



LABTEKWON & ROD LEE

INTERVIEW

*Stephen Janis*

Labtekwon and Rod Lee inhabit what would seem to be oppositely charged spheres of influence within the Baltimore hip-hop scene. While Lee has become the undisputed godfather of the fast-paced, driving dance music hyphenated by hip-hop-inspired chants known as “Baltimore club,” Labtekwon has been building a finely-tuned, horizontally integrated international reputation as one of the best emcees of the subterranean world known simply as the “underground.”

Lee’s work—considered as close to classic as there is in the Baltimore club genre—elevates many of the characteristic strengths of club music, a rough-hewn idiom that is as dark as the urban landscape from which it is born. With vocal volleys producing sinewy aftershocks, eclipsed by a seismic sub-bass, his work encapsulates the schizophrenic world of nocturnal euphoria and inner-city dread that drives the Baltimore club scene to an ecstatic frenzy.

Labtekwon’s eleven albums represent more than a decade of lyricism, wit, and off-beat, beat-wise timing. His circumspectly-crafted reputation—the sedimentary metaphors, elixir-like hooks, and spirited topical adventures into mysticism, politics, and sex—has culminated with the release of *Song of the Sovereign* on venerable Mush Records, so that Labtekwon is solidly ensconced in the firmament that includes eclectic luminaries such as Mad Lib, Atmosphere, and Aesop.

*Link* sat down with Labtekwon and Rod Lee at Rod Lee’s Club Kingz record store on east Monument Street, and talked about the correspondences, and the future, of their respective genres.



LINK: We wanted to do a quick interview on some of the different veins of the Baltimore hip-hop scene, and in particular Baltimore club music. Because some readers might not be familiar with its history, I'd like to ask you, Rod, what the first real "Baltimore club" record was.

LEE: The first record was "Yo Yo Where the Hos At"—Sean Caesar's record released in 1990.

LAB: I've got a little knowledge on that too, 'cause the first one that came out for real was Scotty B's "I Got the Rhythm," that came out in 1989. Scotty played that joint down at Godfrey's. At that point Fantasy was opened, which I believe was 1988 and Sean Caesar started playing down there, too, and then he released "Yo Yo Where the Hos At," which came after "I Got the Rhythm."

LINK: What about the Frank Ski record, "Do Do Brown"—wasn't that around the same time?

LAB: I never counted that as real Baltimore club, though; that was something else. It wasn't like a real sound. It didn't represent the true nature of the Baltimore club sound of the time.

LINK: Was that because of Frank's performance?

LAB: It was designed for radio, and everything else up until that point was hip-hop-house, dealing with the Chicago movement. Baltimore club at that point in time was like a combination of hip-hop and the hip-house, but put into a form that was a reflection of a Baltimore, which was more drum-oriented, repetitive-type choruses with less lyrics. Heavy rhythms, heavy drums, designed for you to move and dance to.

LINK: Do you agree with that, Rod?

LEE: Basically I can only speak on my music, and when I make my music, I'm raunchier with it now than before, so it's different than all that other stuff.

LINK: When you're dealing with writing now, do you do verses, or all choruses—chants?

LEE: With me, I just flipped the whole club scene. At one point in time we were just sampling. Every new hip-hop song we'd just

make a “club” record out it, and it got boring. I just went to the table and started writing.

LINK: What did you start out with thematically, just party chants?

LEE: No, I made song . . . I made songs. Verses, whatever.

LINK: Up to this point then, what is the biggest national Baltimore club record, was it the eighties Dimes song “Whoa Now . . .”?

LEE: Yeah, that would be it.

LINK: Why aren’t there more?

LEE: No push.

LINK: It begs the comparison to go-go music, perhaps, a local music that’s never grown outside the boundaries of the . . .

LEE: It’s like basically like this, same way up in New York, there’s money behind. They take a wack record, and put money behind. By the time they get through banging it in your head, it’s a hit, which we don’t do here; we don’t money behind Baltimore club records. But it doesn’t matter; in the next three months I’m going to change the whole hustle.

LINK: In what way?

LEE: First off, I corner my own market. When I come out with my CDs I keep my whole catalog under my control. So I can use the catalog as stepping stones to other things, to build the label, instead of selling it off. Right now people come into the store and say, “I want *KSO Volume One*.” They know I have it. Then I reissue her volumes one through four and send them out to the stores—two weeks later, sold out.

