

# The Producers: New Minds Behind The Music

In many ways, 2004 could be described as the year of the producer. It saw several underground beat-makers crack mainstream daylight, with 9th Wonder, Kev Brown and Belief rising separately from the thermonuclear magnetism of Jay-Z and ?uestlove.

It was 9th who so impressed Jay-Z with his chopping skills that the platinum-selling rapper dropped his name on "Threat," the track 9th produced for *The Black Album* during a meeting one storied New York City weekend, which 9th later parlayed into a major label deal signed

in August for himself, Phonte and Big Poo, the MCs he backs in Little Brother.

Fueled by his successful remix of Jay-Z's last (alleged) hoorah *The Black Album* into *The Brown Album*, Kev Brown toured Europe, his first-ever trip overseas. Finally, young producer and ?uestlove protégé Belief found himself in the enviable position of supplying nearly half of the music for Vordul Mega's solo debut, *The Revolution of Yung Havoks*.

By Shane Kite. Photos By Ben Hoffmann.



## Kev Brown

It's not like Kev Brown's trying to shake the whole remix thing, following the high praise he received last year for *The Brown Album*, his eponymous workup of the *a cappella* tracks from Jay-Z's supposed final cut, *The Black Album*.

It's just surprising what moves the masses. "It's real strange, 'cause that really wasn't the jump-off for me," says the Maryland native. "I had worked with Biz, I had worked with De La Soul – all these other people. It's just funny that it took a bootleg remix for people to take notice."

Not that the former beatmaker for Jazzy Jeff's label, A Touch of Jazz, is ungrateful, but integrity and diversity seem to rank higher for Brown than whatever he did yesterday. Getting tagged as a recurring passenger on the newest beatmaker bandwagon is something he's avoiding. "If cats come at me to do a remix, I'll still do that," Brown says. "But if, like, Jadakiss comes out with his *a cappella* version of his album, I'm not going to jump out and be like, 'Yo, I'm about to do a Jadakiss-Kev Brown remix joint.'"

The soft-spoken, easy-going Brown seems reflexively modest. It bears noting that the attention the *The Brown Album* garnered came from head-snapping nods to its musical merit, not mere winks to a clever gimmick. While initially reluctant to take on the project, knowing that he would follow 9th Wonder's "God's Stepson" Nas remix, out several months earlier, there's no reticence evident in his true-school backing of Jay-Z's polemics. He took his time to make it all worthwhile.

He turns Jay-Z's "December 4th" on its head, which is to say upbeat, buoyed by an a.m.-hour, coffee-stained, bluesy Fender Rhodes and funky

80s synthscape. He completely rearranges the slot-car hard-driving demolition, roller-derby freak show of "99 Problems," layering Jay-Z's player laments with fuzz-wah guitar clips and Maceo-style horns.

There's an organic essence of sonic melody captured in his beat-verses, and attention to stylized song structure – a *la* Stax-era R&B – which makes Brown's productions highly musical affairs. It's a craft he developed during his tenure at Philly-based ATOJ, years he describes as some of his most creatively satisfying – a prolonged neo-soul and pop, hip-hop summit in song-craft.

"It would be crazy, because I would just sample live musicians playin' something and chop it up and play it back, layerin' stuff on top like that. They had never really heard what the hip-hop cats were bringin', either, so you know, everybody's talent – you inspire everybody else, you inspire each other. It opens your mind to trying different stuff out."

Brown worked with Biz Markie, Freddie Foxx, De La Soul, Boyz II Men's Shawn Stockman and Wanya Morris. He even cut a track with Jewel. "It didn't make her album," Brown said, "but I've got the song to prove it."

His decision to leave ATOJ was a serious one: He's had to supplement recently with a part-time job. Without getting into specifics, Brown said he didn't feel like Touch had the artists' best interests in mind. "Business-wise it kind of taught me how *not* to operate," he says.

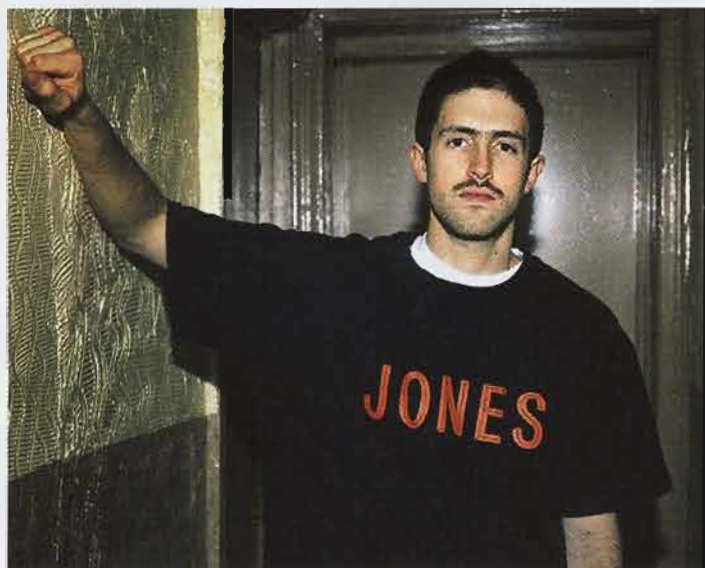
The live vibe has stuck with him, though. He performed in Europe over the summer – his first time overseas – beat-backing Bahamadia,



the female Philly-based MC, with DJ Roddy Rod opening in Paris, Amsterdam, Germany and the Czech Republic. Brown also gigged in New York in October at the Bowery Poetry Club as a part of the CMJ music festival, pumping beats for his longtime crew Critically Acclaimed – MCs Quartermain and Kaliber, and DJ Marshall Law – as well as for Half-Tooth Records' producer/MC Oddisee and MC Ken Starr.

