

CLASS & CO.

Talking Hip-Hop Production & Beat Making With Classified, Rich Kidd & Clean Dirt

PHOTO: SCOTT MAUN

Classified

BY MICHAEL RAINE

In the hip-hop world, the terms “beat maker” and “producer” are often – and wrongly – used interchangeably. Though a producer of a track or album is often (but not always) also the beat maker, a beat maker is often not the producer. Put simply, the beat maker, as the name suggests, is simply the person who composes the beat or music and passes it to the MC to do as they please. The producer, on the other hand, is involved with the track or album from start to finish. They exchange ideas with the artists, often compose the beat, mix and master the track, and are generally the ones steering the process from beginning to end.

With that in mind, CM discussed both hip-hop production and beat making with MC/producers Classified and Rich Kidd, and the production duo of Clean Dirt (a.k.a. Charles Austin and Graham Campbell), who straddle the worlds of hip-hop, folk, and indie rock through their work with Buck 65, David Myles, Matt Mays, and more. Here’s what they had to say.

CM: What is your studio set-up like and what are the main components?

Classified: I got my [Akai] MPC 2500 that pretty much sequences everything. I still sequence off the MPC and I got a Korg Triton and Yamaha Motif for keyboards. I’ve got a bunch of plug-ins for Pro Tools, like synths and sound effects and stuff like that. Got a couple Technics turntables; I got my Neumann 87 mic, which is the only thing I went out and spent a lot of money on. I got some drums, a live piano, and bass in the studio. That’s basically it.

I’m a firm believer that there is always something better that you can get, but sometimes, too many options is a very hard thing.

Rich Kidd: All I need is my laptop, my old hard drive because I have a couple hard drives of sounds, and some stuff like that. I usually jam out; if I can get some live instrumentation then all I need is a room where I can mic stuff and then I take that and sample that and chop it up in my own way. I’m mainly software and I might use a MPD pad. It’s kind of like a MPC but a MIDI controller that I connect with FL [Studio] to bang out some stuff.

Graham Campbell (Clean Dirt): Computers are just so ridiculously powerful now that it’s all just based, for me, around a Mac Pro, Logic and a few other third party plug-ins.

Charles Austin (Clean Dirt): We were using the old [E-mu] SP 1200 last year for a couple things and there’s a sound on there – I don’t know if Graham would agree – but it’s pretty hard to duplicate it in a computer.

CM: Has that set-up changed much over time?

Classified: It’s basically been the same for a while. I change little things here and there but it’s basically been MPC, turntables, and take my drum samples and loop the samples through that. Then, just a lot more live instrumentation. It used to just be the drum machine and samples and me doing a little bit of keys but now it’s small string

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orchestras, horn players, just anything. The kids choir we had sing on "Inner Ninja," we have that access now that I can reach out to people and say, "Man, we need a kids choir for this. Can you hook us up?" and it gets done; it's great.

Rich Kidd: It's pretty much been the same thing. I got a laptop now. I just bought a laptop last year, but a PC laptop. I kind of hate PCs now; getting into the Mac world, you get sucked in. Until FL [Studio] makes a Mac version, I got to mess with this PC. We keep the PC clean, no Internet.

Campbell: With Buck 65, I've been working with him since the late-'90s and back then it was very basic, kind of stripped down set-up, which would be basically turntables, a DJ mixer, SP 1200 – which is a classic sampling drum machine used on all kinds of classic hip-hop records in the '90s – and we would've been recording back then on a cassette four-track. I guess the big shift came in early-2000 to 2003 and by that point I was using other samplers connected to a computer – a fairly primitive PC just for sequencing but not actually doing any audio recording on a computer.

I switched from sequencing with Cubase to working with Logic around 2003 and still at that point using it to trigger sounds on samplers and using it as a MIDI sequencer. Pretty soon, you started just doing everything in the software.

CM: Do you use samples and, if so, how do you choose them and does it create any issues with regards to getting them cleared?

Campbell: This has happened in the past, where somebody has produced a record that uses a bunch of samples that you wouldn't be able to actually release without spending a lot of money on sample clearance. So at that point, what we'll do is actually sit down and listen to figure out, basically, how to come up with something original that is musically different but sonically, in terms of the vibe, does the same thing.

Austin: We're kind of sampling ourselves, if that makes any sense; we're kind of producing content as if we found it on an old record but it's actually us making it.

