

By Jack Firneo  
Photos Courtesy of  
Stephanie Strasburg

## Hip-Hop with a Conscience And You Can Dance to It



Before hip-hop artist Eric Venuto was known as Bamboo, he went by the name Riddlin. A clever spin on the widely prescribed drug Ritalin, used to control symptoms of ADHD, the moniker was Venuto's way of expressing his distaste for people's reliance on chemical-based "helpers" rather than natural remedies.

Ironically, the name came to him while working at a pharmacy.

"I was 17 and needed a job," explains the 28-year-old musician. "I applied for a few, and I got that one. Soon I was thinking, 'This is not cool,' and I started writing rhymes about it on the prescription bags." Bamboo admits his actions could have been the "delusions of teenager trying to save the world." But then again, he notes: "The world sure as hell needs saving."

These conflicts in modern society inform the activist lyrics brimming just underneath the immaculately produced, immediately danceable hip-hop beats and self-produced samples in Bamboo's music. "Men and women are raised in enslavement to a pavement. Do you wanna live in a maze or live in amazement?" he sings on one track. But his ideas reach deeper. "There's an idea that seems to be omnipotent in our culture – the delusion of wealth and richness that has to do with owning a Mercedes and thinking about how many garages you have on your house," Bamboo says. "It's about spoiled 13-year-old kids with cell phones and sassy attitudes. I'm trying to make beautiful music to elevate people out of the world of... just crap."

– Bamboo

*"I'm trying to make beautiful music to elevate people out of the world of... just crap."*





His 2007 release “Metropolis” reflected the troubles Bamboo observed with people trying to eschew these trappings, but his upcoming full-length album deals with the real-world conflicts that come with them. “The first album was about trying to escape the city,” Bamboo says. “Now I’m trying to come to peace with modern life combined with an appreciation for the natural world.”

Bamboo’s new album, still untitled but slated for a November release, reaches back to the uneasy 17-year-old pharmacy clerk and the kid who relished moving out of Northeast Philadelphia when his family relocated to Buckingham, where he first started rapping in high school. “I was a Jewish-Italian kid in Philly. No one wanted to hear me rap there,” he laughs.

After forming a group with another emcee and his older brother serving as the DJ, Bamboo would travel regularly to area record stores in search of vinyl to sample for his burgeoning collection of tracks. He quickly became immersed in rap circles where he would free-style with his peers and performed for the first time when his brother outfitted him in an oversized leather jacket and snuck him into a bar.

Inspired by the work of Jack Kerouac, Bamboo eventually relocated to Berkeley, Calif. to record “Metropolis.” Reflecting on his time there, he says, “I needed a more euphoric place, a place where I could look down on everywhere I’ve been and find ways to excite my peers.”

The move sparked a trend of finding differing locales to inform his music. “You’re shook up, click the TV off, pick a book up. Your big screen’s waiting outside baby, look up,” Bamboo sings on another track, as perhaps a testament to the inspiration he draws from the world around him. This month, he’s traveling to New Orleans to complete his third album, which he says will also incorporate and reflect his appreciation for music from the ‘50s and ‘60s.

But even beyond beats, rhymes and life, Bamboo’s vision is refreshingly simple. “I’m not impressed with a lot of hip-hop and dance music today,” he offers. “It’s mostly egomaniacal – more about the singer’s fashion than the music. I’ve been trying to find out why it used to be okay before disco to just make songs that made you dance and want to smile.” 54

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