

# BROADCAST NEWS

**DJ Jazzy Jeff discusses throwing himself full-force into building a new studio and recording his homegrown album, *The Return of the Magnificent*, with an assembly of friends** By Dominic Umile | Photos courtesy BBE/Rapster

**DJ** Jazzy Jeff's ascent to veteran status is by now a well-known tale—one that had traveled in hip-hop circles long before Jeff's alliance with the Fresh Prince landed him a supporting role on a popular television series. His late-'80s albums with the Fresh Prince gained public attention and even that of the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences, as the native Philadelphian duo was awarded a Grammy in 1988 for best rap performance. But there is considerably more to the story.

The role that DJ Jazzy Jeff played in these early performances and recordings helped establish the DJ as more than the individual who stood behind the MC—Jeff embodied the role of the turntablist, mastering the decks and turning attention toward another integral participant in the hip-hop genre.

## DOWN-HOME RECORDING

While much has rightfully been made of Jazzy Jeff's adept displays of beat juggling and quick cuts, his work as a producer has spanned several genres, and on *The Return of the Magnificent* (BBE/Rapster, 2007), he built palatable, buttery-soulful backdrops for a number of noteworthy guests, including Jean Grae, Method Man, Rhymefest, Big Daddy Kane, Pos of De La Soul and more. For the record to come together properly, the atmosphere had to be as welcoming and warm as the tracks themselves. So after Jeff closed his Philadelphia-based A Touch of Jazz Studios, he moved and built a studio in his new home, ensuring that his guests could record in a fireside-cozy environment, slippers-and-bathrobe style.

"I wanted to make everything about being comfortable," explains Jeff. "From me cooking everybody some grub to everybody sitting down and playing Xbox, it wasn't just getting people in here and getting to work. A lot of it was just vibin' and just everybody building. Records come out of that."

Although Jeff employs an often humorous examination of mainstream radio's impotent scope on *The Return of the Magnificent*, a concept that

coincides with the faux-introspective sketches about people asking him where Will Smith is, the previously gadget-happy producer/musician chilled thoroughly during production. His style is mix-as-you-go, as Jeff doesn't much favor long sessions at the end. He'll carefully EQ while recording so that his mixing sessions ultimately clock in at a satisfying 10 minutes at a clip. Reluctantly but steadily morphing from a tech-oriented gearhead to laidback sage while recording *The Return*, Jeff cooled off a bit, although not before he jacked up his studio with substantial drum muscle.

"God, I have almost every drum machine you can imagine," he says. "I wanted them all hooked up. It was like, 'I'm going to build my dream studio. I want my SP-1200, I want my Studio 440, I want my MPC2000, 3000, my 4000, my [Proteus] 2500, my Roland MV-8000...I want *all* of my drum machines up with all of the drums.' I realized, 'Why am I doing this?' I got a museum, but it wasn't as efficient as I wanted. I got to a point where I was looking at guys like DJ Premier and Jay Dee. I realized that a lot of those guys get the work like they do because they're not paying attention to their equipment. I had to get the 'gadget guy' outta me in the beginning of the record, so I could just focus on *making* the record."

Jeff's production methods changed for *The Return*, but he still used his standbys. The organic-sounding percussive base of "Jeff n Fess," for example, features Chicago's Rhymefest over Jeff's MV-8000, with a little compression and no live drums in sight. More often than on his earlier works, during the sessions for *The Return*, Jeff turned to Apple Logic Pro, Native Instruments Battery 3 and Logic ESX sampler. In Battery 3, Jeff would chop up drum samples and use SSL compression to give them a hard edge. This was the methodology for "Go See the Doctor 2k7," a multifaceted, funky Kool Moe Dee cover that's heated up with '70s adult film-styled wah pedal effects while Twone Gabz (another Chicago MC) fittingly peddles smutty verses about enduring the physical and metaphorical burn of shunning condom use. An important message for sure, but Jeff's hard panning might be just as critical.



