

JH: Fort Knox is the label, the studio, the company and a corporation.

SR: Fort Knox the studio started as our tongue-in-cheek way of having a fancy name for working in our house, which has basically moved with us as we have. I can't tell you exactly where it is because it's our secret.

Rob Myers: It's a stone's throw from the Beecher Street house, Dischord House, which is where the DIY/hardcore/ punk scene started.

In what ways do Fort Knox Five and the other projects overlap with one another?

SR: Fort Knox started now, in particular, as an extension of the last several years that Sid and I and the other guys have participated with the Thunderball project. It was a natural evolution of that. As we've been experimenting, pushing the envelope of the definition of Thunderball and [the Eighteenth Street Lounge Music label], we've been doing a lot of experimentation stuff that we like, that we like to play. It's the natural evolution of writing music, not having to write in a specific voice. We can write songs now where if it has more of a Thunderball sensibility then it goes into the Thunderball project. If it's more electro, breakbeat, it goes under the JonH and Raskal project.

RM: From a songwriting and music standpoint, there's no preconception for any track.

We can do whatever we want; they just filter into different categories.

SR: We've been stockpiling these songs that never really had an outlet. We never wanted to get signed to another label; if we were going to do anything, we were going to do it ourselves.

Do you have specific roles when you work together as Fort Knox Five?

SR: In order to run the label and be able to do all these projects, each of us has different roles. Jon is basically acting as the label manager.

JH: He's the bitch! (Laughter.)

SR: Jon's the muscle. What we do reflects our personalities. There isn't a power struggle; everyone is in it to carry it further, get the music out there. Whatever it takes. Promot-

ers can't afford to fly all five of us out there, and all five of us don't DJ out together anyway. Jon and I might be out there together, but we'll be representing everybody.

Have you played out in D.C. yet?

SR: We did a record release at Lemur Lounge [in May 2003]. It was great! It was for our first single, in June. Honestly, we play more outside of D.C.; we play more in Europe.

Why do you think that is?

JH: That's where people pay money for DJs.

SR: It appears, in Europe anyway, the people who are putting on the shows and going to the shows range in age from all over the spectrum. It's not just a youth movement. People go out from 18 to 50 because they sincerely love the music. The boundary of what is acceptable [is different]. Maybe it's just being over there and we feel freer, but it seems we can really be true to our idea of music.

People in Europe are more open to the differences you are trying to incorporate?

SR: It seems like people are actually listening to the music, instead of listening to what they are told to listen to.

JH: The crowds in Europe, from what we have

experienced, are very reminiscent of the old days in the U.S. when the rave scene was first blossoming and there were a lot of breakbeats going on, a lot of funky breakbeats. In Europe you can drop a big, big record and people will cheer. They really know and study the music – they have that passion. It's disappointing [that it's gone in America] and I really hope that it comes back.

SR: I think it's a reflection that electronic music is considered as a youth movement in the States. There's [a feeling that] it's a phase that people can't be a part of any more. There's more of a stigma; as an adult, you're not really supposed to enjoy music in the same way you did as a youth.

What kinds of venues have given you positive responses?

SR: I personally like playing small-size venues. Those seem to go with the kind of music we are playing. It sounds cheesy, but it's the house party vibe. It's not that the music is not serious; it's that you're there to dance. We're there to play music, and we want to have fun. We want to have this conversation with people. We're playing music that we want to dance to or have fun to, not the chin-scratching kind.

What makes a great song?

JH: Chunky funky beats. (Everyone laughs.)

SR: It's gotta be funky-ass shit.

That seems to be your guiding mantra.

SR: Yeah, it's sort of a generic kind of thing but it's true.

JH: It could have the funky horns, the funky guitar; it just needs funky beats. It's got to put a smile on your face and make your head bob.

What does the future hold for Fort Knox Five?

SR: The future we've been talking about is what we did with Thunderball: Fort

Knox Five as a live thing, a live funk band. Strip it down.

JH: This is what we can finally drop: we linked up with the pimp godfather of hip-hop, Afrika Bambaataa. I ran into him at the record store and had to scrape up some records real quick. He gave us a call 15 minutes later after listening to a CD in the car. He was driving to a gig and called us up and said, "I want you guys to do some work on my next album." Last weekend we were in the studio with him. He flew out one of his MCs who's the secret Zulu Nation battle weapon. King Kamonzi is from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, believe it or not. This guy is amazing, unbelievable. He's ragga, he's hip-hop; it's all conscious. This guy doesn't rap about gangsta stuff, drugs, beating people up; it's all about social consciousness, politics, love and everything for the kids. He's a P.E. teacher. It's quite moving to meet somebody like him.

