

FROM THE UNSEEN TO EVERYTHING STONES THROW TURNS 10

BY CHRIS MARTINS — PHOTOS BY B+

"I'VE GOT A WHOLE FRIDGE FULL OF WINE," says Eothen Alapatt with the air of a veteran businessman. "Going up to places like Lompoc and Buellton right outside Santa Barbara, to these wineries that are site specific...it's just like the music I like." He is, after all, an accomplished record label manager. "I feel the same way traveling to Omaha to track a funk band as when I'm going to a winery seeing where they grow the grapes, tasting the wine and meeting the people that do it." But Eothen isn't an industry old-timer. And I never imagined we'd be pairing wine... "...with Stones Throw, it's the same: it's all independent. There's a better chance to make a living in music ultimately, but the passion's the same. I love it."

We're supposed to be in a basement somewhere, just buried in records and incapable of seeing past our own noses, coughing pungent smoke out at each other and relishing in the lack of breathing room. We're supposed to feel comfortably claustrophobic on account of the piles of instruments, samplers and sound tools; with the dirty, manic air of creativity edging out sanity; leeching anything but spontaneous action and reaction from our hands and minds until we're ready again to make something great. We're supposed to be reinventing hip-hop, injecting it with a sense of humor belied by virtuosic genius imbued with a deep, thick, heady sense of soul. This is Stones Throw, after all. And yet...

...that was 10 years ago, already. And 10 minutes ago I used the word "lovely" while talking to the man

better known as Egon: general manager, vintage regional funk archivist, DJ and all-around hustler (though it must be mentioned that he's much more endearing than he is business) for Stones Throw Records. Of course, this isn't to say that the label's basic function isn't happening (that previously mentioned "supposed to" about reinventing hip-hop), because it most certainly is. But times have changed. Ten years is a lot of time for an independent hip-hop (etc.) imprint that never had dreams of pressing its own logo into platinum pendants; for a small group of guys who set out to make a living by working hard and hardly changing their ideals; for a business that's always taken chances and willingly taken losses along the way. For Stones Throw, 10 years counts—it's a benchmark.

We're at Egon and his girlfriend's house in Glassell Park, an almost suburban neighborhood just a few miles east of Hollywood. I asked him if we could get a few folks together for interviews and photos, and he answered with a barbeque. When I arrive he opens the door midway through a sentence directed at someone else, pours me a glass of chardonnay without looking, and points me to the hors d'oeuvres like I'm family. Which is exactly the point.

The roll call for this impromptu anniversary party reads like a sampler platter from the genealogical tree of Stones Throw, and even hip-hop to some extent: Label owner, DJ and producer Chris "Peanut Butter Wolf" Manak, who put in work with several Bay Area crews before moving operations to Los Angeles. Art

director Jeff Jank, an erstwhile graffiti artist and illustrator from Oakland who made the move south with Wolf. Photographer B+, an Irish transplant whose credits include album covers for N.W.A., the Watts Prophets, DJ Shadow, and the majority of the Stones Throw catalog. Rapper Medaphoar, who grew up with the label's flagship artist Madlib in Oxnard, California, 60 miles northwest of L.A. Producer J-Rocc, founding member of the seminal West Coast turntablist crew the World Famous Beat Junkies (who've worked with, well, everybody). Old school South Bronx emcee Percee P, a firsthand witness to the birth of the breakbeat. Recent fan-turned-signee Koushik, whose funk-inspired shoegazing music represents the label's expansive future. And, of course, our host Egon.

"Chris offered me the job in 2000 when he was moving the company down to L.A.," says Egon. He was a radio DJ at Vanderbilt University in Nashville when he started receiving Stones Throw records with Chris Manak's phone number on them. "Chris was doing all the legwork himself, and he just said, 'Look, I don't know what it's going to entail. I really don't know much more than I'm working with Madlib, he's amazingly talented, and I'm moving. And if you want to figure it out with me, I'd like you to be a part of it.' I was in New York, about to start work, and I tied up everything, got in a van and drove across the country.

"Jeff had helped Chris move all his gear down. He wasn't even supposed to be part of the label—he'd only done the art for the Quasimoto album—and



Peanut Butter Wolf



J-Rocc

two days after I got there, he was like, 'You know, I think I'm gonna stay. I'll move into this room.' We fought over the room, but we all settled into the house, and that was it. That's how it started. Can you believe that?"

But it's not very surprising. This isn't a press event; it's a party. These aren't labelmates; they're friends. B+ showed up with a case of Tecate. Koushik marinated chicken for the grill. Egon bought the grill at Lowe's Home Improvement *this morning*. These people aren't together because of label politics or signing bonuses (and frankly, a few of them could be making a lot more elsewhere); they're together because they're all compelled by the same shared sense of duty and a belief that, if nothing else, they've got each other.