"I like to place things at least so that they can fit," he says. "If I have two percussion instruments, like a hi-hat and a tambourine, I'm going to pan one a little bit to the left and one a little bit to the right. If I have a crash and a handclap, the crash and the handclap go in different positions so that I'm looking at everything like a half-moon, and everything has to fit into that scope. The only things that I don't really pan are kicks and snares and definitive samples that may have some bottom in them that will throw the stereo spectrum off. More than that, though, I just like placing stuff so that it sounds full."

## ALL PAIRED UP

Twone Gabz's vocals are doubled noticeably during the verses and the choruses on "Go See the Doctor 2K7." And for extra bravado impact on the powerful "Supa Jean," Jean Grae's vocal is rarely without a pair up or two, whether she's just repeating her verse in both channels or chattering beneath them. It's pleasantly disruptive, particularly over the hard, well-tread drum break and piano stabs. Jeff offers little direction when the MCs are cutting their vocal tracks, saying just enough so that the finished product comes off according to his mental blueprint of the record.

"I have two mic setups in my room," Jeff says. "I have a big Sony mic, the supergiant, expensive Sony mic. That mic is like \$9,000. It's funny because I have that rig next to the \$700 Groove Tubes mic. I have them both running through Avalons, and I tell people, 'Go ahead and do what you're going to do on each mic, and tell me which one you like,' and I let them pick the mic that they feel comfortable with. It's crazy because 80 percent of the people pick the cheaper mic."

"Most of the time, I will double at least twice to get four vocal tracks to make it a little bit full. I like messing with the stereo spectrum. I'll do two, four or six, especially on vocal tracks. I might do eight with different octaves and things like that for thickness. Once I record all the vocals, I clean things up so that anything I'm not intensely using or that I don't need isn't in there. I have some old Motown tapes, and I was amazed at how, if you just threw the faders up to zero, it sounded like the record was mixed. It was almost like they fixed everything in the recording before they mixed it. I try to clean up my vocals and clean up my drums because I want it to a point where it's 85 to 95 percent there before you start mixing. I fix a lot of it while I'm recording."

Throughout what is possibly *The Return's* strongest entry—the silky, summery "All I Know"—one can't help but ruminate on the charged result of what people basically know CL Smooth for: his team-up with another soul and jazz sampling fanatic, Pete Rock. Granted, any project that would materialize as a result of the partnerships forged on the album would most likely be an immediate success, but he and CL Smooth gel as if the psychological health of the human race depended upon it.

Delivering his traditionally personal/boast-laden verses, with a jangling tambourine track and mildly pulsing software synths, CL Smooth confidently stakes his continued claim in the rap game over warm, gloopy

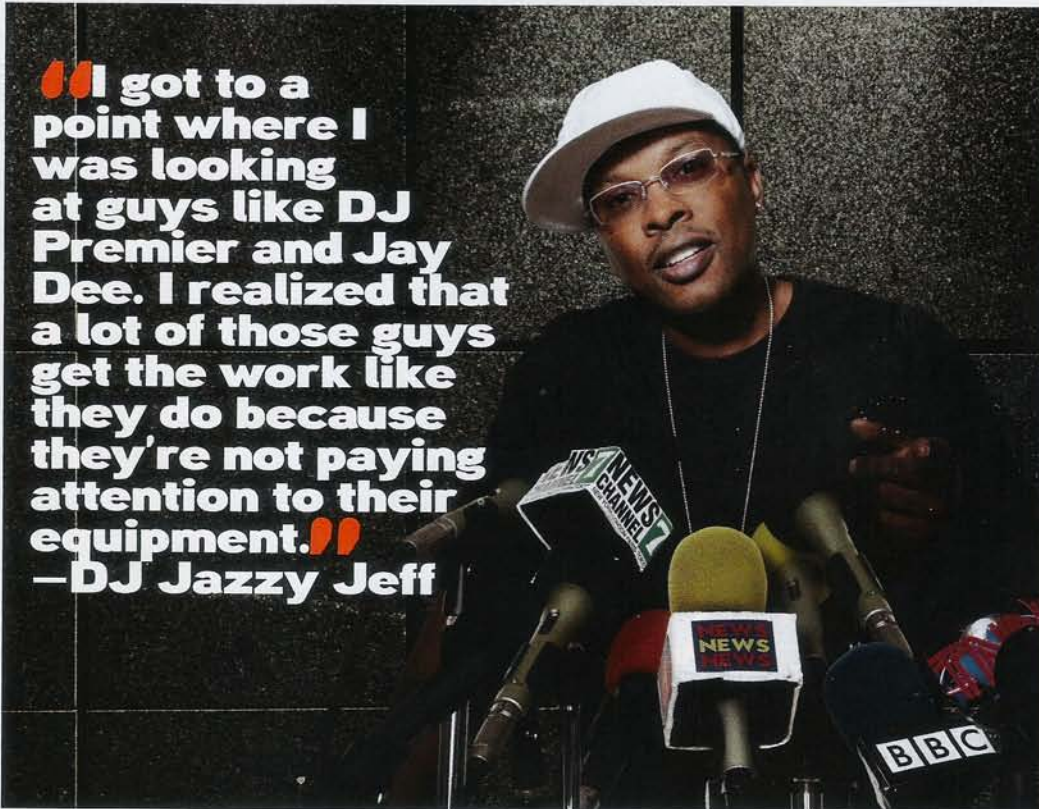
key gurgles, tight kicks and high-end jazz piano plinks that sound as if they're reverberating off empty tavern pint glasses—nobody wants an empty pint glass, but in this context, it sounds lovely.

