



If you thought Three The Hard Way invented rap, you're dead wrong.

The Last Poets, who formed in Harlem, New York, in 1968, have long been recognised as the godfathers of the style known as hardcore rap. Not even James Brown can lay claim to that one. The Last Poets released two albums, 1970's self-titled debut (that contained the classic single, 'Niggers Are Scared Of Revolution'), and *This Is Madness* the following year, before in-fighting caused a split in the original line-up in the mid 70s. Earlier this year, formative members Abiodun Oyewole and Umar Bin Hassan recorded under the name the Last Poets for the first time in 20 years (the duo reunited

briefly in 1993 when Abiodun appeared on Umar's *Be Bop Or Be Dead* album). Their album *Holy Terror* was released last month on legendary producer/musician Bill Laswell's Black Arc label.

Abiodun remembers quite clearly why he departed from the group.

"I left the Last Poets because I didn't want to be a celebrity, and that's where I thought the group was headed. I didn't want to stay in the Poets with that kind of status over my head. I wanted to be a revolutionary from the very beginning, and I reached a point where I could-

n't be in the Last Poets anymore."

**Aren't you more susceptible to celebrity status now, reforming 20 years on?**

"I didn't recognise just how valuable it was to be in the Last Poets. I had to seek my own personal identity, but as time grew on, I began to realise more and more how valuable the group was. Umar invited me to do something, and since we have come back together it's been wonderful, because much of the sensitivity we had as kids, we still have. But we have a lot more direction, and a lot more understanding of why we are doing what we are doing. I still see myself as a revolutionary artist. I use art and poetry as a means to spread the message, and raise the levels of consciousness; that's a personal mission."

**Was your split with Umar a bitter one?**

"Umar and I took lots of time out cause we had to find ourselves, we had to discover who we were as people, we simply had to grow up. It's not so easy being a poet and being a man. I think Umar and I are very sincere people in that we don't take our lives lightly. We are both emotional people, we're the same in some situations and some we're not, and we have a great love for the language. But we have a way of looking at the world that's a bit different; I enjoy being a responsible person, Umar likes to be a little less responsible. That's a very big difference that sometimes causes conflict. Nonetheless, those differences can make for a pretty dynamic partnership."

**Was Bill Laswell an influence on you reuniting?**

"Definitely! Because Bill has a stable, he's got the place where he can bring artists together and get them to record. He found a way to get some money, to get some deals, and all of those points are points of attraction for any artist who feels like they have something to say. Bill Laswell has done a super job. I call him 'The Governor of the Wild Seeds', because he brings all these wild seeds together and allows them to nurture themselves, and to grow and to develop, and ultimately become something important to others. I guess he's a guru of sorts."

**What approach did you bring to the recording of *Holy Terror*?**

"There are many styles to come from, and what Umar and I have decided to do with our album... I think we've calmed down a bit, we're not as pumped up as we were when we did the first album. But this time we are more deliberate in our delivery, and I think that's what counts. There's all kinds of ways to get to the mind, there's no one particular set pattern. The

rappers these days aren't getting up and speaking softly, they're yelling and screaming. Sometimes I think those boys are going to have a cardiac arrest on stage when I see them. The shouting has become a cry, the shouting has become the musical rage of young people. The noise and the sound has been woven together to create one big blast, and it creates a certain electricity all of its own."

**Are there many contemporary rappers that impress you?**

"KRS1, Eric B and Rakim, I really love — they have a lethal use of the language — Queen Latifah, MC Lyte, LL Cool J. There's quite a lot of rappers, and I can find something in all of them, even Snoop Doggy Dog. I don't particularly care for his lyrics — he's selling us a very, very bad bill of sale — but his style is very commendable. The bitches and the ho's don't work for me, it leaves a nasty odour in the air. Nobody can call their momma or their sister a bitch. There's poetry in some rap, and then there's a lot of rap that doesn't have poetry."

**Is there any one rapper who you believe has the insight to stand above the rest?**

"I know what you getting at, there is a lot of potential out there. Any one of them rappers who would stop believing that the almighty dollar is more important, and start recognising the needs of the people in the community. This country is constantly creating an atmosphere for a hero. This country is setting itself up to have heroes, based on the fact that they're going to oppress the people so much that somebody will come up and speak out against that, and organise the people to stop that oppression. The fact is, a lot of these rappers have been moved by the dollar, and that's the nature of the capitalist society."

**Have your basic ideals changed any from the way they were in the 60s and 70s?**

"Now, we're living in the gadget generation, computers are worth much more than hearts and souls. When we talk about getting back to where life is wholesome and sacred, and we don't live off phone lines or facsimiles of reality, when we don't have that aesthetic, then we'll have a revolution, 'cause we'll have moved past the plastic generation. What the Poets are trying to do now is create an atmosphere where those of us who recognise that we have power will use our power to save ourselves, to build things that will help us achieve, and not to feel like life is doomed because a silly government is making budget cuts. My mission, my goal, is to get people to recognise their strengths."

JOHN RUSSELL



The Debut Album From BLACK GRAPE Featuring Happy Mondays' Shaun Ryder & Bez The Single IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER Debuted at #8 in UK, Album Debuted at #1

