

Ugly Duckling

the new album "Fresh Mode" is due out on April 20, 1999

Hip-hop didn't used to be all hard-knocks and stab-wounds. When groups like the Pharcyde, Gang Starr, and the Native Tongues (De La Soul, A Tribe Called Quest, Jungle Brothers) ruled the landscape, hip-hop was a celebration. R&B hooks weren't needed for legitimacy. Creativity and left-of-center thinking served as valuable currency. But that feeling once thought to be lost in a modern-day sea of jiggyness and gangsta braggadocio is slowly being resurrected, and Ugly Duckling- rappers Dizzy, Andycat, and Young Einstein-are adding their brand of fluid, irreverent rhymes and melodic beats to the resurgence.

"Hip-hop today is like the WWF," asserts Dizzy. "Everybody's got their masks on portraying a certain image instead of being themselves." The tide is indeed turning and through well-crafted rhymes and soul-blessed grooves, Ugly Duckling is joining the ranks of Black Star, Jurassic 5, and Black Eyed Peas as children of a more inventive spirit. Adds Andy, of that time: "Hip hop was evolving more flavorful ways of looking at things instead of 'I'm big and bad and I have big nuts.' Groups were experimenting more with production style and with lyrics, being a little more open-minded and still being in touch with the root of hip-hop."

It's that gumption that guides this trio from Long Beach. Dizzy, Andycat, and Einstein converged forces five years ago while each were cutting their teeth with different aspiring hip-hop crews. "We were all the outcasts from each of those clicks," laughs Dizzy. Eventually they were drawn together by a mutual affection of all things fresh. "A friend of mine took me to Dustin's house where a lot of people used to just hang out and rap," recalls Andycat "We just all had a vibe going together and we liked the stuff Einstein was doing, so it felt right."

The group's first musical manifestation was the DIY pressing of the inimitably crafty single "Fresh Mode" which sold over 3,000 copies. "Fresh Mode" eventually found itself in the hands of radio and mix-show DJs nationwide, winning fans like hip-hop personality Bobbito the Barber and impressing DJs in Europe. "It got pretty good circulation for our nickel and dime effort," says Andy, understating the case. Their signing to 1500 Records was catalyzed when executives at the label caught an online debate on the merits of Ugly Duckling in a hip-hop chat room. "An Only-In-The-90s type of thing," Dizzy marvels.

The group's intoxicating first song, "Fresh Mode," also christens the group's self-titled debut EP. "Fresh Mode" really captures the essence of the group," says Einstein, the musical resolve behind Ugly Duckling. "It's to have a good time and not be so serious all the time." The rest of the EP follows suit. Songs like the piano-laced "Now Who's Laughing" and "Everything's Alright" weave old-school rhymes with a fresh new school perspective. "Get On This" was a personal song where the group wanted to show that everything in music isn't peaches and cream. "We were all having our own problems," says Dizzy, "and we wanted to make a song that said making music wasn't all fun and games. It was hard work, too."

Another notable track is "Taking Off," where the two MCs pay homage to their DJ. Einstein's beats constitute the backbone of Ugly Duckling, hard-hitting and harmonious grooves that serve as an appropriate foundation for Andycat and Dizzy's free-spirited verbal escapades. "He's the king," exclaims Andycat of his DJ. "I've never met someone who loved music more than him, someone who has a deep background in collecting records and digging for beats." Offers Einstein on his own musical philosophy, "With the hip-hop today, people haven't heard good 'music'. I try to keep the sound of old records alive, old jazz and soul sounds. Something just more musical."

Ugly Duckling's purpose, says Dizzy, is to simply take hip-hop music back to its essence. "I guess the energy comes from us just being ostracized our whole life. The fact that we were never really accepted for doing what you love to do and being told that you just couldn't do it. That's why we came together as Ugly Duckling. We realized, ok, we're not going to fit in, so let's just be ourselves." Indeed.

- January 1999

Source: www.1500records.com (defunct)