

Masters At Work

Their name says it all – Masters At Work. For over a decade, "Little Louie" Vega and Kenny "Dope" Gonzalez have shepherded dance music down new paths with their inventive production style and imaginative feel for different musical forms. The two native New Yorkers have amassed an overwhelming body of work in that time, one that includes hundreds of original productions, remixes and side projects, redefining the way we think of music in clubs. Vega and Gonzalez defiantly mix everything they can find – house, hip-hop, funk, disco, Latin, African and jazz – into a universal groove. And in doing so, MAW has become a cultural *mélange* unto itself, emblematic of the multicultural society in which we live.

Our Time Is Coming is the group's third official album, second under the MAW moniker, and first for Tommy Boy Records. Comprised of wonderful new compositions and a handful of their most popular singles from recent years, it is indicative of the ambitiously eclectic MAW sound: a vibrant dance groove culled from a mesh of Latin rhythms, jazz and soul. Vega and Gonzalez composed, produced and arranged the album's ten songs, using crafty studio work and live instrumentation and help from some regular collaborators (India, Roy Ayers) and a few special guests (Patti Austin, James Ingram, Stephanie Mills).

The Beginnings "Little Louie" Vega and Kenny "Dope" Gonzalez officially started their union as Masters At Work in 1990. Vega, a prodigious DJ around New York, met Gonzalez, a producer, through burgeoning house DJ Todd Terry. Gonzalez's song "Salsa House" was a favorite of Vega, who fell for its Latin-influenced, everything-goes flavor. Desiring to remix the song, Vega asked Terry for an introduction, and almost instantly the two bonded over their insatiable appetite for music of all kinds.

Vega was born in the Bronx in 1965 and raised in an environment rich with Latin music. His father was an accomplished saxophone player and his uncle was renowned salsa singer Hector Lavoe (of Fania All Stars fame). While Vega embraced the music of his Puerto Rican heritage, it was his pair of club-hopping sisters – regulars at David Mancuso's famous late-'70s Loft parties and at Paradise Garage – who introduced him to the vitality of dance music. Already taken with roller-disco and hip-hop, Vega attended Paradise Garage for the first time in 1980. There he witnessed the magic of DJ Larry Levan, whose ability to blend music from seemingly every genre and era into a seamless groove would foreshadow the spirit of Masters At Work. Through the mid-'80s, Vega began to make a name for himself as an up-and-coming DJ, playing house and freestyle in Bronx and Manhattan hotspots like Devil's Nest, Roseland and Studio 54. He was also doing remixes and original rhythm tracks, including one of his early breaks remixing Information Society's "Running" for Tommy Boy.

Gonzalez was born in Brooklyn in 1970. As a kid, he initially shunned Latin music, falling in love with the rebellious party beats of hip-hop. He worked as a buyer in a local record store while a teenager, mastering his skills as a DJ playing on the side. In the late-'80s, Gonzalez and a friend began organizing popular neighborhood block parties under

the guise Masters At Work. Gonzalez met Todd Terry through these parties and lent Terry the fresh MAW moniker for two eventual club hits – "Alright, Alright" and "Dum Dum Cry." In return, Terry let Gonzalez borrow his drum machine and recording equipment, on which the blossoming producer recorded several tracks for the influential Nu Groove Records, including "Salsa House."

The MAW Union The first collaboration between Vega and Gonzalez came in 1990 when Vega produced the debut album for singer Marc Anthony, an underground club prodigy at the time. Writing with India and other collaborators, and arranging the album himself, Vega brought in Latin masters Tito Puente and Eddie Palmieri to record the album, and turned to Gonzalez for some beats. Credited as "Masters At Work featuring Tito Puente and Eddie Palmieri," the recording of the album set the conceptual framework for future MAW productions: combining live instruments with sampled beats, and veteran masters with new innovators. Soon others were seeking the MAW sound, and Vega and Gonzalez began remixing artists ranging from Debbie Gibson to Saint Etienne. They also began making their own original tracks, like "Blood Vibes," a hip-hop/reggae blend that marked their first original production, and "Our Mute Horn," a Miles Davis tribute track that gave a nod to their jazz influences.