He's released a three-track joint, *Kev Brown Presents*, produced for friend Kaimbr and Isaac Jones, a group comprised of Ken Starr and Sean Born, members of his Maryland posse since they first crossed paths in 1999 around the scene nurtured by the University of Maryland's WMUC, a college radio station that boasts a rich archive of hip-hop sounds and history. Brown even rhymes on a cut, he said.

Still baffled at the enigma of the breakthrough code, Brown chalks his remix success up to something like fate. "The whole music business stuff is just like one big, gigantic fluke almost," he says. "It feels like that sometimes. I guess whatever's meant to be is meant to be. But at times it feels like you're just rolling the dice, and whatever happens, happens."



Belief is hungry, both metaphorically and physically. We sit in a booth in Grand Morelo's, the producer's favorite Mexican restaurant in his Williamsburg, Brooklyn neighborhood. The recent release of his biggest project to date, *The Revolution Of Yung Havoks*, the long-awaited solo debut from Vordul Mega of Cannibal Ox, mitigates the rainy, post-election day blues.

The culmination of seven months of hard work, recording and battling to sonically shape the record, the Nov. 2 Nature Sounds release has provided the young producer with another major rung in an ascendant beat-making career. The 25-year old produced six of Vordul's 13 cuts, mixing the entire record from his Williamsburg studio. The finished tracks went straight from Belief's two-room apartment to mastering and duplication, hitting the Sandbox Automatic screens weeks later.

His heavy presence on the record is a hip-hop achievement not to be sniffed at. Few beat-makers are given the musical leeway to produce more than a track or two these days. While initial plans to have him shape the whole disk were scaled back to admit other producers, he described the decision as a "preliminary" agreement among his cipher that it would only lead to more wreaking of his own young havoc, with further sonic permutations to come.

It might just slam the appropriate spike into the afferent track record he's built to produce entire full-length disks for single artists, something he strongly desires. "It's just nice to be that involved – to shape the whole sound so it can stay moving and stay interesting," said Belief, over a shared plate of tortillas and red picante.

Belief's high standards developed over a three-year apprenticeship of 60-hour weeks at the famed Electric Lady Studios, where he arrived in 2000 just after D'Angelo's *Voodoo* emerged from the hallowed soundproof walls where original owner Jimi Hendrix once transmuted the form with engineer Eddie Kramer.

Belief's tenure spanned a portion of track-laying for key members of the Soulquarians collective, arguably one of the most richly inspired and creative music-making scenes in recent history, presided over by Roots drummer Questlove. The effort was a seamless merging of the funky but ultra-modern R&B and soul-steeped phonic art of D'Angelo, Erykah Badu, Jill Scott and Bilal, with the MC skills of Common, Talib Kweli and Mos Def. Belief, who was there for the making of Badu's *Mama's Gun* and Common's assumption-busting *Electric Circus*, said: "I just had to be around that sound."

The L.A.-raised music-maker points to progressive influences. Timbaland "revolutionized popular music," Belief explains, with the ear-tweaking crunk-funk and East Coast swagger of Missy Elliott's breakout "Miss E....," and he defends the Neptunes: "Although they're so hated on, [they] are really forward-thinking [producers]."

"I get annoyed by purists," Belief argues. "[The Neptunes] more than anybody don't give a fuck about that crap – a beat could be all synth sounds, or the snare will be just a really thin 'tick.' It's refreshing." He cites recent advice to rockers Slipknot from Rick Rubin, who kept playing the axle-busting, 808-powered tracks of Lil Jon for the band, telling them (in Belief's paraphrase): "This is what we're going for."

Belief's been feeling the rock lately too, listening to Mars Volta for the "craziest energy," and learning to play drums. Concerns about sampling as his profile rises, and a tendency toward ceaseless experimentation, have prompted Belief to combining heavily layered, computer-based production with sounds created from live drums. "I'm combining the MPC and Reason with patterns and sounds," he says. "I just don't want to be limited as to where the music goes."

This open-minded approach is evident on *Belief's Remixes*, a promotional set he put out over the summer. He layers distorted, hardcore guitars over hollow snare bangs on Organized Konfusion's "Bring it On," an aggressive RAWK version that should trigger car alarms and make the kids smile.