We put on a six-minute song and from the beginning to the end he would freestyle the whole way through, without dropping, without losing the beat. After he did that, he would do the same song ragga style. It was unbelievable. Hopefully the future sees us doing a lot of work with this guy. We're really excited about it, and I think he's really excited about it as well. Hopefully it will be some music that has the opportunity to get to a whole new area, a whole new crowd. The people who are going to use these records are going to expose to a whole new audience what we are

all about as Fort Knox Five. We'll see how it works out; I think it will be very good.

SR: For us, we've got each other, but it's always nice to meet people who share the same mindset. It's not even a specific goal in words, but it's an approach to music, the way you see the power of music or how you can play with music, the art and fun of music. He's one of the few people we've met in the last few years that gels with the way that we work, who has the same approach to music.

Sid Barcelona: One of the great things about working with Bambaataa is just talking to him about music. Like us, he's a huge music fan, not just about hip-hop, not just about electro. He loves Led Zeppelin, he loves Three Dog Night, and classic '50s. It's amazing. Seeing someone like that at his level, it's kind of reaffirming and reassuring, because we love music in the same way.

What does the Fort Knox Recordings label offer?

SR: Good, funky tunes. You will always be able to count on Fort Knox. One song on every single will be a dance floor gem. At least one of the songs will be designed for the floor. At least one of the songs will be designed for the smokers out there, for the heads.

JH: This whole cross beat thing that we mentioned earlier will be found on pretty much every Fort Knox record. We might have a downtempo song or a mid-tempo song, or even a drum 'n' bass song, or a hip-hop song. The whole point is that we want to start getting people out of this [idea] that you have to follow a guideline as a DJ. For years and years I was guilty of it; I was strictly a breaks DJ or strictly a house DJ and I would never veer off the guideline and I would probably move within five BPM of whatever area I started in. Now, I might start at 95 BPM, go up a BPM every couple records, until we get to 165, 170 BPM.

SR: All the way to drum 'n' bass.

JH: And then drop classic funk and soul. It's all innovative mixing. It basically is more of a feeling – not concentrating or paying attention to what you are doing. By [concentrating too hard], you forget about the dance floor.

What inspired you to break away from genre-oriented expectations and go to a wider variety of styles?

JH: One of the reasons we started getting into styles of music like this is from DJing overseas. If you play straight music at one tempo for half an hour, it's very easy to lose people. The dancers there want to go all over the place, and every once in a while you have to break it down.

SR: We bring stupid amounts of records with us when we travel. We could very easily bring a bag of records and probably play the amount that we are supposed to, plan it out, but over the last year we've tried to do it differently. When we were just in Germany, the promoter came up to us and said they'd never heard anyone cover the genres we covered, still beat matching it in. Mixing is still important, there is still an art involved, but there's a certain freedom: "Hip-hop's not working now, let's go drum 'n' bass, let's see what happens." Some places want to start off more house-y and if we drop hip-hop later, people go crazy. Some places you have to start slow and build it up and do downtempo.

JH: The big thing about playing overseas right now is that you have to be able to cover several different areas. We will play certain things

that will not work. We have gone to Austria, played funky, Jurassic 5, Blackalicious hip-hop, and people are like, "we don't want hip-hop here," so we'll go into some other funky stuff. You have to be able to cover that ground. In Germany we played for very close to eight hours, two for two, 10 o'clock at night 'til 5:30 in the morning, to a completely packed club going off, covering any tempo from 95 BPM to 170 BPM, back down, all over the place, just freakin' people out and it worked really well.

What can we expect from Fort Knox Five in 2004?

JH: Some dope, phat electro-funk tracks with godfather Afrika Bambaataa. We just completed a remix for Rodney Hunter of the Afrodelics, just an old school funk, hip-hop thing. That album is coming out on Kruder and Dorfmeister's label. We're still waiting for approval on the remix. We've got a lot of remixes for various European labels.

SR: We're puttin' the Chocolate City back on the map, baby.

JH: We have two releases that are being mastered right now. The next one is called the "Blowin' Up the Spot" EP, which features a remix by Ancient Astronauts of Switchstance Recordings in Germany. It's a real funky hip-hop number. There's a dancefloor one that Fort Knox Five did.

SR: And then there's Latin-influenced breaks.

JH: The next breakbeat one will be "The Brazilian Hipster." By the [Winter Music] Conference, we're going to try and have an introduction to the full-length by Fort Knox Five.

For more on Fort Knox Five, check out www.fortknoxrecordings.com. The project will be doing DJ sets at Mantis in D.C. on Friday, February 20 (an event sponsored by Innerloop), and at Lemur Lounge in Alexandria, VA, on Friday, February 27.

