

■ NEPTUNES  
Pharrell  
Williams, left,  
and Chad  
Hugo.

## THE N.E.R.D. MENTALITY

THEY GAVE JAY-Z A BOUNCE, LENT THEIR FUNK TO 'N SYNC AND HUSTLED BEATS FOR THE KING OF POP. IT WAS ONLY A MATTER OF TIME BEFORE THE VIRGINIA BEACH PRODUCTION TEAM CALLED THE NEPTUNES PUT THEIR CLIENTS ON HOLD AND LET THEIR OWN STRANGE SOUNDS LOOSE ON THE CHARTS BY ETHAN BROWN

**P**HARRELL WILLIAMS HAS THE EVENING MAPPED OUT. "LISTEN," he explains, "tonight we're gonna hang out with punks, skaters and brothers from the hood." He glances down at the freshly painted motel parking lot and climbs into his oversize Lincoln Navigator. "I can't hang with just one group of people." The 28-year-old producer-musician is the mirror image of his inclusive social sphere—call it a ghetto-glam-bumpkin look: faded thrift-store jeans, tattered Rolling Stones baseball cap, Versace T-shirt and white Prada sneakers. And though he wears a chunky diamond earring in one ear and a cartoonishly iced-out Rolex on his wrist, he carries himself with a laid-back swagger and wears the sleepy-eyed expression of a stoned southern rocker.

Williams's stubborn refusal to identify with any one particular subculture has served him well. As the production duo known as the Neptunes—and as the eclectic side project called N.E.R.D.—he and his partner, Chad Hugo, 27, have been equal-opportunity innovators, putting their sonic stamp on rap, rock and R&B and reshaping the pop landscape in their own musically miscegenated image. Ever since they catapulted Noreaga's riotous "Superthug" into the mainstream in 1998, the Neptunes

have been shockingly consistent hitmakers, racking up a half-dozen Top 10 hits (and loads of Top 40s) in an arena where major players like Sean "Puffy" Combs and legendary hit men such as Clive Davis often strike out. Moreover, the Neptunes have proved they can save artists from themselves, spinning stalwart stars in new directions. They transformed Jay-Z's hustler-by-numbers "I Just Wanna Love U (Give It 2 Me)" into a soulful sing-along, remixed and rescued the Backstreet Boys' uninspiring anthem "The Call" and converted Mystikal's clichéd booty call "Shake Ya Ass" into a brassy, funky hit.

PRODUCERS ARE THE NEW STARS OF MUSIC, HIGHLY PAID MAESTROS hired to craft instant hits for increasingly disposable, telegenic pop stars, to lend fledgling hip-hoppers the necessary legitimacy and to infuse well-worn rock stars with a bit of needed currency. Surely, Destiny's Child, Britney Spears and Aaliyah owe much of their off-camera appeal to the innovative sounds created by production stars such as Rodney Jerkins, Max Martin and Timbaland. Even Madonna, for all her feminist self-reliance, attributes much of her recent success to her men behind the mixing boards, William Orbit and Mirwais. As a



result, there's been a predictable stampede to work with the most current studio masters. The common refrain in the music business these days is not "Can you make me a number one record?" It's "Can you make my record sound like that?" And right now, the sound they're thinking of when they say that is that of the Neptunes.

"This 'gimme the hottest sound' shit," Williams says angrily, "that's what's killing this business. People gotta think for themselves, bring their own shit to the table. We ain't gonna create something from nothing." But in truth, the Neptunes often come close. Their productions burst with falsetto choruses (usually sung by Williams), beat-box rhythms and twangy guitars—all underlined by a sly outsider's irreverence. They crafted a hilarious blaxploitation send-up for Ol' Dirty Bastard on "Got Your Money" and infused Kelis's woman-wronged anthem "Caught Out There" with angry, boombastic beats without undermining its party-starting power. "If you're in a club and you hear a song by the Neptunes," explains Keith Wood, executive vice president of A&R at Virgin Records, "there's an instant reaction, a mad rush to the dance floor."