The fluid, windshield-wiping keys, vinyl popcorn tick and hollow-body octave slides of his remix of Freeway's "Flipside" showcases his mellow, melodic side. He even sneaks the high-mountain sounds of a pan flute into the rain-drip, low-end synth wash of his remix of T.I.'s "Rubber Man." Standouts from *Havoks* include the minor-key full-moon pogo menace of "Believe" and its front-linin', Meters-on-a-revenge-jag bounce.

Notable, but likely overlooked, is "Belief's Blues" from Murs' *Varsity Blues* (Vertech 2002). The only producer on the disk to fuse the musical links pointed to in the record's title, Belief underpins Murs' rhymes with knife-blade slide licks and the Delta hollers of a gospel shouter – just one choice, said Belief, among "limitless possibilities."



“Hold on a second,” says 9th Wonder. “I don’t have any grape jelly! Look in the refrigerator!”

“That was Murs.”

Apparently Murs, the L.A.-bred, 10-year hip-hop veteran and road dog, known for logging some 200-plus dates a year, likes grape jelly.

Also, apparently, this is what happens when you perk industry ears and spark a trend with a game-switching remix, and Jay-Z subsequently drops your name in the track you produce for him, after chopping it in 20 minutes under pressure after meeting the platinum-selling star the day before your big shot in the studio: Murs ends up in your crib looking for grape jelly. Oh, and dope beats too.

Both jelly and beats are something that 9th, who turned heads re-tooling Nas’ *God’s Son* into the arguably much dooper *God’s Stepson*, says he’s happy to supply – *mi casa, su casa*, Southern-style hospitality. Yet his unpretentious charm belies a rather grand accomplishment for which his name speaks volumes.

Speaking to us from his home in Raleigh-Durham, 9th had just returned from a dual-purpose trip to New York: the premiere of Jay-Z’s *Fade To Black* concert film and meetings with Atlantic execs to discuss the two-album deal 9th and his MC partners, Phonte and Big Poo – who comprise the critically acclaimed Little Brother – struck with the label over the summer.

Recalling his previous NYC trip over a year ago, the North Carolina native observes, “It’s a freaky thing, visiting New York for the first time 14 years after the release of ‘Uptown Anthem’ by Naughty by Nature.”

That adventure resulted in 20 computer-beat-making minutes in which he managed to build a funky, heretofore doubtful bridge between the underground and platinum rap. The story of his successful DIY effort to cut beats for *The Black Album* has been told, but it’s a Six-Sigma lesson in persistent moxie. With Roc-A-Fella engineer Young Guru’s interest already piqued from the Nas remix, 9th hit up Roots drummer and fellow fan 7uestlove to tell his close friend Jay-Z that “this beatmaker” was in town to work – 9th ended up hooking up, and on a Monday at the end of a long fever-dream weekend, added layered soul to Jay-Z’s lyrical scythe, “Threat.”

Just days after his red-carpet Manhattan return, 9th was busy helping Murs record tracks for *Murray’s Revenge*, a full-length follow up to the work the two did a year ago on *Murs 3:16 The 9th Edition*, the West Coast MC’s sophomore release on Def Jux.

As for Little Brother’s big label debut, due in early summer: “The album’s almost done,” 9th said. “There’s maybe three songs left, but we’ll be toning it up, making it make sense from front to back.”

The continuity and versatility he describes is both sonically evident and metaphorically highlighted on *The Listening*, Little Brother’s much-lauded 2003 debut on ABB Records, which is partnered with Atlantic in the new deal.

It’s this tempered, subtle attention to musicality and threading of auricular themes that also lends a sense of overall permanence on *God’s Stepson*. The witty, humble turn of phrase describing the title pays off in a cunning display of Golden Age POV, in which he takes the Nas record back to the school of kool – slowing the procession down, discarding the out-front, FM

radio, china-smashing beats, and pouring in the soul tracks.

There’s the good ghetto Saturday morning of “I Can,” and even a bit of global trance he sneaks into his version of “Hey Nas.” The chopping is seamless: Short-clipped guitar samples feed into Hammond B-3 defibrillations, while mellow keys, fingered like slow-motion, single raindrops bellow slack waters.

The phonic, warm tones embedded in his fully digital approach to making soundscapes should silence the Luddites – he’s used Fruityloops since his college days, for the sole reason that that’s what the budget dictated.

If his attention to continuity risks being lost amid the new world of track-by-track purchases and skip buttons, it’s a circumstance that only seems to bump up his work ethic.

“You’ve got to sell the essence of the full record,” 9th said. “Most album music right now is microwavable, you know what I’m sayin’? But we’re in the business of presenting a full idea instead of a collection of songs on a CD.”

Regarding the next Little Brother set, 9th says, “It’s still soul music, whether it’s layerin’ soul or choppin’ a Brazilian guitar player. It’s still us.”

Asked about Jay-Z dropping his name on “Threat,” it’s obvious the event still humbles Wonder. “It was like the culmination of my whole beat career summed up in one phrase, man.

“For cats like me that sample, that chop up beats, it was like it killed all the misconceptions,” 9th said. “You can make it on your own terms.”