Which is, in a word, familial. Some folks come and go like errant teenagers (MF Doom stopped by to record his word-warping best, *Madvillainy*), others stay close (the various friends and members of the original Oxnard group, Lootpack), while others still have taken on the role of nurturer (Peanut Butter Wolf hasn't put out a true album since his 1998 classic *My Vinyl Weighs a Ton*). Like most families, they've suffered loss (Stones Throw released producer J Dilla's final album, the magnificent *Donuts*, just three days before he passed in February of 2006). And like a lot of families, there's one indisputable, bread-winning daddy: Otis Jackson Jr., or Madlib.

"He's one person that's never gotten sick of it," says Wolf, having taken Egon's place on the interrogation

couch. He's the photo negative of his business partner: soft-spoken, introverted, happy only when the subject is someone else. "A lot of people go through those phases: They'll retire for five years and then come back, like the Beastie Boys. But Madlib makes a record every five weeks." Which seems phenomenal until he corrects himself: "I mean every five days. I love my music, and I think it's better than most people's, but Madlib's is better than mine. So why bang my head trying to make my music when I can be promoting him and the other guys?"

It's a heavy statement, almost disheartening until you realize the breadth of Madlib's influence. He was the backbone of Lootpack, the reason that Wolf, Egon and Jeff all moved in together, and the unofficial fourth tenant of that communal house, essentially squatting in their studio six days a week for the better part of four years, making so much music that he invented aliases in order to keep up with himself. Quasimoto is indeed Madlib, only as a mischievous, spliff-smoking alien who raps hilarious streaming wisdom over disjointed, bubbly funk beats. And as Yesterdays New Quintet, Madlib is an entire jazz band, playing every instrument under a different name (each "member" has recorded side projects since), then sampling and re-orchestrating the whole beautiful mess. Both Quas' *The Unseen* (2000) and YNQ's *Angles Without Edges* (2001) were critical successes and small revolutions that helped make Stones Throw what it is. And that doesn't even begin to touch upon what the man has done

since. Figuratively speaking, this is the house that Madlib built. And here in Egon's actual home, that influence clings to the walls and coats the guests like the dank, mind-expanding basement ozone that fueled the label's early years.

Out on the porch away from the party, Koushik quietly confesses: "Madlib...that's my favorite shit—my *all-time favorite* music. When Stones Throw asked if they could put out my record, I was like, 'Come on, are you kidding me?'"

And when I ask photographer B+ how he came to the label, he answers between bites of chicken: "Lootpack came out and I knew I wanted to work with them. But then I heard the first Quasimoto single and I was just like, 'Whoa.' I got a hold of them immediately: 'I'm just letting you know, whatever you need...'"

And later in the backyard, as the stars start to show and a piquant smoke hangs on our lips, J-Rocc reflects: "He influences everyone, just seeing that he can get away with so much. It's like, 'Damn, well now I've got to try something crazy.' Maybe I won't do exactly what he does, but—" and Medaphoar, who's been cool as a cucumber until now, cuts off J excitedly: "I've got to let you hear the shit I've been working on!"

When Madlib moves, so does the family. But, at the risk of mixing metaphors, every good ship needs a ballast to keep it from tipping when the sails catch wind. And it seems Wolf is that almost maternal anchor. He's sacrificed to get here—monetarily, creatively, emotionally—and to no small degree, his wanting to do for others is



Percee P



Medaphoar

what founded Stones Throw in 1996. J Dilla wasn't the first death in the family. In East Palo Alto in 1993, Wolf's best friend and long-time recording partner, rapper Charles "Charizma" Hicks was gunned down at the age of 20. The two were on their way toward modest rap stardom, having toured Europe, performed with Nas and the Pharcyde, and landed a record deal with Hollywood Basic, then home to DJ Shadow and Organized Konfusion.

Back on the living room couch, Wolf gets a little more soft-spoken: "I remember being signed and thinking we were going to take over the world and then the record never coming out. That was the worst feeling. We eventually got released from our contract and Charizma died a couple months after. I think it was related in a way. After he passed, what I wanted most was to share his music with everybody. I was showing it to all different labels before I started mine, and no one was interested because he was gone. That experience has made me who I am."

And thus, so many others are given the chance to do what Charizma and J Dilla can't anymore: see the fruition of their dreams here on Earth. Being a Stones Throw artist means putting in a lot of work, but the result of all that collected effort is a label that's grown into something much bigger than its initial impetus as a means to put out a lost album (Charizma & Peanut Butter Wolf's "My World Premiere" single was the label's first release; their *Big Shots* long-player came out in 2003), and even bigger than its secondary goal as a vehicle for Madlib's constant outpouring.