LINK: And Lab, you’ve also kept your whole catalog as means to control your music.

LAB: I’ve released nineteen albums independently.

LINK: You’ve built an international reputation doing it yourself; was the independent, CDR thing part of the strategy?

LAB: It’s a strategy sure, but I always tell people, as far as my end of the hip-hop, just making music was part of my motivation.

When people said, “hey, you’re not average,” it motivated me to realize that even if my album didn’t blow up locally, somebody *somewhere* was going to want to hear my album; I just had to find them. Doing it myself allowed me to keep it consistent to what I wanted and to get it overseas. . .

LINK: How would you characterize the scene in which you built up your fan base? It’s a lot different from club music.

LAB: No it’s not, and that’s been a problem for me. I’ll be brutal with you, ultimately I’ve always wanted that audience. I took the throne at Douglass High in 1986, and battling kids at AFRAM [Baltimore’s annual African-American festival] in 1988 and won. For a minute I didn’t think I needed a record deal, I thought rapping in Baltimore was enough. But what happened was, I realized, when I started putting records out that people in other places bought . . . They would buy the records but also I realized I didn’t want to live anywhere else—I think my music is a reflection of my being from here, but the money is being made outside of Baltimore.

LINK: What is it about Baltimore that informs your music?

LAB: This city has the most soul of any city I’ve ever been to.

LEE: Yeah.

LAB: It’s the northernmost city of the south, and the southernmost city of the north. Whatever you think is hot about the north or the south is here. Baltimore has spirit of no die—really it’s either you’re a whore or you ain’t no whore . . . that’s the ethos for athletes, artist, whatever you’re into you gotta hustle.

LINK: So it’s soul . . .

LAB: My thing is I believe that Baltimore club music is at a critical point. In terms of going global, Baltimore club music needs to retain its raw form, that means 120 beats per minute and up . . . dance speed. Rod does good stuff with Tim Trees, but he slows the beat down. People in other places can’t recognize that energy without the speed. When I went to California I let people hear club music and they went crazy. I told Sean Caesar

and Scotty, if you could combine hip-hop and R&B and club and keep it fast, then it would blow up.

LEE: But it's like, you can make it any way—if you don't have oomph behind it, you will always have them shut you down. That's why I turned down several major deals, off the strength of controlling my own hustle.

As I was coming up, I was always a spectator. I was always the one in the corner, seeing what was working and not working. Going to the record pools, seeing who made asses of themselves, and who didn't make asses of themselves. Just seeing how the whole hustle worked, and using it to my advantage. I didn't do the same things other people did.

So the idea that Baltimore don't support, Baltimore don't support is wrong . . . someone's just got to open the door.

LINK: Are you talking about a leadership role?

LEE: If I was to have the first local label signed nationally here, or for the whole east coast region, I would have the power to pull whoever I want. All the cats I see struggle, I could put them to work. Someone who sounds like shit last month can turn things around.

Here's the thing, when I first did club music, I never got paid for it, until I met Bernie [Bernie Rabinowitz is the former and deceased owner of Music Liberated, a legendary local store that sold almost exclusively vinyl, and was the source for Baltimore club music].

Bernie was like, why put out the tracks, I'll buy them from you. We worked out a price: six tracks for \$1,500. I was like, shit, I don't have to put out no more records.

The only thing I sat around and did was make the tracks. But it got to the point it wasn't fun anymore, 'cause it was all about money.

The way I put out club music now, you wouldn't do it back in the day. It was one record; for three of four months that one record was the shit. Now, I put seven or eight records out in month, with six tracks on each record. That's a lot of club music, that a lot of music to get. If we go back to doing singles,

club music would get more notoriety, but right now it's a hustle for me, and I know how DJs are.

DJs feel afraid when they don't have something, mainly when they think they have a name. So they'll come in here and spend \$200 for every record on the wall, then I call and say we have a new record and they'll come back and find two more.

LINK: So you're saying you're better off having five or six club records to corner the market, rather than breaking one record.

LEE: Right now, to surviving, that's how I'm doing. I'm a DJ; I use to come to the wall so I know.

LINK: But club records cost \$14 each, that's unheard of in terms of the price for regular commercial vinyl; does this have to do with this limited market you're talking about?

