

STORIES COLLEGE AREA | COVER STORY | NORTH PARK

# I don't know what they told you, but this is called Hip-Hop

By Matthew Lickona | Published Wednesday, Aug. 18, 2010

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“This is HIP-HOP. I don’t know what they told you, but this is called HIP-HOP!”

DJ Artistic has me in a gentle headlock as he shouts this into my ear. He’s not being aggressive; he just needs to draw me in low and close if there’s any way I’m going to hear him over the music pumping out from the stage and filling the low confines of the North Park club U-31. We’re up behind the two sets of turntables and the three MacBook Pros and the mixers and the speakers that are blaring a modern-day cover of Bill Withers’ ’77 groove tune “Lovely Day.” (When I wake up in the morning, love/ And the sunlight hits my eyes...)

Tonight is “Generations” night at **U-31**; the music will range from updated old school to an early-’90s rap number like “They Want EFX” (So Peter Piper, I’m hyper than Pinocchio’s nose/ I’m the supercalafragilistic tic-tac pro...) to Jay-Z doing intro work for TI on ’04’s “Bring ’em Out” (Once again what other rap nigga hooder than this/ I got rich and I’m still on some hooligan shit). Nothing sounds as if it’s been on the radio lately, and it looks as though that’s the way everybody here likes it.

For now, the dreadlocked DJ Artistic is much more MC than DJ — he leaves the turntables to others and picks up the microphone to rally the crowd. “Ladies, make some noise! Fellas make some noise! Everybody say Ho! This party is in full effect!” He’s right about this much: the floor is full, row after row of hipster bodies outfitted with cocktails and artful bedhead and carefully haphazard outfits. One or two of them are even dancing. But mostly, movement is confined to milling and head-bobbing to the beat, the latter of which sets up a herky-jerk undulation along the surface of the crowd. The relative stasis is impressive, given the strength of the beat; I jot in my pad, “Are these people numb?” But then, it’s only 11:00; the night is young — and it’s not as if they’re ignoring the music. For the most part, folks face the stage, watching the DJs do their thing as the disco ball spins and sparkles overhead.

For the DJs, “their thing” is keeping the party going, mixing, and scratching — in that order. I’m here tonight to see DJ Felt1, late of the Sharpshooters crew, and as he puts it, “If you can scratch, but you don’t know how to mix, don’t call yourself a DJ. Know when to mix — know the bars, learn the verses, and once you’ve got that down, you can freak it your own way. Like maybe you scratch in the beat before it comes into the mix, just to give it that extra flavor.” Your job is to keep the flow, one song slipping into another before the people have time to get bored, before they start wondering what’s happening somewhere else. You never play a song all the way through. “Before,” says Felt1, “it was ‘Let’s DJ to make ’em dance.’ Now, it’s like, ‘Let’s DJ to keep them in the place.’ You can have a dead dance floor and a packed bar and still be making money. You might make more money working at a dive bar and pulling a bar percentage than a downtown club” for a flat fee. “You have to read the crowd.” (The fee thing is based largely on reputation — the more likely your name is to pull a crowd, the more you command. A newbie downtown

might get less than \$200, a genuine celebrity DJ, \$2000.)

Just now, Felt1 is reading his track list, spinning a knob on the right-hand mixer to scroll through the near-endless song list on his laptop screen. (The songs are arranged by beats per minute— a standard evening might start out at around 78 bpm and finish up around 120. Smooth mixing requires that you build slowly, gently drawing the crowd along.) Over on the left, DJ Neil Armstrong is working through a longish set — he's been away, and this is his welcome-back night. His cuts are frequent and dramatic, often with a heavy, even scratch busting in between songs. (A note on the scratching: once upon a time, DJs played records, grooved vinyl discs that delivered analog sound when you ran a needle along the groove. Now they spin vinyl discs that deliver a control signal to the mixer. You place the needle at the edge of the disc, and the rotation starts whatever mp3 you've got cued up on your Scratch Live software from the beginning. Scratching, once the natural result of pulling a disc back to cue it up, has become a digital sound effect. But a very good one. The delay between hand-motion and registered sound is split-second, almost unnoticeable.)

