was fortunate to be living in London at the time when Dego from [drum 'n' bass luminaries] 4Hero was, for lack of a better word, living the drum 'n' bass [life]. Early '92, '93, we befriended him and he showed us a lot."

Since then, the Roots have kept their feet planted in both communities, both in Philadelphia and nationally. Thompson and occasional Roots keyboardist James Poyser also guest on fellow Illadelphian King Britt's Sylk 130 project when they have the time, and last year, the group threw down at Carl Craig's Detroit Electronic Music Festival alongside such momentarily unruffled brothers as Kevin Saunderson, Jay Denham and Derrick May. And Thompson even stepped out from behind the drum kit to DJ this year at the dance music community's annual Winter Music Convention in Miami Beach.

"That was easily one of the best times I ever had DJing," he says. "I think every record I put on prompted some sort of nostalgia or some frenzied [response]. First of all, it was more or less the shock of it. That's basically the whole story of the Roots. People just underestimate what we're all about and what we're able to do. So easily, nine times out of ten, people's reactions are like, 'Oh, man, I love the Roots, man, they dope!' I know that what

continued on page 60

continued from page 58 we're doing is purely business as usual. I think a lot of hip-hop purists think [we're just] an acid-jazz group or a bunch of musicians that don't have any hip-hop groundings."

Asked if he sees any difference between playing for a dance crowd and playing for a hip-hop crowd, Thompson jokes, "One just prefers ecstasy just a little bit more!" But after laughing it off, he once again ruefully ponders the limited perspective he sees nowadays in hip-hop culture: "It depends on what your definition of hip-hop is, because the powers that be don't really treat hip-hop as an art form. Hip-hop is treated like a drug game, a quick way out or easy cash, so as a result, there's really no emphasis placed on historical beginnings. If you're a 20-year-old now, then Kriss Kross probably introduced hip-hop to you, or Hammer or Vanilla Ice. And that was when you were eight, nine, ten years old. I respect hip-hop as an art form. I study the whole history of it. A jazz guy won't ignore Louis Armstrong or King Oliver. To think that, 'OK, it started with Miles Davis and that's it' — that's why we're in the state we're in right now, of disarray."

Of course, dance music culture itself is

facing its own demons as well, especially regarding the twin battles being waged between the DEA and club and rave promoters in New Orleans and Panama City, Florida. And while Weber is quick to note that Area:One is not a rave, she also acknowledges the added responsibility promoters need to take nowadays, both in protecting their patrons and defending themselves against drug war tyranny. "I've spent enough time at raves with Moby and going to five, six, seven years of doing the underground parties to know that it's a really, really hard thing to put on in this country. And as much as I support everything like that, it's really hard to find the people that put these events on that are really trying to look after the audience as well."

In the meantime, Thompson sees very little interest in hip-hop for a real partnership with dance music culture. Perhaps seeing the grass as being a little bit greener on the other side of the DJ booth, he feels that electronica may be able to avoid the pitfalls that he sees overtaking hip-hop. "I think dance music can learn from hip-hop, to see what the downfall of the hip-hop culture has become and how to avoid it," he says. "A lot of brothers are put out of work because of sampling laws. If you're Pete Rock and you are known for your clever use of samples, well, now sampling is basically illegal, unless you're a millionaire and are able to afford those things. That's the handicap of Pete Rock. Same thing for De La Soul. And the public doesn't understand. They say,



Moby

'Oh, why can't they make another record like *Three Feet High and Rising*? Or Public Enemy, it would be great if they could come back, but those records are illegal now.

"I don't think that black people in general are all that interested in the art of it. Very few blacks are interested in the value or the art reference. And that's the sad truth. Black people are great innovators of music, but they don't believe in historical preservation of the music, and as a result, it becomes disposable. Look at [quick-tongued rappers] Das EFX, they put into high gear a new form of music only for everyone to plagiarize and copy, plagiarize and copy, leaving them no choice but to abandon what they invented, only for it to fall apart."

So where does this leave the Roots, who are already seven songs into their new LP and preparing to do the first seven dates of Area:One with hip-hop chanteuse Kelis? "That leaves us nowhere. We're the same group we've always been. We've never been swayed by the marketplace," Thompson insists. "If it's ready for us, it's ready for us. Whatever goes around comes back around. But now, I guess because everybody's having neo-soul fever and all of these new soul artists are coming out, then the pendulum is swinging our way again. But on the real, none of that sways us. As a result, I doubt I'll be living in a 30-room mansion. But I'll die at peace knowing I did something that I truly believed in."