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Why Does Everyone
Want a Piece of
DJ Shadow?

Who Knows What Sounds Lurk in
the Hearts and Minds of Men?

DJ Shadow Knows

FOUND-SOUND SCAVENGER DJ SHADOW has a hard, fast rule: No sampling from reissued albums or greatest hits anthologies—and certainly not from packaged breakbeat collections.

"It has to do with not taking the easy route," says this increasingly visible, but reluctant, media icon, talking on the phone late on a Saturday morning after weeks of utter inaccessibility. "It has to do with finding the goods on your own, with finding the break that you're gonna rock at a party where you have to cover up the label so nobody sees it."

NOW 24, SHADOW (BORN JOSH DAVIS, RAISED AND SCHOOLED in Davis, California, where he still lives) sees the world through a hip-hop kaleidoscope. "The people I looked up to were always going beyond the easy shit," he says. "The reason people like Large Professor [Main Source, Nas] and [Gang Starr DJ] Premier blew up was because they weren't limiting themselves to '25 Volumes of Beats and Breaks.' Which everybody else in New York was. And in LA, for that matter."

Building songs entirely from pre-recorded material—thrift-store vinyl, TV broadcasts, the demo tapes of his rapping colleagues in the East Bay collective *SoleSides*—Shadow says his intention is not simply to look for the most obscure recordings he can find: "It has nothing to do with exclusivity. It doesn't even really have to do with the availability factor, because I sampled Bjork on my album."

The album in reference, of course, is on the tip of every record junkie's tongue at the moment. *Endtroducing...* is the cut-up artist's first full-length LP after a series of acclaimed singles and EPs released by London's influential Mo Wax label to U.K. raves. Ruminative yet riddled with passages of booty-quaking furor, the largely instrumental *Endtroducing...* has struck a (re)contextualized chord with writers from every corner. At risk of fanning the fire that threatens to warp the colossal record collection of this suburban hip-hop innovator, it's fairly safe to say: Not since *Nevermind* has a pop record

by James Sullivan





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achieved such universal acclaim.

Sputtering superlatives aside, Shadow's not finished explaining his aversion to "easy" source material: "You go to a store and you see CD sets of things like '100 Breaks, Looped Up, Ready for Producers.' What's the fun in that?" he asks. "To me, that's almost disrespectful to the art form itself.

"It's sort of funny—in England they have this compilation called 'Beats and Scratches for Lazy Producers.' I actually played it live one time, in a DJ set, just because the beats are cool. But I would never use them [on a record]... You'd be astounded at who uses, like, 'Drum Crazy,' and all these things you can walk down to any store and pick up. And these are [DJs] that're getting paid mad money. If you knew that all they were doing was something you could do, you'd be like, what the hell? What's so big about them?"

To the contrary—passionately so—DJ Shadow goes to remarkable lengths to ensure that his moody, cinematic thinkpieces are authentically fresh and provocative. As an unlikely result, very much in spite of the avant-garde nature of the work, everybody wants a piece of DJ Shadow at the moment. From *Spin's* recent "40 Most Vital Artists in Music Today," in which the recently anony-

mous Shadow was suddenly lumped with multi-platinum acts like Pearl Jam, U2 and Alanis Morissette, to soundtrack offers, video projects, and remix solicitations, Shadow finds himself in a blustery whirlwind of hype.

"There's a lot of people trying to insulate me because there's a lot of things I'm supposed to be doing," he says, noting that he's only now considering hiring a manager. "It has been busy and I'm definitely ready for a break... But the chaos doesn't really bother me. It's just a bunch of people running around going 'blalalalala,'" he laughs, making a frantic tongue-wagging sound.

"What's happening is I want to try and do everything, but even when I can't, instead of just telling people that I can't, I always try and make it happen. It's like anything," he rationalizes, refusing to let success get him sidetracked. "I've just had to prioritize."