Stones Throw has come to embody an aesthetic—one as visual as it is musical, thanks to Jeff and B+—that lithely avoids that old unimaginative hip-hop pigeonhole. Absent from the barbeque today are: the ever-soulful, booty-loving crooner Dudley Perkins; resurrected '70s new wave experimentalist weirdo Gary Wilson; Oh No, an emcee/producer whose latest album is assembled exclusively from the sampled works of Galt MacDermot (the co-author of '60s rock musical *Hair*); self-made funk-soul-hop musician and singer Georgia Anne Muldrow; and the bilingual, many-styled, multi-instrumentalist being touted as "the indie R. Kelly," Aloe Blacc. All of whom (among others) contribute to Stones Throw's celebratory *Chrome Children* compilation. Released in collaboration with late night animation mayhem-makers Adult Swim, the 19-track anniversary collection focuses not on the past, but on the best and the brightest to come.

"Everything is poured into the company," says Egon. "I keep enough to pay my mortgage and my bills, enough so that me and my girl can go out to eat one night a week and buy some wine, and that's it. Wolf does the same thing. Everyone on the label hustles. That being said, there's a lot good that comes out of feeling so close to the edge that you have to put everything into it. That's why Madlib works 16 hours a day. When you see him during what's down time for him—a drive from L.A. to San Francisco, or flying somewhere for a gig—he's fuckin' knocked out, man. He's asleep, because he can't be doing what he does."

Which goes a long way to explaining the most notice-

able absence from the party. Down in that immortal basement where inspiration runs wild, you can find Madlib (probably at this very moment) hard at work on something limitless and incredible. All afternoon, I keep looking toward the door expecting our hero to walk in, for the head of the family to come home, hang up his knit hat and revel in the love gathered here in his name. But as much as I keep looking, no one else bothers; they all know better. 'Lib has got that fever, again and always, locked up and lost to the world in his most aptly named studio, the Bomb Shelter, surrounded by all those instruments and equipment, that near-tangible energy seeping out of the cracks and into the air carrying the promise of everything yet unimagined. And inside the house, Koushik and Wolf are huddled in Egon's vinyl room, going through records like mad scientist-librarians. Percee P's on the couch telling stories from the good old days to Medaphoar. B+ and Jeff are planning the wheat-pasting campaign that's going to cover Los Angeles in *Chrome Children* posters. And outside, I'm sitting with J-Rocc, smoking and watching our words dissipate into the atmosphere.

"Nothing's changed, really," he says between gated exhales. "It's just a different year and we're all a little older. It's family. Even if I wasn't an artist, I'd still be here. I don't count on it for paying my bills; it helps me out, but I'm here 'cause I love it. Where else am I gonna be? I'm an old school b-boy. I gotta have my crew."

Ten years down, and many more to come. Long live the independent label. **F**



Jeff Jank



Egon

TEN TO OWN (IN 10 WORDS OR LESS)

2006



OH NO
Exodus into Unheard Rhythms
(STH2143)

Madlib's brother rhymes with friends over chopped Galt MacDermot jams.



DUDLEY PERKINS
Expressions (2012 a.u.)
(STH2136)

Funky Dudley returns with more O.D.B.-meets-Parliament sentimental loveliness.



MADLIB
Beat Konducta Vol. 1-2
(STH2133)

The masterfully imperfect wordless works of Madlib; head-nods 'til infinity.



J DILLA
Donuts
(STH2126)

Thirty-one beautiful, banging, brilliant instrumentals from an overlooked genius.

2005



KOUSHIK
Be With
(STH2098)

Textured '60s psych-pop with airy vocals and tons of promise.

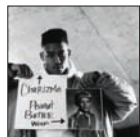
2004



MADVILLAIN
Madvillainy
(STH2065)

Monumental collaboration between 'Lib and Long Island monster MF Doom.

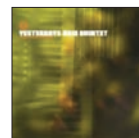
2003



CHARIZMA & PEANUT BUTTER WOLF
Big Shots
(STH2077)

Classic raps/beats from Bay Area hip-hop's best year (1993).

2001



YESTERDAYS NEW QUINTET
Angles without Edges
(STH2041)

Madlib smashes the rulebook, masquerading as a stunning jazz combo.

2000



QUASIMOTO
The Unseen
(STH2025)

A ganja-toking, helium-voiced alien (also Madlib) raps over gritty soundscapes.

1999



LOOTPACK
Soundpieces: Da Antidote
(STH2019)

Laid-back grooves and stoney raps that set the STH mold.