

FEATURE INTERVIEW

Jazzy Jeff

'The Love...Fame or Fortune?'

Interviewed by Melissa 'Alemain' Vozzo February 2006

A: When you won the DMC's in 1986, were people surprised about your skills on the decks?

JJ: "Yeah, especially back then, it was so much based around NYC, no one thought anyone from outside were doing anything. It was all very deceiving I think, cause the first record that will and I put out (Rock tha House) had nothing to do with me as a DJ, and the first single 'girls ain't nothing but trouble' had nothing to do with me as a DJ, it didn't showcase any king of DJing on it. So it was kind of like 'who is this guy'?"

A: That was 1986, what were your aspirations back then?

JJ: "I really wanted to make a record that I could show my kids one day, I never thought it would become as big as what it has. It's definitely WAY over shot any of my expectations. Back then I was just a kid that wanted to have fun. You know its crazy, it had nothing to do with money, we didn't want to make money at all. If somebody just paid you to get to some place, we would have played for free. It was just for the love of it. It turned from a hobby, then a job and a career. It wasn't supposed to happen like that, but I'm very happy".

A: You're one of the best scratchers in the industry; you brought the bird scratch onto the record. How long had you been doing that scratch? Were you dropping it in club sets?

JJ: "I was always VERY bashful, I would say 50% of the stuff that I could do, no one has ever seen. The DMC's were very rare. It wasn't about competition for me, I love all DJ's, and I love their contribution. I never really wanted to show off, I just enjoyed what I was doing. I impressed more people that would come to my basement and watch me do stuff, than the public. There were scratches and techniques I was doing for years before I let anyone see it".

A: What do you think of the turntablist culture now? Do you follow the DMC's anymore?

JJ: "Oh yeah, definitely!"

A: You're in the DMC hall of fame, is there anyone that you find particularly cutting edge?

JJ: "I don't know a lot of the guys now, it's changed a little bit as of recent. I think one of the things I don't like is that the turntablist mentality came from Hip Hop, but right now there's only a handful of Hip Hop groups that have REAL DJ's that travel with them. But then again 90% of rock groups out there have turntablists in their group. I'm happy with the advancement; it's probably bigger than it's ever been. But it's just not as big as it should be in Hip Hop, whereas Hip Hop is pretty much what birthed it".

A: You must have one of the biggest funk 45 collections on the planet. With the collectors in Japan, Australia and Europe playing catch up, do you still get time to dig in the crates?

JJ: "I MAKE TIME. I'm leaving here, and I'm on my way to Asia where I already have a list of the record shops I need to go to, all the people I need to talk to list of all the records I'm looking for that I cant find. Real DJ's never stop looking for records".

A: When you set up A Touch of Jazz in 1990, what was your vision at the time?

JJ: "Truthfully it was for me to do records without people knowing that I was doing them, because I didn't want to be pigeon holed. Back then I think people believed if you did Hip Hop music that was the only thing you did. I was into so many kinds of music I didn't want to be pigeoned as a hip hop DJ. So I set up A Touch of Jazz to hide behind. I could do it and not put my name on it. Come out under an alias and try soul, house music, rock music or just anything that I wanted to try without being judged before it's heard".

A: How did you encounter some of the artists that you've worked with on a Touch of Jazz?
Did you know there was something special about Jill Scott?

JJ: "Absolutely! A very close friend of mine introduced me to Jill; we sat down in the studio and just talked. It was funny, it just wasn't the right time. We talked, laughed and joked, then went out separate ways. Then a year and a half later I was driving down the street and she spoke to me, she called out 'hey Jeff Townes' I said 'how you doin' Jill Scott'. We sat and talked again, and went to the studio. I gave her some music, and she called me 2 days later, and she said 'I wanna sing

what I wrote to you', and actually the song was 'Long Walk'. She sang it and we immediately went to the studio and started recording, and the rest is history".

A: The Jazzy Jeff designer series, the Gemini 2200, do you still use that?

JJ: "No, I have it in a protective box that I'll keep 4 ever".

A: What advice would you give to young artists trying to get into the music biz in the UK? Any tips on breaking through this business?

JJ: "Mine is a little bit real and hardcore advice. First of all you need to figure out if you're cut for this industry. This industry is very cut throat, and you have to figure out if there's something which you really want to do. Then you have to surround yourself with extremely honest people, you can't surround yourself with people that will tell you that everything that you do is good. If you suck, you need someone to tell you 'that's terrible' cause then that gives you the best shot at succeeding. You need people to be brutally honest with you. People have a tendency to look at this business for what they want it to be, and not what it is. Instead of looking at it as something that brings you fame and fortune, you need to investigate what the business is, how you get paid and the chains of commands in this business, then make your decision. Fame and fortune are two different things. There's two different levels in this business; you're either doing it for the love, fame or fortune. There's a lot of rich people in this business that aren't known at all. A lot of people are very famous in this business and don't have a dime. There's also a lot of people that do it and you don't know who they are, they may not have a bunch of money, but they are doing it for the love. I don't think either the three reasons are wrong, you just have to figure out which of those 3 you wanna do it for?"

A: Yes, and take ownership of that. Much respect.