Rich Kidd: Just whatever I'm digging or whatever song is hot. For whatever reason, what makes you feel like, "Oh shit, I could really hook this shit up."

It all depends on the contractual agreement you [and the artist] got. It's really for when you guys both produce a track and put it out. He rhymes on it, you

produce the track, you use a sample from a known artist, and the agreement there is when you guys start getting money off of it, they're going to come for both of you. Basically, all the parties that are making money off of it, if you have a contract as a producer or beat maker, saying we can do this agreement as long as you put a point in there saying [the artist] would have to be responsible for the samples. They'd have to clear them. Whatever legal terms the lawyers can write for you. You just say that and basically it's their responsibility.

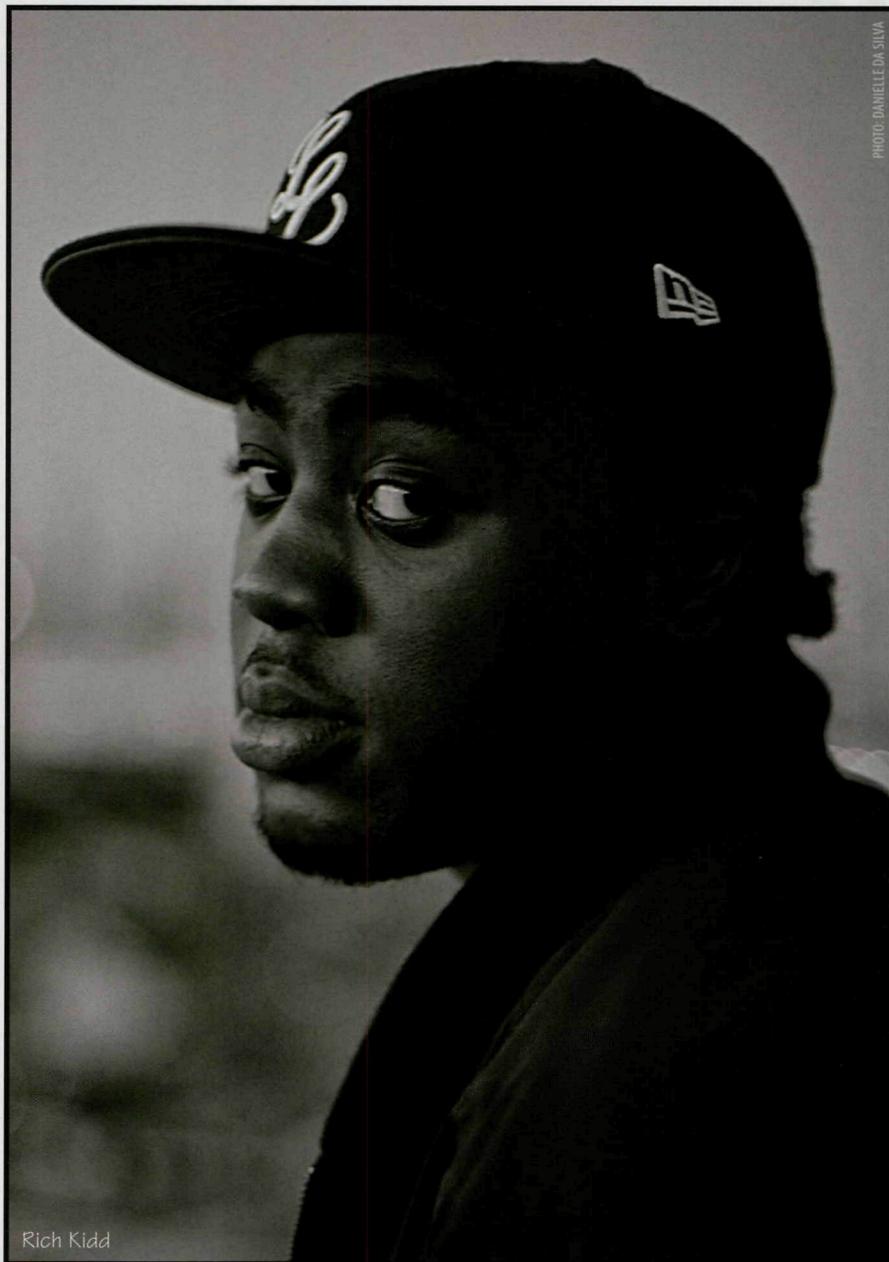
If you're working with labels, if they know there is a sample, they're going to try to clear it. All you have to do is do a sample

sheet. They ask you what sample, the name of the artist, the writers on the song, how long of a duration did you sample, and then they make you sign a little thing at the end saying if there is any samples that you didn't tell us about, you're going to have to pay for it and all the legal ramifications go to you.

