

De La Soul

A diverse assortment of people has gathered at the American Airlines Arena in Miami the day before the MTV Video Music Awards. Celebrity freaks (Victoria Gotti), teeny-bop flavors of the month (Hilary Duff), rock-and-roll nonentities (Hoobastank), fledgling stars (Kanye West) and over-the-hill acts (New Edition) are joined by a few musicians who actually resonate beyond the here and now.

De La Soul is among that small number. As one of the creators of bohemian rap as an ambitious alternative to the hardcore macho idioms that typically dominate hip-hop culture, the Long Island trio is legendary, the B-boy equivalent of Sonic Youth. A few key encounters during the group's jaunt around the press room confirm its importance. The face of MTV journalism, Kurt Loder, doesn't seem fazed (or much interested) in the hubbub surrounding him, but he makes a point of walking over and talking with De La Soul, even as Yoko Ono passes by.

But De La Soul was really just in Miami to work, like everybody else. There was a new album, *Grind Date*, to promote. The group snapped photos and talked with Dame Dash, Carl Thomas, and Lil' Jon and the Eastside Boyz, then spent five minutes chatting up the broadcasters.

"Hip-hop legends De La Soul in the building!" shouts No Limit Larry, a DJ from a North Carolina radio station. Later, he marveled at De La's staying power. "If I have a choice, it's got to be hot. And they're still hot. Still together after all these years, still doing it."

Two hours after arriving (and running into Outkast and BET Rap City host Big Tigger on the way out of the arena), De La Soul was back on the road. Maseo, the group's DJ, was on his way to Club Row in downtown Miami to do a sound check for the group's performance at an MTV block party that evening. Meanwhile, Kelvin "Posdnous" Mercer and Dave "Trugoy" Jolicoeur took separate minivans back to the Hotel Nash to rest up for the block party and another sold-out performance with the Beastie Boys.

"Every time an album comes out, we stay traveling," Mercer says as his chauffeured minivan hurtles down the freeway. "We've been blessed to go places where we have loyal supporters of De La Soul, just because we'll go places that no one else will."

De La Soul unapologetically makes records for the people. The group's 1996 album *Stakes Is High* stands as the dividing line between the freewheeling innovations of "golden era" hip-hop

De La Soul Grinds On

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and the flossy hip-pop concoctions now playing on a radio near you. Subsequent releases, such as AOI: Mosaic Thump and Grind Date, have found the group fighting to maintain relevance in the new era of hip-hop.

Grind Date is generating a modest buzz in industry circles, but De La Soul is holding on as the only rap headliner from the '80s that matters and relies solely on its music for sustenance. Chuck D and KRS-One are more elder-statesmen figureheads than cutting-edge artists. LL Cool J has his chiseled looks and B-movie career. Dr. Dre sticks to making beats and developing protégés to handle the microphone in his stead.

"Three Feet High and Rising wasn't like anything that was out," Mercer says of De La's seminal 1989 album. "It was on MTV. It was on Rap City. It was on everything possible. Why not have that same drive and understanding now? I won't sit here and say I make music to save people's lives. I make music because I love music. But I realized that, wow, I can make money off making music that I love. So it is to make a living."

But the group also acts as a mentor. Since the trio's classic single "Buddy," which introduced A Tribe Called Quest, De La Soul has supported emerging artists from Common and Mos Def (Stakes Is High) to Devin the Dude (AOI: Bionix). And today's De La Soul remains part of a resurgence in creative and thematically varied hip-hop.

"It's great to see Anthony Hamilton do a song with Jadakiss," Jolicoeur says. "Would it have happened in 1996? Probably not. It would have been Mariah and Jadakiss. [But] I think people are starting to let their guards down and try new things. We don't have to be so tough. We don't have to be so rugged."

De La Soul's members insist their music is equally palatable to the general public and to veteran hip-hop fans, some of whom have charged that the group has lost the eccentric touches of Three Feet High and Rising. In fact, Grind Date isn't as experimental as that classic debut. But 15 years after Three Feet, the members of De La Soul are family men who've watched hip-hop become a billion-dollar business. Their recent output is the reflection of grown men, not talented teenagers.

Grind Date is polished and sophisticated enough to be appreciated on its own terms, easily bumping from the bass bounce of "Verbal Clap" to "He Comes," a fleet-footed duet with Ghostface Killah. There's also the surprising track "Rock Co. Kane Flow," which finds Jolicoeur and Mercer trading stop-start verses with cutting-edge rap mathematician MF Doom. But Grind Date is not Three Feet High and Rising or even Buhloone Mindstate.

Then again, why should it be?

"In '88, we weren't conscious of what was going on," Jolicoeur says of the group's formative years. "We were knuckleheads ... young kids pulling jokes on each other. But in time, you've seen De La grow up. That's how it should be."

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