

BLAST OFF

The Motor City's new hip-hop phenom, Black Milk, launches from Dilla's legacy

An acknowledged product of his environment, Detroit's Black Milk makes no bones about carrying on the Motor City hip-hop sound. Since officially breaking into the game in 2002, producing for Slum Village, this 23-year-old beatmaker/MC has embodied the grimy rhythm and ever-soulful melodies that go hand in hand with his city. More precisely, the influence from Detroit's late and legendary rapping producer J Dilla is impossible to miss in his work. Black Milk doesn't deny the similarities or the inspiration from the influential beat architect. "Dilla's the biggest influence I got from any artist, period," he says. Despite that, although Black Milk is a laidback guy, he's a bit vexed by those who expect him to be "the next Dilla."

"I'm not really trying to fill Dilla's shoes," he says. "I probably won't ever fill his shoes. He came, and he created a sound. He created a sound for Detroit, for producers who came after him—like me, Wajeed and Kareem Riggins—to have. I just want to continue to put out good music [from] Detroit."

While Black Milk still often works with Dilla's original group, Slum Village, he's steadily beginning to shed the impractical expectations. His new album, *Popular Demand* (Fat Beats, 2007), is just the beginning of his progression. As the follow-up to his 2005 solo debut (*Sounds of the City* on Music House), *Popular Demand* upholds the familiar, Detroit quality: looping up vocal-heavy '60s soul samples to complement rugged drums and upbeat bravado. While his city's sound is more about a vibe than a studio science, Black Milk's technique on the Akai MPC2000XL explains a lot about the fluidity of his hip-hop. "I don't quantize my beats," he admits. "I don't use a timer, so the beats is kinda loose—a little sloppy." It's not too often you'll hear a producer calling his work "sloppy." But Detroit hip-hop is dirtier than it is pristine.

Although no less grimy, there are tracks on *Popular Demand* in which Black Milk steps outside of his hometown comfort zone. On "Watch Em," featuring Fat Ray and QD, he does without the sped-up female vocals and pairs a funky, key-laden Bob James sample with some bouncy drums; in the process, he drops some of his most inspired lyrics of the album about keeping an eye out for crooked cops. Then on the final track, "Take It There," Black Milk unearths his most original beat to date with a chopped-up loop of a tribal chant.

"A majority of my sound is soul music, but when I'm listening to records, I go with whatever feels good," Black Milk explains of his sample choices. "I got a couple joints on the album that have rock samples and one joint with some electronic samples. I mix it up, but at the same time, the soul shit—that's the majority of my record collection."

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For a man born and bred in Motown, leaning toward soul is to be expected. But working for artists outside of Detroit, such as Lloyd Banks and Pharoahe Monch, has helped inspire him to dig for more obscure loops. Just listen to "Let's Go," a single from Pharoahe Monch's forthcoming album *Desire*. It's got Black Milk's trademark bounce, but the clunky guitar licks are definitely an update for this up-and-coming producer. "Let's Go" is a rock stab that I chopped up," Black Milk says. "It's real energetic and hype. It's a real up-tempo joint, man."

While Black Milk is seen proudly clutching an MPC on the cover of *Popular Demand*, he isn't your average young beatmaker, only familiar with one piece of gear and one approach. For his next solo album, he's thinking of integrating live instruments into his production, including playing drums with his own five-piece Yamaha kit. "I'm gonna try to bring in live guitars and a live keyboard player just to switch it up because people get tired of hearing the same soul samples all the time," he says with a laugh.

With or without his crates of dusty 45s, Black Milk is not only Detroit's youngest in charge; he's also becoming the backbone of Detroit's unmistakable hip-hop movement. **o**

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