As the Masters At Work sound became more pervasive in clubs, they became more sought after by artists and labels, eventually remixing Bjork, Deee-Lite, Neneh Cherry, Soul II Soul, Donna Summer, Janet Jackson, Daft Punk, Incognito, Brand New Heavies, Stephanie Mills and many, many more. Sometimes a MAW remix is literally a re-mixing of the original, like adding a bass line and some minimal keys (Daft Punk's "Around the World") Other times, their remixes are total re-imaginings of the songs, as was the case with Saint Etienne's "Only Love Can Break Your Heart".

MAW also began producing for their own coterie of artists, like Barbara Tucker and salsa singer India, as well as for artists like Luther Vandross, BeBe Winans and George Benson. These were artists who had no foothold in the dance world but, based on their collaborations with MAW, were given instant respect. In addition to their own solo departures – e.g., Gonzalez's hip-hop influenced guise The Bucketheads and Vega's DJ residencies at Sound Factory Bar – the group collected some of their own original tracks and released The Album in 1993. Alternating between hard, head-nodding hip-hop and more inspired house tracks, it was their first album released under the Masters At Work name.

Nuyorican Soul MAW alter-ego Nuyorican Soul was born in 1993, a play on their heritage (Puerto Rican), residence (New York City) and style of music (soul). They debuted the guise on "The Nervous Track" (Nervous Records), giving us a glimpse of the Nuyorican concept – a groove that wasn't just thumping beats but musically sophisticated and engaging as well. A subsequent track, the hot club hit "You Can Do It (Baby)!" featuring George Benson, helped the project gain critical mass with fans, and after being signed by influential music maestro Gilles Peterson, Vega and Gonzalez recorded the first Nuyorican Soul album.

Released in 1997, the self-titled album was a mix of exemplary salsa, jazz and soul musicians (Roy Ayers, Eddie Palmieri, Jocelyn Brown). There was a discernable Latin jazz influence on songs like "Runaway" (a Salsoul Orchestra cover), a classic soul feel on the Rotary Connection gem "I Am The Black Gold Of The Sun," and a nod to hip-hop with a cover of Bob James' oft-sampled classic "Nautilus (Mawtilus)". Yet while the album's cover songs gave a nod to their influences, nobody could have imagined the timelessness of the Nuyorican sound.

Our Time Is Coming Our Time Is Coming combines six new compositions with four popular MAW singles from recent years, all co-written, produced, arranged and mixed by Vega and Gonzalez, who recruited a number of friends and influences to add to the sessions.

The title track boasts the inimitable influence of Roy Ayers on vibes and background vocals. "Like A Butterfly (You Send Me)," the opening selection, features the lovely Patti Austin on vocals with lyrics co-written by Blaze and background vocals arranged by Austin. The legendary James Ingram appears on "Lean On Me." Elsewhere on Our Time Is Coming, the diversity of Vega and Gonzalez rears its head with the Latin-jazz-influenced "Pienso En Ti," featuring guitarist and vocalist Luis Salinas, and the deep-house funk of Billie's "Every Now And Then." And it's nearly impossible to throw on the Soca-influenced "Work," (featuring Puppah Nas-T with vocals by Denise) and casually bob your head – this is a full-body experience.

It was a dream of Vega and Gonzalez's to record with Afrobeat king Fela Kuti. Unfortunately, their hopes were dashed when Fela passed away in August 1997. So instead, "MAW Expensive (A Tribute To Fela)" reworks Fela's signature "Expensive Shit," maintaining its dedicated tribal flavor.

Our Time Is Coming is Masters At Work at their finest, a wonderful accomplishment especially given the scope of Masters At Work's robust discography. It's rare to see artists push their creative impulses so consistently and with such acceptance, and even more rare to see it sustained for so long. But as this album reveals, Vega and Gonzalez continue to do so with unequalled ability. If anything, the album's title is too appropriate, for as much as the artists have done in the last eleven years, there is certainly more that lies ahead.