LEE: I started that with Bernie. I wanted to see how strong my name was. Cats would come in and ask, "Rod Lee have new records out?" Bernie would say, "no," and they'd leave. Okay. I called Bernie and said I got three EPs; I'm not making any more; I gave him a whole hustle. I told Bernie to put up a poster in the back of the store, and take the rest of the club records off the wall... the poster said "Rod Lee Coming Soon."

I told Bernie not to make any labels for the records, 'cause a DJ wants to feel important. The record had colored labels: sky blue, orange, and black. One, two, and three. So when we put it up on the wall, everything that Rod Lee was playing was up there. When they come to the store, the DJs would say, "oh shit, how much are these?" Bernie said "ten," and the DJs would say, "ten... shit, I'll take two." That's how the whole price thing started.

LINK: Lab, you did a club record on your album *The Hustlaz Guide to the Universe*, released last spring, called "Thing Thang"?

LAB: Yeah, I did a club record. I've been saying it for years, hip-house was the grandfather of Baltimore club, Tyler Cooper and Fats Eddie, those dudes from Chicago trying to rap over club beats. I've been doing it since then, too, although I've been trying to hook up with [Rod] so I can put, things, a record together.

LEE: The whole gimmick Lab is how you give it to them. You gotta paint the picture for them. Say if I come to you with Labtekwon, I would never come to you with his vinyl, if I'm trying to get your money. I could paint this picture by making the hype in the streets.

LINK: In other words, creating a buzz; how do you do that?

LEE: You have to manipulate the clubs, stay in the streets, stay in after hours, you gotta be available, you don't have a life.

A lot of cats think just 'cause they're from Holbrook, they put flyers out, and spend a lot of money, they have something; they missed the whole concept.

LINK: You think being out there drives your creativity, too, being in the clubs?

LEE: Basically, I tell you the truth, my music comes out of anger.

LINK: What kind of anger?

LEE: Depressed anger that goes amongst everybody. You got people going to the club to have a drink cause they're mad at their females. You got guys going to club to get away from their bills. I just relate off everything. If you could sit there and make someone dance after they got divorced [laughter], I know I'm good!

I seen females, before they get to the club, they done got their ass whipped. Go to the club, the music come on, they're gone, "I feel good; I needed this."

LINK: So is this the soul you were talking about, does the soul come from anger and depression and the struggle?

LEE: Some of it.

LINK: Or is it a release?

LEE: I think it's from the anger. It's like, music consoles the beast. No matter who you are, you got some kind of music you can sit down and get your owns on. Jazz . . . R&B . . . hip-hop.



A lot of people like me didn't like club music when I first started hearing it; I liked rap. I didn't like going out. But people kept telling me I had to go out and hear it.

The first club I went to was Odell's. I get in there, I hear them wild out to the song, but they were moving too fast . . . I was like, you're jumping around too DAMN FAST! [laughter] But then I was like, "they're going crazy over this stuff." One went to two weeks, three weeks went to four weeks, until you know . . .

LAB: You were getting that hook-up. [laughter]

LEE: Exactly . . . club rules here.

LINK: Lab, you take a little bit more of a metaphysical approach to your music, do you have a source of creative inspiration like Rod's?

LAB: I could give you a long speech, but it's the same thing he just said. I go to the clubs for the same reasons everyone else does, cause I got issues and anger like everyone else does. When I get in there, it being in the midst of all those black people dancing, and it does something for me, that energy, it's an escape. As far as my art as an emcee, it's more intellectual only because I use words, but when you deal with the nature of club music it's the body language, you have to feel it in your body when you have to dance. It's the sweat, the contact of with the woman, when you freakin'. When you get in that circle and everybody wildin' you might see someone get stomped, someone might get their ass whipped. That's the raw energy . . . me personally, I feed off that energy to make hip-hop, it's a circle. At any given time I can tap into that part of me that's not civilized, compared to that side of me that's a scientist. Being Baltimore, that's an advantage—I can get my soul restored in that crowd of a thousand people, beautiful gorgeous woman sweating, and feeling like everything else outside of that club doesn't exist. As [Rod] uses the anger to make the club, I use the club energy and overall experience and channel it back into my hip-hop; they don't have that in New York, they don't have that in L.A., they don't have it down south; it's our own.