

**T**HE SOUND OF MUSIC HAS CHANGED TODAY BECAUSE you got kids on totally different drugs," says Andre 3000. Andre was born Andre Benjamin but answers to Dre as well as Possum Allawishes Jenkins and Nookie Blossumgang III. He is twenty-five. He is one-half of OutKast, unquestionably the most creative duo in hip-hop today. He is also on a roll about this drugs-and-music thing. "First, everybody was doing the weed thing, and shit was slower," he says.

"Mmm," mumbles his partner Big Boi, also twenty-five and born Antwan Patton, from across the room. "Laid-back G-funk." Patton answers as well to Daddy Fatsacks and Luscious Leftfoot.

"Now," Dre continues, "they on the X, so they want it faster. They want to move. It's this rave energy. The new hip-pies are rave kids. Songs like 'B.O.B.' and 'Speedballin'" - from OutKast's new album, *Stankonia*, unquestionably the most creative album in hip-hop today - "are the heartbeat of what's going on with youth right now."

In the last few years, ecstasy has become as prevalent in the bodies of hip-hoppers as tattoos are on them, but Andre's observation is one that no other rapper has made. It's unsurprising that

he points it out - OutKast have been speaking the truth from their booth since their first album, 1994's *Southernplayalisticadillacmuzik*, recorded when the pair were just eighteen. As they say on the new track "Humble Mumble" (featuring Erykah Badu): "The game changes every day, so obsolete is the fist and marches/Speeches only reaches

those who already know about it/This is how we go about it."

*Stankonia* is OutKast's masterpiece - brainy, socially aware, flexible funk akin to Sly and the Family Stone's 1971 opus, *There's a Riot Going On*. Andre and Big Boi have deftly married two sides of hip-hop: Andre's way-out, third-eye consciousness harkens back to the free-wheeling intellectualism of groups like Public Enemy and De La Soul, while Big Boi represents the streets and the gangsta tradition, albeit with a dose of conscience. Andre is as interplanetary as Kool Keith and as earthbound as Grandmaster Flash. He's one of the few male MCs to have performed in a platinum wig (not to mention mummy, shiny turbans, genie outfits, customized military uniforms, funk-ed-up fur coats and other homespun psychedelic-pimp creations) without losing cred. "Dre's living a life with it," says Rico Wade, the Organized Noize producer who has been on board from the beginning. "He's funk'n' out. He's on a level with Bootsy Collins and George Clinton. Three or four years ago, I remember him saying, 'I just want to look like the music, man - as funky and exciting as the music. Why should the music

sound better than I look?'"

Along with the Goodie Mob and producers Organized Noize, OutKast have proved over the years that there is much more to Atlanta's music scene than dirty-South booty beats. *Stankonia* is full of acid-trip vocal effects, live instruments, Isley Brothers-style guitars and beats that range from skittering to bombastic. It's OutKast's greatest work yet. And now the world is ready to listen.

The pair are cooling in their New York hotel with a few of their posse and their management team, watching an OutKast segment on *Direct Effect* (MTV's new hip-hop TRL). Andre sits on the floor like a relaxed Buddha. Perched on the couch next to him is OutKast protégé Killer Mike, a large, low-voiced rapper in big orange-lensed glasses who stays very still. At one point he rasps that his homeboy on the Buffalo Bills told him that OutKast's new traffic-stopping, techno-laced single "B.O.B." is the only video that the white players and black players will sit down and watch together. Over by the other side of the couch are Big Boi, the managers and Slim Cutta Calhoun, a kind of Atlanta Snoop Dogg who is the first signing to OutKast's new label,

