

# Like Peas in a Pod

**Two years after it took the world by storm, the collective known as Black Eyed Peas returns with another high-energy party album. Let's get the interview started!**

**By Lorraine Ali**

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May 16 issue - It's unlikely that the Peruvian singer Yma Sumac, '80s sensations Lisa Lisa & The Cult Jam or Dick Dale, King of the Surf Guitar, ever planned to make a big splash in the hip-hop world. But then neither did the Black Eyed Peas. For years, the eccentric interracial L.A. crew just did what they do best: sampled unusual music, rapped about anything but guns and ho's, and danced like Crouching Tiger meets Bojangles Robinson. "We really aren't smart enough to be pretentious," says rapper will.i.am. Still, the music business considered them ... maybe a little weird.

But it turns out that a lot of thug-weary rap fans and funk-deprived club kids were ready for a little weirdness—and in 2003, the Black Eyed Peas captured the moment. "Elephunk," the fourth album in their 10-year career, sold more than 7½ million copies. It transformed the band—a favorite act in L.A.'s cool, eclectic crossover clubs—into big-time players competing with the likes of Usher for chart space. So what was their game plan for their new album, "Monkey Business" (out in June)? Turn Dick Dale's surf classic "Misirlou" into a slamming dance tune with Latin melodies and European club beats, and make it the kickoff track—of course. Why didn't anybody ever think of that?

You need only visit the band in their L.A. studio to see that this isn't your everyday hip-hop act. They look like an MTV public-service announcement for racial harmony, gone slightly awry. Will wears cutoff Capri-style pants and suede moccasin boots. Fellow rapper apl.de.ap, a Filipino adopted by an American family, has on a BEP promo cap and sweats that he probably slept in. Taboo, another rapper and dancer, has a puffy face from dental surgery—they're all calling him Chip, as in chipmunk. Singer Fergie sports blond Swiss Miss-style braids. "We all had to dodge the idea we were spokespeople for our races," says Taboo. "Like, 'Hey, it's the Mexican Guy! The Filipino! The Chick!' We've always stood up to it and said, 'Fine, bring it on and we'll show you how we rock'."

BEP founders will and apl.de.ap have been following their counterintuitions since they began break-dancing in high school with the Tribal Nation crew and, later, rapping freestyle in parking lots after shows by such favorite performers as A Tribe Called Quest. Then, will says, "we met some people who fused real dance with breaking, and brought in *capoeira* [Brazilian dancing]. I thought, 'That's it! I wanna bring in old-man tap and Jackie Chan and, and ... everything else that's not supposed to be in there.' That's the mind-set we came into this with, and we'll never get rid of that."

They formed the band Atban Klann and, in 1991, they were signed to Eazy E's Ruthless Records, but no one at the gangsta-rap label knew quite what to do with them. "Any time you said 'hip-hop' and 'dancing' in the same sentence, people immediately thought of MC Hammer and Vanilla Ice," will recalls. "It was really frustrating." The album was shelved, and they went on to form BEP with Taboo. The band struggled to forge an identity somewhere between the underground world of socially aware hip-hop and commercial playa-style rap. A "positive message" had become the kiss of death. (We know what happened to Ice Cube, but where is Arrested Development now?) "The challenge was how to make feel-good albums with substance, but not come off like we were preaching," says will. "Nobody wants to be jamming at a party and be preached to. It's a real fine line between 'Oh, wow! Did you hear that?' And 'This guy needs to shut up'."

Then, just as the group scored a breakthrough hit with the post-9/11 anthem "Where Is the Love"—thanks in part to a vocal by Justin Timberlake—BEP brought in the cute blond singer Fergie from the all-girl pop group Wild Orchid. Older fans thought the band was selling out. "I'd read comments on the Internet about me, and some of it was really mean," Fergie recalls. "Then I'd go onstage and have to prove myself. I cried a lot in the beginning." At first, will worried about the lineup change. "I thought, 'Fergie doesn't really come from our world, so how are they gonna take it? It'll make a lot of our fans p---d off.' But then I was, like, 'Wait a second, when did we ever care what people said?' I mean, look at the s--t I'm wearing right now. It's *my* style. So what's more important—appeasing somebody else, or surrounding ourselves with talented motherf-----rs? We all knew the answer to that one."

On "Monkey Business," Black Eyed Peas put this independent, eclectic sensibility to work. The album's social consciousness doesn't stop it from being one of the best party soundtracks of the year; they know how to mix pleasure with business. They induced James Brown himself to sing the superbad "They Don't Want Music"—a floor-shaking funk number that mourns the loss of soul in tech-obsessed urban music. Apl.de.ap raps in Tagalog over thumping hip-hop beats. And BEP pairs up with Sting for "Union," a ballad about—what else?—togetherness. But this is a group that never shoves its politics down your throat, and they still remember how to get stupid.

A sample line from Fergie on "Humps": "Don't touch my humps, my humps, my lovely lady lumps." If there's a message there, we'll worry about it in the morning.

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Weird, but good: The gang gets down at the Grammys