CM: What do you look for in any MC you work with?

Classified: I look at it two different ways because I am a rapper, too. I'm looking at it as a competitive MC. Like, "Did he just fucking murder this shit? Did he say some shit that blew my mind?" Or, is there something lyrically he's saying that has me going, "I wish I wrote that song." That's usually how I know I really like something. It's like, "Man, I wish I came up with that idea."

Campbell: I guess from an engineer's or producer's perspective, somebody who has



Rich Kidd

PHOTO: DANIELLE DA SILVA

got their lyrics written and rehearsed to some extent and is able to execute them consistently rather than winding up with a situation where you're having to piece things together.

Austin: I think one thing, personally, that I really appreciate that you don't necessarily get to hear a lot is not only rhythmic consistently, but also some kind of originality. Obviously the guys who are true to themselves, like Rich [Terfry, a.k.a. Buck 65] is from Mount Uniacke [Nova Scotia] so he's not really talking about driving a lowrider and selling drugs on the corner. He stays true to who he is.

We worked on this Scratch Bastid record and Cadence Weapon came in and worked on a track and I was impressed with him because he was original. He had a great

Classified: I've always been like, "I've got my 30 beats. Let me just send them down to this girl in New York who shops beats." And you know, different connections over the years, like, "Send me your beats. I'll get them placed." Nothing has ever really come out of that and at the same time, I think that's partly my mistake as well.

That's something that me and my manager always talk about, but when I go in on something, I really spend a lot of time and I can't go spend two months to work on something that might get used. If I work on something, I want it out and want people to hear it.

Rich Kidd: Yeah, I have to. At the end of the day I'm still aspiring to be a producer where I have a good resume of artists that I work with and have an extensive resume that

Classified: Other songs usually. I remember when Dr. Dre's 2001 came out. I guess I was still working a job, and I remember driving home from that and hearing "What's the Difference," and I just got inspired and excited. I'm not like, "I want to go make that album," but when you hear something that really excites you, it makes you excited to get home so you can turn on the drum machine.

Just hearing other music and getting a spark of some idea, it's just like, "OK, let's take this spark and try to turn it into a forest fire."

Austin: We both are pretty inspired by people like Massive Attack and Aphex Twin, so in terms of going back to what I said about trying to be original, I'm like, "Well, what if Aphex Twin had an acoustic guitar?"



Graham Campbell & Charles Austin of Clean Dirt

flow and everything but he was also doing his own thing. I've had younger guys in here who are incredibly talented in terms of their flow and everything, but they're talking about stuff that is not a reality to them and it's kind of tiresome.

Rich Kidd: I appreciate the passion projects; the ones where I feel the artist is really in-tune with creating a masterpiece or stuff like that. The hit albums or the ones that sell the most, I'd definitely love to be on those, but when I can work with an artist whose goal is to make a classic album and something that is true to them but may be underrated, I'd rather take the underrated approach and be respected as a legend than just get on temporarily and have people forget the next day.

CM: Do you shop beats around?

shows that I've put in the work. So, I always got to stay shopping beats to these labels or these publishers. It's a game that's very saturated; everybody makes beats and a lot of guys have their in-house guys.

Campbell: I guess I kind of stopped making beats around the time that shopping your beats around became a thing.

Austin: It's a shame!

Campbell: I'm a mix engineer and kind of became obsessed with that aspect of it; it works a lot better if I got somebody feeding me stuff and I can turn it into something good. We've done more remixing than actually generating stuff from scratch to sell to people.

CM: Who or what inspires your work and music?

What would that be like?" So I'll make something that is probably not that great and then I'll give it to Graham and he'll turn it into something pretty cool.

Rich Kidd: In the hip-hop producer community it's all my peers. I'm talking Canada-wide: Boi-1da, obviously; T-Minus, he's a good guy; Saukrates; DJ Scam. A whole bunch of producers who did big hits back in the day to the guys who are doing the hits now, everybody kind of inspires me.

A lot of people just hear the words but a producer, when they first hear a track, they hear the beat and they take in the beat more than the words. It's just a thing. So I respect all these producers paving the way and making it easier to get some money [laughs]. ■

Michael Raine is the Assistant Editor of Canadian Musician.

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