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Freaked beat manifesto

Altered Beats lets hip-hoppers go out of their heads

ALTERED BEATS

With DJs Proteus, Loomr. Sun, Jan 5. NASA, 609 Queen W. Free.

BY [ANDRE MAYER](#)

You could call Aaron Campbell a musical philanthropist. With a penchant for hyperbole and a zeal that borders on missionary, this DJ and sometime MC views himself as the city's biggest champion of avant hip-hop.

"Most of the artists, if not all of them, make very, very, very little money," says the 26-year-old Campbell, who spins under the name Proteus. "I honestly feel that there are some people out there who have no choice but to make music. If they don't, it will actually cause them some degree of physical pain. People like [California-based] DJ Hive need to make their tracks. They're not making any money, and I feel I owe it to them to do what I can to basically help them."

For the past two years, Campbell's patronage has come in the form of Altered Beats, a formerly bi-weekly and now monthly night at Queen Street club NASA, in which he and partner Loomr spin a heady, idiosyncratic repertoire of progressive hip-hop. While his enthusiasm is unstoppable, talk of Altered Beats' musical mandate tends to get bollixed up with terms like "hard-hop," "futuristic" and "cyber-escapism."

"The pinnacle would be science-fiction meeting hip-hop meeting deviant electronic experimental music," says Campbell in a moment of lucidity. "It sounds all melodramatic, but it's very groove-oriented."

A few touchstones seem appropriate: to hear Campbell tell it, he didn't discover this strain of hip-hop so much as fall under its narcotic influence. It began with the Beastie Boys' *License to Ill*, progressed to Das EFX, The Goats and New Kingdom, and reached its epiphany when Campbell first heard Meat Beat Manifesto. "I realized what I liked was alternative flipsides to hip-hop. Sort of a mutation of hip-hop. After I started listening to the Meat Beat, I thought I should be looking at different genres of music that do things with hip-hop in a very grimy, electronica aspect," he says. "It all sort of blew up from there."

Campbell's freaky breaks are complemented by an intense audio-visual component, in which he uses NASA's 10 TV screens to project mash-ups of frenetic Japanese action flicks assembled by a friend at Suspect Video (the store also sponsors the nights). His assertion that "you can't compare Altered Beats to anything in Toronto" is brazen, and obvious, given the narrowness of his scope.

But Campbell is a DJ who won't pander to audiences or second-guess himself. For example: although he professes love for Company Flow, artists on Definitive Jux -- the label run by former CoFlow member El-P and regarded as having the most outré roster in hip-hop -- don't get much play at Altered Beats.

"I'm insane about [Company Flow's] *Little Johnny from the Hospital*, but believe it or not, Def Jux is a little too tame," says Campbell. "It doesn't punch through the envelope. It doesn't make you go, 'What is this?'"

This past summer, Campbell put Altered Beats on a six-month hiatus in order to pursue a placement at Ninja Tune U.K. in southeast London. The opportunity was facilitated through an enterprising government-sponsored program called Someone Else (S1E for short). Conceived by a pair of culturally minded Montrealers -- Christine McLean and Jean Nicolas Dupéré -- the little-known initiative uses money from the feds' Youth International Development Program to sponsor winning applicants for a work placement that combines music and business. Through his own connections, Campbell secured a six-month posting at Ninja Tune with Peter Quick, the label's managing director. Ottawa gave Campbell the \$10,000 necessary to cover his expenses for the duration of his stay.

"It's 2003 now," says Campbell, "and electronic music is big enough that the government should notice and help out musicians."

Given his advocacy of indigent musicians, it seems appropriate that Campbell's internship at



Aaron Campbell, a.k.a. Proteus

Ninja Tune was spent working the bugs out of the label's new royalty software, which tracks the radio play and payment of Ninja Tune artists. He also managed to wing his way to Barcelona for Sonar, the three-day electronic music festival, where he hung out with the likes of Kid606. Not surprisingly, Campbell says his stint in Europe was the "best experience of my life."

Since he's been back, Campbell has been chasing leads on a plethora of other music-related projects. He hopes to put his rap skills to use in collaboration with local Tigerbeat6 icon Billy Pollard (a.k.a. Knifehandchop), who's known for his twisted surgery on popular hip-hop songs. Altered Beats has moved from Wednesdays to Sundays, and Campbell is as determined as ever to represent for hip-hop's underpaid innovators.

"I just don't want these people to quit," he says. "I don't want them to stop doing what they're doing."

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