**BIG BOI (LEFT), DRE AND A TRIO OF EXOTIC DANCERS EXPRESS THEMSELVES.**

# OutKast

## LET THEIR FREAK FUNK FLY

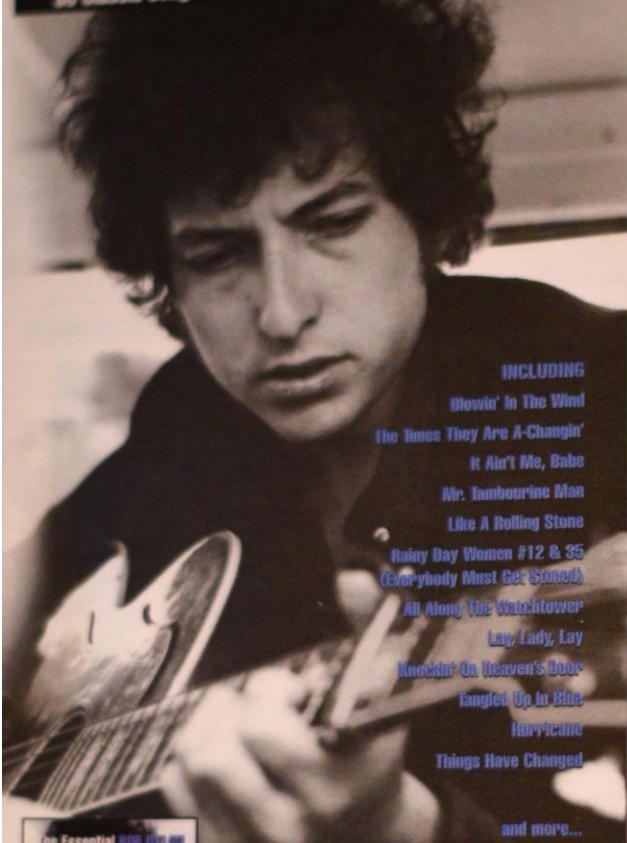
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Aquemini. In the room, as in the music and the group, there is a balance between freak and street.

The video for "B.O.B." ("Bombs Over Baghdad") comes on and Sway, the dreadlocked news guy on *Direct Effect*, is recounting the duo's discography. Everyone laughs - genuinely amused - at his characterization of Stankonia as a land of purple grass (the kind you walk on) and Kabuki masks, both images in the "B.O.B." video.

"We got a little bit of play on 'Rosa Parks,'" says Big Boi, referring to the video for the anthemic single that landed them a lawsuit in 1999 from the song's namesake (the suit was dismissed earlier this year). "This is the first time we've got MTV play on something coming out the box." He's sitting at the coffee table, breaking up some of the finest-smelling stankonia this side of Amsterdam. He's smallish and solid, his hair weaved in braids, his clothes big, baggy gangsta-sports style, accessorized with subdued jewelry. He is the consummate host, taking care of everyone's needs while watching the perimeter. In a war, he would be a scout. His partner, Dre, would be a general. Today, Dre's lounging in a pair of green-and-white genie pants and a burgundy varsity-track-type jacket embroidered on the front with some toreator-style stitching. Even in plain clothes, he commands attention without demanding it. He exudes a strong, humble star power, and his voice is as deep an intimate drawl in person as it is on record.

"Man," Dre says, looking at snapshots of their career flashings on the TV, "this shit is fucking me up."

It feels like a Sunday - just watching a little tube in your friend's living room - but earlier tonight, OutKast were fucking New York up. They played a promotional forty-five-minute club set that, despite nagging sound problems and a set list made up primarily of new material, had the crowd jumping. The highlight was "Bombs Over Baghdad." It was furious and infectious, the pair throwing down their lines over a racing 135-bpm techno beat - fast enough to whiplash a nation of head-bobbing hip-hoppers into enlightenment. "Really, the beat make you crank it up," Andre says about his triple-fast delivery on the song. "You can't get on them beats playin', cause they'll really kick your ass."

The duo recorded the song shortly after completing its last album, the Grammy-nominated *Aquemini*. The title and hook - "Don't pull the thang out, unless you plan to bang/Don't even bang unless you plan to hit

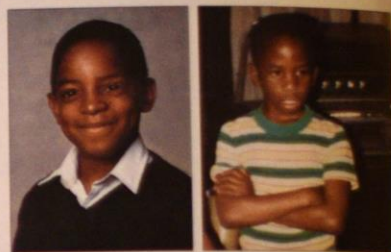
Associate editor ANTHONY BOZZA wrote about rap artist Nelly in RS 853.

something" - was prompted by the United States' bombing of Iraq. "The U.S. was trying to beat around the bush," Dre says. "We was trying to scare them by bombing the outskirts."

