

Flame Griller interview

Kate Wellham

'The Amazing Book of Chess' and 'Qi Banter' are forcing their way out of the stack of books and folders on the top shelf, too small to comfortably house them all; three huge and intimidating gorilla masks are crammed onto the shelf below, next to two heavily laden mug trees. On the shelf below that - the only items given the courtesy of any room to breathe - are a kettle (graffitied) and a box of teabags (Yorkshire).

This is the organised chaos of the Sinoptic studio, the cosy and graffiti-covered home of Addverse, JND and ExP - collectively known as Flame Griller. It's also the actual home of ExP, being at the back of his house.

Taking down one of the folders, its label decorated with Sinoptic's trademark overlaid WY (hand drawn) Addverse opens it to show the alphabetised tabs cataloguing all the people who flocked from around Yorkshire to gather in an outbuilding in a garden in suburban Leeds.

"Imagine all the guys from Leeds, Bradford, Huddersfield and wherever, all crammed into that back room," he says, pointing to the recording booth. There are just four musicians in there at the moment jamming along to Outkast, and it still looks like a squeeze. It's definitely not designed for a folder full.

"That came out of nowhere" says ExP, of the filmed WY Cypher group freestyle sessions that became an unexpected hit, both on YouTube and in his back garden. 'When you start rapping you do tend to get together with others and start freestyling or spit rhymes together. Freestyle is really important to hip hop and something you have to be able to practise because you have to be able to do it onstage. I was getting pissed off because I was pretty shit at it and I just thought 'let's get a few people round'. Then someone brought a camera along and it became the WY Cypher.

"Then more people came along and it got bigger and bigger, then it got a bit too big and I got a bit too annoyed and there was too much piss on the floor. It ended as quick as it started. If you say to a load of rappers 'you can drink, you can bring your own booze, and you can smoke as much weed as you want to, come round and let's listen to some beats and freestyle' you'll get all the rappers in the world."

And so they did, or from as far as Sheffield at least, but the high couldn't last, says Addverse:

“Once we got a couple of episodes onto the internet people were asking to come down, bring their mates - the movement was great, we had numbers, but we had to contain that and still get something you can work with and edit.”

“Egos got in the way,” elaborates ExP. “People who no one had ever heard of were coming through and using it, and good on them, but then they wouldn’t promote the Cypher.”

ExP describes Cypher as “the only channel where the guaranteed rule was don’t say anything premeditated”. “Also a rule we added later was that we weren’t going to be derogatory about people. The biggest thing in hip hop at the moment is the battle scene. There’s a lot of battles on YouTube, but that’s built off hate and bravado, but that’s what people like, they like that competitive sporting element”

No derogatory material eh? What next, no swearing? Yes, as it goes. ExP: “Flame Griller, we do have a rule about not swearing. If it’s got Flame Griller on it we won’t swear”. JND: “That’s the trouble with hip hop in general, a lot of it does contain explicit effin and jeffin”.

In case you’re picturing a trio of cheesy wholesome characters, you’d be wrong. JND and Addverse are low-key but sharp, intelligent and chatty; ExP is a big character, expressive and outspoken. All three are clearly obsessive about their music, and all three are producers in their own right.

All this makes it so much more frustrating for them when gigs are cancelled or refused because, even when ExP and JND fronted the funk and hip hop band Freyed Knot, it was assumed they were “stabby stabby knife music”. Far from posturing and bravado, all admit to being wary of telling anyone what they do because it’s ‘awkward’.

Addverse, the least extroverted and most intense of the three, says: “I usually say I’m in a band - ‘I can’t tonight, I’ve got band practise’, ‘what do you do’? and I say ‘I’m a vocalist’. It’s the difference between people thinking you’re a musician in a band, and just some youth off the street shouting about how hard they are.”

Describing Sinoptic, the alliance of artists they work within, ExP say it’s “a business model and definitely a collective but not a label”.

One of the artists to have emerged from the Sinoptic fold is Lunar C, a Bradford rapper whose unique combination of wit, filth and charm have seen him storm the Don’t Flop rap battles. Lunar retired undefeated from battling to concentrate on music, courted by radio and press, and signed with Primary Talent booking. Although his sudden fame must be something they’ve been asked about a lot in recent weeks, failing to mention him would be foolish.

“Lunar’s on Sinoptic but he’s getting interest from record labels,” says ExP. “He’s not signed to anything but we’ve got an agreement in as much as he gets free recording and we work

together and he's not going to leave me in the dust."

Like Lunar, all are fiercely proud of WY, namechecking it frequently. 'Where We Live' is a straight-up homage to 'a comfy old Yorkshire town where it's pouring down and the skies are grey / where there's rolling hills and a load of mills and they harvest grain'. It also takes talent to be able to carry off the music video for 'Wuntathought' whilst dressed as farmers, driving tractors and spitting sincerely about creative hurdles, without looking like David Brent in triplicate. "It could have been Yeo Valley central", as JND puts it, but for their laid-back delivery and understated sincerity.

Addverse explains: "We don't want to be known for shouting about all the things that people who do rapping are generally boxed into shouting about, like cars and guns and girls and how hard we are. We've all been raised as good boys. We're telling stories, talking about our lives in rhyme over music, that's all. We want people to see that hip hop is actually full of clever musicians."

Without effin and jeffin, what they do write about is life in West Yorkshire, with all the beauty and tragedy that entails. "We're not afraid to say what we're feeling", says JND, admitting that it's very therapeutic.

They're also all broad Yorkshire, not something we're used to hearing much in hip hop but it's not the unnatural pairing it sounds like it should be. Which is just as well, because ExP has high praise for the local scene: "Outside London it's the best hip hop scene. it's like the Olympics - it's a great big international thing, but Yorkshire did fucking well."