"A lot of times, I'll take something and run it through a highpass filter," Jeff says. "If it's a piano loop, and it has any kind of bottom in it, I'll run it through the highpass filter and map it twice. One of them has a highpass filter so that I make sure it's really crispy, and on the other one, I'll put a lowpass filter on it to just grab whatever bottom out, but I'll roll off the bottom to the point that I'm not getting any kind of subharmonic rumble or anything, and I'll just push them both up to get a really good mix. It's almost like I have a top and a bottom, even though it's just one sample."

before Kel Spencer drops in on "The Definition" with a little echo, courtesy of his beloved mixer.

"I have a bank of two effects," says Jeff. "I don't use all three banks. I have two banks, which is pretty much six effects that I use, and I know the settings. When I do a whole delay, I'll take the bottom off; if you delay, you don't really want to delay a kick drum because that sounds nasty going through the system, so I take the bottom off and leave the mids and highs. You get your flanger and your chorus, and you know how you have them set. A lot of times, I'll travel with my mixer, and if they have a mixer there, I can set it in about two minutes, and once I do that, I'm set."

Jazzy Jeff's *The Return of the Magnificent* plays like another great summer record, with smooth afternoon



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—DJ Jazzy Jeff

## MAGNIFICENT DJ

*The Return* isn't without Jeff's staggeringly masterful cuts. Although he didn't offer any of the transformer scratches he's been credited with developing, the producer is practically married to the Pioneer DJM-909 mixer and inserts air-light scratches where needed on *The Return's* batch of tracks. The DJM-909 was sandwiched between his decks ("Technics 1200s 'til the end...I feel comfortable with them," he says) during a recent European tour, and he says he probably couldn't do without the device's effects banks. While he gripes about the crossfader, wishing that it was branded with Rane's good name, he has no problem manipulating what appear to be rather complex enhancements. Jeff's scratch-fests on *The Return* are nothing short of what he has delivered for 20 years; he bookends "Supa Jean" with some quick deck-work, and slips in restrained cuts on the way out of "All I Know." And he dresses the cuts

soul vibes complemented by party-rockin' backward-peering hip-hop tracks. To his surprise, the involvement of a home studio plays noticeably into this recording. Throughout the less hectic moments of building a new studio and album, Jeff was able to communicate the comfortable relationship he maintains with production in all of the album's musical backdrops, exercising the kind of restraint that can only come from years of practice.

"I look at the start of my album as me walking into this basement with nothing but four walls of concrete and just building the studio from scratch, getting it how I want it all the way down the colors and the decor," Jeff says. "I don't think I really paid attention to what I was doing until after I was done. Then I was like, 'Did you actually move, build a studio and finish a record, all in one?' I'm glad I didn't really think about it while I was doing it, because I probably would've scared myself. I got really lucky that everything fell into place." 