"Cow pastures and milk factories," Big Boi chimes in. "Deodorant stores, stuff like that."

"If you gonna do anything at all," Dre continues, "do it. If you gonna push it, push it."

The backing track was sequenced on their tour bus, inspired by British drum-and-bass artists like Roni Size and Phitek. Before OutKast had even thought of lyrics, they decided it would be their first single. "It was an idea before it was a song," Dre says. "We was at this party in London, and they were playing drum-and-bass music with an MC rhyming. There wasn't anything killing me in hip-hop at the time, but woo, that shit was tough. They make all their beats on computers overseas. Our shit is harder, but theirs is more complex. It was the tempo I was looking for, so I thought about how to Americanize it. Techno was too cheesy and dance-oriented for people over here. People in the hood either felt you was a white



Little stankers: Dre (left), circa 1985, smiles pretty, and an eight-year-old Big Boi pouts.

boy or you was gay if you listened to that type of music. But if you make it hard, with feeling and lyrics on top, it's a new type of music. We call it slumadelic - slum dance music. That way they can understand it."

Stankonia is what hip-hop desperately needs: not just a wake-up call, but a resuscitation - the "electric revival" OutKast call for in "B.O.B." OutKast decry rap's rampant conformity, with its celebration of materialism and violence - in short, the "bullshit" they ask other rappers to keep out of their ears in "Red Velvet." Others have preached the same message over the years, from De La to Common, though one thing that makes OutKast different is that they understand both sides of hip-hop - what it must be and what it can be. Take the story Dre recounts in "Humble Mumble": "I met a critic, I made her shit her drawers/She said she thought hip-hop was only guns and alcohol/I said, 'Oh, hell, naw' but yet it's that, too/You can't discrimahate be-



**Blond ambition: Dre (left) and Big Boi take the stage in New York, December 1998.**

cause you done read a book or two."

The pair have also long criticized big-balling braggers, the very people who are responsible for a lot of the violence in the hip-hop world. In "Red Velvet," they make this clearer than ever before. "The focus of lyrics in hip-hop lately has been braggadocio," Big Boi says, still crumbling a growing mountain of fresh green buds. "I got this, 'I got that,' 'I'm the best.' That's cool, whatever. Battle raps go back to the early pre-dawn of hip-hop and are still going on, whatever. But there's been an overabundance of 'Look at my watch! Look at my car! Look at my diamonds! Look at my teeth! Look it! Look it! Look at the goddamned TV! Look at the DVD! If you're doing that, what's your focus? What are you doing? Are you doing advertising for car upgrades? One big automobile commercial for the whole world?" In the "Red Velvet" hook, OutKast equate poundcake to money, women and all of the facets of high-style living. Red velvet cake is a Southern specialty with dyed-red insides. "You know red velvet cake looks like it's bleeding," Big Boi says. "People got to realize that eighty percent of the brothers out there ain't got half what they got, and they puttin' it in they face. It's like dangling raw meat in front of dogs."

When they were still only known as Antwan and Andre, the two met in tenth grade back at Tri-Cities High School in Atlanta's East Point. Antwan (Big Boi) was new to the school and was quick to suss out where the action was. "We was some playa preps; we always wore different clothes," Big Boi says.

"You just had to be a fly boy," Dre adds. "Wear a print shirt, some Guess jeans you done dyed in the sink. Some fake Guess - sew the Guess sign on some Gap jeans."

"I was new to school," Big Boi says, "and Dre and his four homeboys was all new to school too. None of us knew nobody. Them four niggas - the cut-em-up crew. They was choppin' ho's down. These muthafuckas was wear-

ing Timberlands and Girbaud jeans. I could have sworn they was rich."