DJ Artistic breaks in to rap along over top of Notorious B.I.G.'s "Juicy": "Uh, and if you don't know, now you know, nigga...Let's go, San Diego! Make some noise! Now get the fuck up!" This is his lead-in for Pharoahe Monch's "Simon Says," which starts off Felt1's set and opens with, you guessed it, "Simon says, 'GET THE FUCK UP!'" From there we move into Snoop Dogg's "Ain't No Fun (If the Homies Can't Have None)," which includes a pretty rough stanza from Kurupt (And then I'm through with it/ There's nothing else to do with it). That makes for a smooth segue into Kurupt's "We Can Freak It"; smooth too is the fade from one song to the next. Felt1 saves his scratching for relatively low-volume quick work over top of the songs themselves. The bodies on the floor start to come unstuck and really move.

It's a very different scene when Felt1 plays the downtown club On Broadway. Under the high, ornamented beams of the ceiling, it's all untucked dress shirts on the men and short, stretchy dresses on the ladies. Somebody works a light show from up in a balcony, and a hostess in fish nets and a black bustier hauls big bottles of high-end vodka and stacks of glasses over to guests willing to pay for a table and bottle service. (This much is the same: it's freaking loud.) The DJ works alone in a booth well above the parquet dance floor, sipping a Grey Goose and cranberry brought to him by a promoter. "There are something like six promoters here," Felt1 explains. "Some promoters just Facebook all day to get people to come down to the club, or they walk around and pass out flyers. They have nothing to do with the music." That's what they hire DJs like Felt1 for.

But Felt1 has to play to the crowd, and what this crowd wants is what's on the radio. "From ten to ten-thirty, I'll do all radio," he tells me. "I've been doing all right, but I'll also throw in 'Billie Jean,' see what they do. Once, some girl came up to me and asked, 'When are you gonna play some good music?' I was playing 'Human Nature!'" (At the moment, he's blaring the Z-Trip remix of the Jackson Five's "I Want You Back.") Still, the playlist runs to the familiar: Kid Cudi making Lady Gaga sound dirty when she sings "Poker face" as "Poke-her-face," Mariah Carey, LL Cool J, 50 Cent, Eve. Oh, and Kinfolk Kia Shine's "So Krispy," which I seem to hear wherever I go. That and Trey Songz' "Say Aah."

The dance might as well be in a high school gym; the social dynamics seem pretty much the same. A single lady in booty shorts and a black tank top faces the DJ and

works it hard and slow — call her the Constant. Over at the edge, two dudes face each other and hop around for a minute or two, mugging. One of them manages to approach the Constant; they gyrate against each other briefly, and then he disappears. A single white female in a kinky dress moseys out and starts a tentative shuffle. The Constant finds her and they dance, but Constant scares her off with a flirty touch to the back. We finally get a proper couple, but they're both holding their drinks, and that slows them down. Five petite Asians with bare legs and heels of varying heights emerge from the restroom and begin to cross the floor. They stop, dance a little, take each others' pictures, and start working their cell phones. The bass hits like missiles, the lights flash like bombs. Eventually, I count a dozen women out on the floor — and no men. They sit at the tables, nursing their beers and taking in the show. For the DJ, it's enough.

DJ Felt1 is DJ Felt1 because he came to the music part of hip-hop through the art part of hip-hop: paint work. "Felt is like 'felt-tip marker.' I was doing full murals; it got to the point where people didn't even know my real name. I lived near Morse, but I knew if I went there, I probably wouldn't graduate. It was too close to home, and all of my friends were ditching. So I chose to go to University City. My brother started DJing in '86," when Felt1 was ten years old, "and I was the little brother who rolled with him. I started in '89, playing as a hobby. This was when hip-hop was fresh, so there were no lines on what you could and couldn't do. I even tried rapping, but it wasn't my thing. That's when I started with the art. My ninth-grade art teacher said I had a good eye for it."