A few weeks ago, Shadow's priority was his first video, for the mid-tempo keyboard-and-drums expedition "Midnight in a Perfect World," as the young artist holed himself up in a Los Angeles editing room for days. Given the unmistakable visual quality of his music, for Shadow to make a video seems almost redundant, but there he was, hunkered down with "the best editor in LA,"

doing to videotape what he normally does with audio recordings.

"From the conception to the on-line of the video, I was involved every step of the way," Shadow says. "And that's because I treated it like when I do music. I wanted to learn. I was in there going, 'OK, this is an Avid [computerized editing system], and then we take it to the Henry [effects facilitator] and the Henry does this, and then we can fix that in on-line.' It was like making music except with visuals. It was a learning process, just like going in the studio and using a new piece of gear."

As with his music, Shadow was meticulous in his conception and execution of the video: "For the first one, it was really important—I didn't want to do the black-and-white, people-in-a-train, obscure-abstract-images-of-slow-motion-objects thing... I got the same guy who does all my photos [B+] to direct it. We sat down and built the whole thing from the ground up. The way we did it was—and I've never seen a video like this—everything is exactly what you hear. So when you hear drums, you see drums. We had a drummer play the original break and then chopped him up in the same way I chopped the drums [on the song]..."

"I have no interest in lecturing, musically or verbally. All I want to do is expose people to a few hours of really good music. I want it to be like an education, without feeling like one."



Same with every element—the piano, the main Fender Rhodes lick, all that stuff.

"And then we took it a step further, like with the Fender Rhodes lick we got this certain type of film that looks like [the Rolling Stones'] *Rock and Roll Circus*—real blown-out, early-'70s color. And for the drums, if you've ever seen

James Brown live on [60s pop shows like *Hullabaloo*], that real flared-out black-and-white look... When you see it, it really makes a lot of sense."

Consciously shattering boundaries, sampling from riff-rock and classical performances as well as hip-hop staples like soul, funk and jazz, Shadow knows his

music confounds program directors, most of whom insist on coloring inside the lines. The video, he says, has been picked up by MTV's new electronica show *Amp*, "but then I was like, 'Oh great, they're going to ghettoize it, keep it in the electronic music file.' I'm so

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DJ Shadow

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ambivalent about MTV—I just get so disgusted with it... I want it to be shown on everything from *Rap City* to the *Box*. But I know that Rap City's just gonna go, "This isn't a rap video as we know it." They don't know how to just put videos on the air."

What's more, he says, even when MTV claims to be taking chances, they don't come close: "I put on *120 Minutes* the other day and the lead video was Oasis 'Wonderwall.' I was like, 'Whatever.'"

Like it or not, though, Shadow is beginning to run in such company, fielding plenty of requests from industry heavyweights. Lending his songs to a few film projects so far, he's also fending off other suitors, working to stop one from using a track without authorization and turning down an offer to do the theme song to the forthcoming Val Kilmer vehicle *The Saint* (Orbital ended up handling that chore).

"I get a lot of requests to update or dance-size things, and that's when I know that people haven't really heard what I do," Shadow says. "I don't want to just be the Meco of the '90s—remember Meco [Star Wars Theme]? It's not my vibe—that's something a little more down the Chemical Brothers' lane than my stuff. But everybody gets a lot of cornball requests, and you just sift through them."

One potentially cornball request that he did fulfill was to remix a song from Depeche Mode's upcoming album. "I've always been a fan of Depeche Mode," Shadow swears, underscoring his complete disregard for musical cubicles. The song, he says, "was supposed to appear on their first single as a b-side, but they were really weird about the samples. Which are about as obscure as they get. [The band's longtime label] Mute in America—I can tell they don't really get what is tolerable and what is not tolerable, as far as sampling goes. They think every sample needs to be cleared. So now I think it's coming out on the second single."

He's also been asked to remix a track for a certain mega-stardom rock group, though at the moment he'd rather not say which one. "I don't mind telling you off the record," he says, "but it could just as well not happen, and then it'd be like, 'Oh, whatever happened to that?'" And it might not happen because Shadow deems it so—he hasn't decided yet, he says. "I have no problem with

turning down things that are supposed to be the in-things, the big things to do."