That mad rush should increase considerably in the coming months as the Neptunes' most recent collaborations find their way into clubs. Though Williams and Hugo usually make tracks in their Virginia Beach studio, they recently spent a few months working with clients in Los Angeles. "We had four studios rented out simultaneously," Hugo says. "One for Kelis, one for Mary J. Blige, one for Busta Rhymes and one for No Doubt." They were also among the producers asked to work on Michael Jackson's long-delayed comeback, though the Neptunes couldn't schedule him in. R&B heartthrob Usher says the tracks the Neptunes crafted for his new record were so hot, the King of Pop attempted to snatch them away. "But he's not gonna get 'em!" Usher taunts playfully. And this month, like Timbaland before them, the Neptunes will test the power of their brand by releasing an album of their own, called *In Search Of...*, for which they (along with high school pal Shay) dubbed themselves N.E.R.D., an otherworldly acronym for No One Ever Really Dies. The name is a reference to Williams's belief that "humans are just matter in space—always recirculating in the atmosphere, never dying." It also reinforces their geek image.

THOUGH PHARRELL WILLIAMS HAS RECENTLY BECOME A REGULAR fixture on BET and MTV, making flashy cameos in videos for Neptunes-produced singles by Babyface, Mystikal and Ray J, inside his Navigator there's little evidence that he's attempting to raise his profile. Brazilian lounge singer Sergio Mendes coos Beatles covers on the stereo, and an affable, silver-haired southerner named Bob sits dutifully behind the wheel. (Williams has

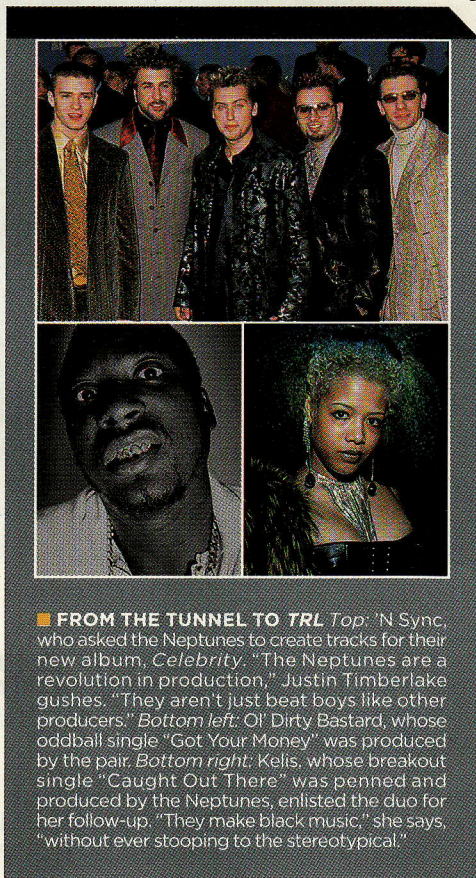
been afraid to drive since his truck was struck by a car and "did two 360s in the air.") And although Williams manhandles strippers in the video for N.E.R.D.'s "Lap Dance," tonight the only female in sight is Williams's quiet, platonic pal Keisha.

Williams's idiosyncrasies are holding court in the backseat; without any prompting, he announces the names and sexes of his four future children, his seven favorite movies and his favorite song by which to receive fellatio (Stereolab's "The Flower Called Nowhere"). But between his bizarre outbursts and sexual bravado, self-doubt creeps in. "You're not supposed to talk about hurt feelings in interviews," Williams says solemnly as the Navigator crawls through traffic on Virginia Beach's Atlantic Avenue strip, but an early, negative review of

*In Search Of...* has surfaced in the small but influential hip-hop magazine *XXL*. "My feelings have been hurt," he says sadly. "I didn't do this album for my pockets. I did it for my heart. That's why *XXL* hurts." Williams rolls up his window and turns down the music, fearing the Virginia Beach police will ticket him (again) for violating noise ordinances. "I look at it this way," he says of his critics. "It's sort of like giving a driver's license and a Ferrari to an infant. He's got a license and a great car, but you can be damn sure that he's not gonna know what to do with it."

And so what if he doesn't know what to do with it? N.E.R.D. is not a side project in search of approval. It seems unlikely that the album's conspiratorial rants (even one disguised as a lap-dance fantasy) and off-kilter love songs will find much of a mainstream audience. Neither Williams nor Hugo can pinpoint a potential fan base, but, strangely, *In Search Of...* is winning over taste-making dance DJs such as Pete Tong and Giles Peterson. "I don't do drugs," says Williams, "and I think it's sad that it takes mind-altering drugs for people to get into music, but people who do ecstasy, LSD, mushrooms? They get N.E.R.D."

