

SAy IT LOuD

BAD BRAINS

Bad Brains are the archetype for the Afro-punk movement. Formed in Washington DC circa 1977, the band created their own distinctive sound that was a flavourful fusion of punk rock and reggae. Often mentioned in the same breath as the Ramones and the Sex Pistols, Bad Brains eventually migrated to New York where they built their iconic legacy in historic venues such as CBGB and the Knitting Factory. Although the group has existed in many incarnations over the years, due to break-ups and member changes, Bad Brains continue to inspire young black musicians that want to challenge the status quo.

□ www.badbrains.com

WHO SAYS BLACK MUSICIANS ONLY MAKE URBAN MUSIC? AFRO-PUNK IS TEARING UP THE RULE BOOK AS INTREPID ARTISTS PLUG IN AND YELL 'I'M BLACK AND I'M LOUD!'

WORDS LARRY OSSEI-MENSAH

Afro-punk is mobilising a generation, yet it has so many facets it's hard to define: a muscular mix of punk rock, hip hop, and the odd dash of ska and dub. Oh, and a whole lot of decibel-bruising attitude. "Afro-punk defies definition as that would go against the ethos of what makes the culture unique," says music-industry veteran Matthew Morgan, creator of afropunk.com. Words like freedom, do-it-yourself and self-expression are buzz words of the culture.

The Afro-punk lifestyle gushes from the shanties of Joburg to the tenements of Brooklyn. Young people of colour, marginalised for being too black for rock but not black enough for their peers, have gravitated to Afro-punk as a source of empowerment, inspiration and community. It's a viable platform of expression for black individuals all over the world living outside the box and defying the stereotypes.

"Afro-punk draws from the full spectrum of black music and music in general," explains black rock evangelist and music marketer Rob Fields. "It's a direct challenge to the simple notion that black music equals hip hop and/or R&B." Whether you're a fan, musician, promoter or have never even heard of Afro-punk, this bold movement strikes a chord of familiarity with black youth around the globe.

Punk emerged in New York then London during the 1970s – a brash cultural movement that challenged the establishment and gave a voice to those who felt alienated and disenfranchised by the status quo. Punk spawned many iconic bands, from the New York Dolls to the Sex Pistols, but was classified as an exclusively 'white experience'. Scratch the surface though, and a new colour is revealed: punk inspired Bob Marley's Punky Reggae Party single in 1977, The Clash were propelled on rolling dub rhythms, and DJ Don Letts fused nascent punk with dub and reggae at London scene hubs Acme Attractions and The Roxy. Pioneering US band Bad Brains plugged in and turned up for the first time in 1977. Their fusion of hard rock and reggae opened the door for others such as ska-punks Fishbone and funk-metallers Living Colour, who headlined this year's Afro-Punk Festival in Brooklyn.

Director James Spooner coined the term Afro-punk while working on a documentary

highlighting black youth in the punk/hardcore scene. The release of the film, *Afro-Punk*, in 2003 brought the movement into the spotlight, giving attention to a community often ostracised and maligned for being different. Artist Sandflower Dyson explains: "Afro-Punk helped break down barriers for people of colour who are into alternative music and culture."

The cosmic shift generated by the film inspired young people to create a platform of social networks and special events. Spooner teamed up with Morgan to give exposure to Afro-punk bands. It was musical manna for fans starved of black alternative music. "I like to showcase bands that push the boundaries and are really good within their genre," explains Morgan. These showcases evolved into the annual Afro-Punk Festival, with international music, art, films, and BMX and skate demos. "Seeing a reflection of yourself not being marginalised is empowering," says Spooner.

The creation of afropunk.com, the social network and portal for all things Afro-punk, has assisted in the rapid growth of the movement. And as the Afro-Punk Festival celebrates its fifth year, the ambitious Morgan wants to take it around the United States, and has set his sights on international expansion, with plans for festivals in Brazil in 2010, and South Africa in time for the FIFA World Cup.

PHOTO JOHN NIKOLAI



PURE HELL

Formed in 1974, Pure Hell migrated from their native Philadelphia to try their luck on the New York punk scene. The move proved fortuitous and they enjoyed a taste of rock stardom while playing briefly with punk legend Sid Vicious. After a series of hiccups, the group disbanded in 1980, only to reunite years later. In 2006, Welfare Records released never-before-heard music by Pure Hell that resurrected interest in the band. Lead singer Kenny 'Stinker' Gordon credits the Afro-punk movement as having "brought new-found recognition to the band". Pure Hell performed at the fifth annual Afro-Punk Festival in New York this summer.