Conversely, he has no problem continuing to work with the artists who've comprised his peer group on the way up. In the coming months, Shadow's producing and remixing skills will be heard on records by SoleSides labelmates Blackalicious and Latyrx and Mo Wax founder James Lavelle's project, U.N.K.L.E.

Blurring the lines not just between styles of music but between art forms in general might well be Shadow's greatest single attribute as an artist. Though he's loathe to brag about it—"that's one of the reasons that me and James got along so well," he says about his early "discovery" by the young U.K. record mogul. "There's this artist named Mike Mills [who has done graphic design for the Beastie Boys and Sonic Youth]. James put out this thing [by Mills] that looks like a record but it's actually eight flats. And he just sells it in record stores."

Ignoring categorization, Shadow says, simply feels right: "To me, it's just logic. But it's something I've never really tripped on—it's just what I always thought it was supposed to be about. And I know it's what hip-hop was always about. It's just that things've gotten so crazy."

Latyrx—SoleSides rappers Lateef and Lyrx Born—will join Shadow onstage for part of his set during his current tour, scheduled to hit San Francisco's Maritime Hall (with Jeru the Damaja and a headlining set by Shadow favorites De La Soul) the day before this issue hits the streets. Although he has certainly spun more than his share of records in public, it's the first time the studio-raised Shadow has mounted a full-fledged stage show.

Asked whether he's had time to prepare his set, Shadow laughs: "I've wanted to do a lot of preparing... All I can say is, expect a hip-hop show. I'm gonna play a lot of new stuff, stuff I've done for myself and U.N.K.L.E. Then with Latyrx, I'm in the background," which is where he'd prefer to be throughout.

"What's important is that I articulate that [the new hip-hop experimentalism] is not just one person—it's a movement. I have no interest in lecturing, musically or verbally. All I want to do is expose people to a few hours of really good music. I want it to be like an education, without feeling like one."

Knowing all "eyez" will be on him, Shadow views the De La dates as something of a test. "I want to see if it feels

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JAY BLAKESBERG

wrong or not. It's not in my nature to stand up there in the spotlight."

One way to keep the glare down would be to hire Bob Wood, "National Program Director of the Chum Group," the guy mentioned in a bizarre Canadian radio voice-over spot Shadow found and used for the opening bit on *Endroducing...*

"The funny thing is, on this tour we're gigging in Toronto, and Bob Wood contacted the organizers over there and wanted to introduce me at the show," Shadow says. Turns out "he's like a real guy, and he's still out there, and somehow he knew about [the sample]."

In this age of rampant irony and all-consuming pop culture, such nonsensical sound bites make their way onto virtually every hip-and-trip-hop record. But Shadow keeps his own use of sonic detritus to a minimum, meting out his comic relief in measured doses.

"It's real easy to throw in goofy things that don't have any relevance," he says. "It'd be easy for me to put on the TV and sample Ricki Lake saying something absurd and put it in my song—'Look how hip I am.' I prefer not to go that route, but when I do use humor, it's

in a way that humor would be used in a movie like *Seven*, which is really dark.

"There are certain times that you have to give your audience a little bit of a breather," he acknowledges, "a little bit of a respite from the thought. Otherwise the power of the dark side loses its force... I was actually worried people would think the album was too dark."

One observer who begs to differ is rock-writing eminence grise Greil Marcus, who wrote in his current *Interview* magazine column that Shadow's work on "Stem/Long Stem," the album's breathtaking centerpiece, resonates with "the feeling of having finally understood something essential about life." Does the thoughtful young b-boy agree, or is that idea just a tad too heady to contemplate?

"I'm not gonna say, well, no, he's taking it too far and actually, my music is just for fun," Shadow says, hesitantly. "You have to have something else inside to do this. 'Stem/Long Stem' was always my favorite song, and when it was done I knew the album was gonna be possible. If he felt that way about it as closely as I did, then that's great."

And there seem to be two or three others out there who agree. ★