Just about everybody in the music business gets the Neptunes. "Do you wanna hear this hot new track I just did with Brandy?" Williams asks, pulling a CD from a leather-bound case and sliding it into the multidisc player. The song has the hopelessly sappy title "Save the Babies" and seems like typically sentimental R&B stuff, until Williams's squawky falsetto gives it a bizarre, jarring break. He puts another CD in the player, containing two quirky, spitfire tracks the Neptunes just finished for Busta Rhymes. Then Williams produces yet another demo, this one for Perry Farrell. A wave of guitars roars from the speakers, and as Farrell howls *Glooooooorry!* Williams raises his hands triumphantly and sings along. It's as thrillingly ecstatic as early Jane's Addiction classics like "Mountain Song," and Williams knows it (though the song didn't make the cut on Farrell's July CD). "See?" Williams asks, grinning widely. "I can do anything. I'm a universalist, man! I'm here to change the world!"



■ FROM THE TUNNEL TO *TRL* Top: 'N Sync, who asked the Neptunes to create tracks for their new album, *Celebrity*. "The Neptunes are a revolution in production," Justin Timberlake gushes. "They aren't just beat boys like other producers." Bottom left: Ol' Dirty Bastard, whose oddball single "Got Your Money" was produced by the pair. Bottom right: Kelis, whose breakout single "Caught Out There" was penned and produced by the Neptunes, enlisted the duo for her follow-up. "They make black music," she says, "without ever stooping to the stereotypical."



CHAD HUGO, THE SON OF A NAVAL OFFICER AND A MEDICAL TECHNICIAN, met Pharrell Williams, the son of a teacher and a painter, in band practice at Kemps Landing Middle School in Virginia Beach. "We were the best in band class, so that's what brought us together initially," Williams says. "But Tribe [A Tribe Called Quest] was the thing that really did it for us. We wanted to be just like them." The two threw together a band—"a real messy version of Tribe," says Williams, "but with live instruments and vocals."

THE NEPTUNES MADE THEIR DEBUT IN THE EARLY '90S AT AN ANNUAL talent show staged by Blackstreet frontman and New Jack maestro Teddy Riley. "Their music was way out there," Riley says, "definitely ahead of its time. So I signed them to a production deal and signed them as a group as well." But Riley gave the young duo only sporadic, B-level work. Hugo played sax on a Blackstreet song; Williams penned a verse for Wreckx-N-Effect's bump-and-grind classic "Rumpshaker." "I didn't know what direction to take them in because as great as they were, they weren't able to do the kind of accessible stuff they do now."

Realizing the limitations of their experimental sound, the Neptunes abandoned the band and hammered away at small production roles on albums such as Jay-Z's *In My Lifetime, Vol. 1*, until Noreaga's "Superthug" broke into the Top 40. The song introduced the Neptunes' twangy, Arab-esque sound, brought an aggressive, hard-core brand of hip-hop to Top 40 radio and MTV and gave the Neptunes a profile beyond the Virginia music scene. "People don't think the real jewels can exist out here," says Riley, who is also from Virginia Beach, about working outside New York and L.A. "So you've got to work extra hard to shine."

So far, at least, the Neptunes haven't needed any geographic advantages. "I'm constantly asked by people in the industry, 'Why don't you get out of Virginia Beach and move to L.A. or New York so you can really be side by side with the big players?'" Hugo says disdainfully. "But you know what? Virginia Beach is part of our individuality. I like looking from the outside in."

CHAD HUGO IS RUNNING MORE THAN AN HOUR LATE FOR LUNCH AT A beachside pizza parlor. "Sorry, man," he says. "I've been getting my kids ready for the day." Hugo is the more domestic half of the Neptunes; he and his wife live in nearby Chesapeake with their two young children. Hugo is more reserved and sensible than his partner, preferring intense conversations to Williams's hammy, attention-grabbing diversions. But Hugo, who sports two diamond earrings and silver wraparound shades, possesses a deep technical proficiency and the soul of a cyberpunk.

"If I wasn't a producer," Hugo says, "I'd be a hacker. I love

to bypass authority." This isn't an idle boast. "I stole all the equipment I needed to start my first studio," he says impassively. When he wasn't lifting equipment, Hugo was raving until dawn at the legendary Catastrophic parties in Washington, D.C. The budding producer even had his own techno group, called *Legacy*, which once opened for electronic popsters Information Society. "I wish I could find those tapes," Hugo says. "I think that shit would sound new now."