"We done stole it all from the mall," Dre laughs. "But we looked rich."

"So we hooked up one day at the mall when my brother and I were out there planning to shoplift," Big Boi says. "We went back to Dre crib, and from then we was just coolin'."

Antwan and Andre met their future producer, Rico Wade, and rhymed for him in a parking lot to the remix of A Tribe Called Quest's "Scenario." "Them cats was about sixteen and took the bus up to this little plaza where I owned a beauty supply shop and a video store," Wade recalls. "They came out with an instrumental of 'Scenario,' and for seven minutes them cats went back to back. I didn't even stop them, I was so in awe. I closed the store, we got in my Blazer and went straight to the Dungeon."

"The Dungeon was great," Dre says. "It was a preproduction studio in the basement of this house with red dirt walls and floor, crickets everywhere. We had planned to take the bus around that day to meet a few producers - just trying to get on - but the beats they had were some of the most original music from Atlanta we'd ever heard."

The duo began coming by daily for musical education. "Raymon Murray of Organized Noize is a real beat maker," Dre says. "He'd know exactly where the samples from everything out at the time came from - all of Dr. Dre." In his junior year, Andre dropped out of school to devote himself fully to music. Big Boi stuck it out and graduated with a 3.68 GPA.

OutKast aren't too quick to talk about their personal lives, and when asked, they immediately point to song lyrics, as if to say their lives are in their music and their music is their lives.

Apparently there's a lot of earthly love in those lives. Songs like "Stank-love" and "Slum Beautiful" are soul

jams reminiscent of the more orgasmic moments of "Dr. Funkenstein." Down in Atlanta, Big Boi has a lounge in his house, complete with a pole for any lady guest's impromptu self-expression needs, assuming those needs involve stripping. He also has two kids and, earlier in the evening, introduced a very well-dressed woman named Sherlita as his fiancée.

Dre, for his part, has a son named Seven with singer Erykah Badu. The couple are no longer together, a breakup that inspired elements of the song "Ms. Jackson," an open letter to a baby-mama's mama with a once-heard, never-forgotten hook. "We're not together no more," he says, looking down, "but we still cool, though. We talk every day. We really just focusing on raising our kid." And if you're wondering, Badu's mom, Kolleen Gipson Wright, has heard the song. "I didn't play it for her or nothing, but she done heard the song," Dre says, starting to crack one of his mile-wide grins. "She said, 'Why didn't you call it "Ms. Wright"?'"

As a few blunts make their way around the room, Big Boi pulls out his newest gadget - a portable MP3 player that holds the equivalent of 100 CDs. "From the top, we always been music lovers," he says. "If you a music lover and you love the music, you gonna love what you doing."

"It's about learning and paying attention," Dre says. "When we listen to records, we sit down and listen to everything from blues to bluegrass to the people that really inspire us, like Jimi Hendrix, Funkadelic and Sly Stone."

"We truly love what we do," Big Boi nods. "That's one thing I can say about us as a team."

Other people love what they're doing too, and, surely, songs like "B.O.B." will usher in a new sound in hip-hop, much in the way that Timbaland's minimal *Knight Rider* beats set the tone for 1997-98. "You know what?" Big Boi asks, sitting back. "It's good, too, if people do that. When we started making this album, we was like, 'Ain't hardly anything out.' Everybody doing the same thing. For us to come and drop a drip in the bucket, make some waves and inspire different producers to go to other realms of the music, then good. It helps hip-hop as a whole. I'm just glad God chose us."

Dre suddenly leans forward to make a point. "It's the people who take whatever music they doing so far to the left of what was going on," he starts to explain. "Put on any album from goddamned 1966 and put on a Sly Stone album - it sounds very different. P-Funk from any time sounds different. Those are the people that inspired us to blow niggas' minds." He puts a fist to his forehead then opens the palm, spreading his fingers wide. "That's what we really into," he says, his eyes gleaming and his face grinning. "Mind-blowin' shit." ○