□ www.myspace.com/purehellband



BAZAAR ROYALE

Bazaar Royale's life was transformed when he witnessed Run-DMC perform with Aerosmith. He saw the unlimited potential for black artists to create music other than just hip hop and R&B. Royale's art goes beyond challenging the establishment – it pushes the boundaries of music altogether. Having ridden the major-label carousel with Sony Music and Def Jam, in the spirit of Afro-punk's do-it-yourself ethos Royale eventually created his own niche, which he dubbed "Ghetto Metal", an amalgam of soul, rock and hip hop. "People relate to the heartfelt struggle of being creative and not the norm," says Royale.

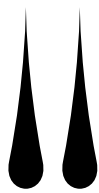
□ www.ghettometal.biz



BLK JKS

An Afro-punk novice would think these Joburg natives actually lived in New York with the amount of shows they've performed there. The Blk Jks (featured in *ARISE* Issue 1) are a fixture on the scene, led by singer/guitarist Lindani 'Linda' Buthelezi, drawing many comparisons to TV On The Radio, also led by an African frontman. The Blks Jks came to international attention with the release of *Mystery EP* (re-released in March 2009). Their music is a hodgepodge of rock, reggae, punk and traditional African rhythms. Words can't really describe it – you have to personally experience the Blk Jks to truly comprehend it.

□ www.myspace.com/blkjks



Young people of colour have gravitated to Afro-punk as a source of empowerment, inspiration and community



SWEETIE

SwEEtie is your favourite band's favourite band. This Brooklyn-based quartet, led by frontwomen Kitt-Katt and Twixx, put their own sugary spin on alternative music. Considered one of the hardest working bands on the New York scene, SwEEtie explore a range of topics, from sex to love, in an effort to satiate their adoring fans. They have cultivated a sound that has made them one of the most recognisable young bands in New York. SwEEtie continued their musical journey this summer playing at the Afro-Punk Festival at the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

□ www.myspace.com/sweetietheband



ELEVATOR FIGHT

Led by multi-talented frontwoman Zoe Kravitz (yes, Lenny's daughter), Elevator Fight have sparked the most curiosity on the Afro-punk scene in recent times. The band have shuttled between New York and Philadelphia over the past three months, performing shows at a frenzied pace. Following in the footsteps of her rocker father, Kravitz represents the next generation; breaking down barriers and creating a new paradigm for black music. Elevator Fight performed at the Afro-Punk Festival this summer and are working on their first album.

□ www.myspace.com/elevatorfight



GAME REBELLION

Afro-punk wouldn't be the same without Game Rebellion. They are the heartbeat of Afro-punk, with music that combines the brashness of punk, the swagger of hip hop and the rudeboy antics of ska. Hailing from Brooklyn, the energetic sextet have utilised the Afro-punk scene to seduce fans with their raw brand of music. "Thanks to James Spooner and Matthew Morgan we have been able to become an essential part of the movement", says Emi of Game Rebellion. This summer the band played the Afro-Punk Festival in their hometown.

□ www.myspace.com/gamerebellion



TAMAR-KALI

One of the stars of James Spooner's Afro-Punk film, Tamar-kali epitomises the culture. Since 2003, this Brooklyn native has witnessed Afro-punk mushroom from a relatively unknown sub-culture into a fully fledged lifestyle. "Afro-punk reaffirms my African ideals of hard work and DIY," says Kali. "The [Afro-Punk] festival provides a platform to celebrate the eclectic nature of black folks." As one of the 'faces' of the Afro-punk community, Tamar-kali was at this summer's Afro-Punk Festival and is set to release her first full-length album, entitled Black Bottom, this September.

□ www.flamingoni.com



THE SMYRK

The Smyrk embody the DIY ethos ingrained in the fabric of the global Afro-punk culture. The New Haven-based band are slowly becoming a staple in New York. Led by frontman Doron Flake, The Smyrk are on the tip of everyone's tongue and one of the hottest bands on the scene. "Afro-punk gave us a built-in audience that didn't look at us funny between every song," says Flake. "A lot of the same faces show up to everything we do in the city. That's something to be grateful for." Look out for their first album, which the band hope to release later in 2009.

□ www.myspace.com/thesmyrk



TV ON THE RADIO

One of the most notable bands to emerge from the Afro-punk scene in recent years is TV On The Radio. Frontman Nigerian-American Tunde Adebimpe has led the band through a musical evolution. Their music embodies the free form of creation that has made Afro-punk attractive to young musicians and participants in the culture. The group has also shown that artists can achieve commercial success and not sell out to the mainstream. Their 2008 album Dear Silence is a clear indication that this is just the beginning as they continue to push musical boundaries. ●

□ www.tvontheradio.com