Hugo calls the Neptunes' unconventional, genre-busting sound "who gives a fuck" music, as in, Who gives a fuck about hip-hop convention? Who gives a fuck about what other people think is uncool? Hugo gives accolades to 'N Sync, whom he calls "a talented, soulful group who immediately saw where we were coming from," and characterizes No Doubt as "risktakers." He and Williams so revere Michael Jackson that they often work in the studio for hours, says Hugo, "just trying to see who can make the better tracks for Michael."

Hugo's partner is also a proud aficionado of the severely uncool, a fan of those farthest from the self-conscious urban trendsetters. After cruising the strip, Williams excitedly dashes in and out of Virginia Beach frat bars such as the Edge and Lagoon as if he were club-hopping in SoHo. He ignores offers of free drinks from the one bartender who recognizes him (lemonade is the strongest beverage he'll consume), opting to study the action from the side of the dance floor. At the Edge, a bartender shouts drink specials over the club's PA and works the CD player, alternating between Technotronic's "Pump Up the Jam," Digital Underground's "Humpty Dance" and, of course, a Neptunes production, Jay-Z's "I Just Wanna Love U (Give It 2 Me)." As the song's chorus, *I'm a hustler baby!*, sung by Williams, comes over the PA, thick-necked guys in baseball caps and permed girls wearing scrunchies in their hair put

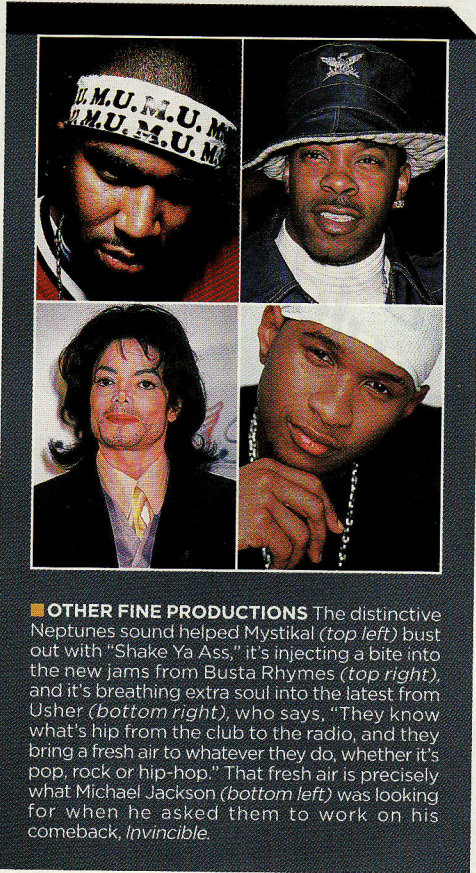
down their Rolling Rocks and crowd onto the dance floor.

Williams grabs a raver girl in wide-legged jeans and whispers something in her ear. An Asian teen in puffy break-dancing pants runs off the dance floor and claps Williams on the back. "Hey, man, you were in the Mystikal video, right?"

Williams nods and shakes the kid's hand. "I love these kinds of places," he shouts over the din. "There's a lot of honesty here." Minutes later an impromptu line dance featuring some of the bar's more inebriated patrons forms to the thundering percussion of Ludacris's "Southern Hospitality," the young rapper's voice shouting from the speakers: *Hit by stars / Hit by cars... / Hit by da Neptunes / Hit by guitars.*

Williams points at the growing number of suntanned Abercrombie & Fitch types shimmying together to the Neptunes' sound and grins. "I love it when my shit gets people that open." ■

Ethan Brown is a writer who lives in New York. This is his first piece for GQ.



■ **OTHER FINE PRODUCTIONS** The distinctive Neptunes sound helped Mystikal (top left) bust out with "Shake Ya Ass," it's injecting a bite into the new jams from Busta Rhymes (top right), and it's breathing extra soul into the latest from Usher (bottom right), who says, "They know what's hip from the club to the radio, and they bring a fresh air to whatever they do, whether it's pop, rock or hip-hop." That fresh air is precisely what Michael Jackson (bottom left) was looking for when he asked them to work on his comeback, *Invincible*.