University City offered classes in graphic design, and that led to a graphic-art school in Denver. "But when I came back, I couldn't find any work. I took whatever I could find, club flyers, stuff like that." Around this time, he hooked up with an old neighbor who had just gotten his turntables and was also looking to start a clothing line. "We'd practice our DJ skills while we were designing, and that's what got me back into DJ work. I'd make deals with club promoters — 'I can do your flyers for free; just pay me to DJ.'" Today, he still designs shirts for Armory Survival Gear and also works at the Armory store on F Street downtown. There used to be four locations, including one in Tokyo, and they used to sell a lot of vintage vinyl. But then, you know, digital. These days, it's mostly hats and T-shirts and DVDs of the company's freestyle DJ sessions, which started in the Chula Vista YMCA before going international and moving to L.A. Oh, and spray paint, custom-designed for graffiti artists. "The pressure in the can is lower, so the paint comes out slower," explains Felt1. "You get cleaner lines. I probably did my last work about three months ago."

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That old neighbor Felt1 hooked up with now goes by the name DJ Pacman, a handle bestowed by a friend after Pacman shaved his head for the first time. Like Felt1, Pacman began his forays into hip-hop through a spray can before turning to the turntable. "It's different skills," he says, "but the same as far as expression goes. When I was a kid, I used to see all those writings — people call it graffiti. All the techniques were really fascinating to me. The closer in your can, the thinner the line, almost like an airbrush technique." Enchanted, Pacman set out to become a hip-hop artist. "A lot of people have mistaken hip-hop, the actual subculture, for rap. But when I moved from National City to Paradise Hills in elementary school, I just saw it as what people did in the neighborhood. It influences how you walk, how you dress, how you talk. When people said, 'That's wack,' that's just what people said."

The music was just part of the scene. “I think hip-hop artists grab from the environment and translate it into how they see or feel” — techno, house, rap, etc. “I was just in love with the music, the beats — when you heard it, it made you feel a certain way.” Then Run-D.M.C. broke out on television in ’85, and Pacman realized he was part of a thing. And then, on “The Magnificent Jazzy Jeff,” the Fresh Prince asked DJ Jazzy Jeff to make the record sound like a bird, and Pacman realized he wanted to be a DJ. “It’s called a chirp scratch. When I first heard it, I thought, ‘Wow, how do you do that?’ I was working at an ice cream shop, and I saved up and bought two turntables for probably \$1000. A decent mixer was maybe \$100.”

Figuring out how Jazzy Jeff did his chirp scratch meant hours of practice away from the public eye, same as any other musical instrument. “Even though the turntable plays songs that are already made,” says Pacman, “the way you use it to manipulate the sound, to create a rhythmic pattern, changes the songs. You can change the pace that’s going for the crowd — the way you transition and put songs together. To me, that’s kind of like an instrument.”

Figuring out how he did that also meant respect. “Where we grew up, there weren’t so many Laotian-Americans. But as far as hip-hop was concerned, it didn’t really matter. It just mattered what your skill set was.” At first, he grants, the race thing might have made things a bit awkward, “but if you executed well, you were respected. D.M.C. from Run-D.M.C. would have these DJ battles, and the Filipino DJ QBert won it three times. They actually retired him from defending his title.”

Pacman is still with the Sharpshooters, and I catch up with him working a Saturday night at club 923 in the Gaslamp. The place is near empty when I show up; extreme sports play on the big-screen TVs with the sound turned off. Pacman stands at a tiny booth in the front corner, wearing an Armory shirt styled after a Padres jersey and pushing music toward the couples in the booths on the opposite wall. Then, *boom*, in come a dozen girls in short black dresses and high black heels, over comes the bottle service of Svedka and mixers, and on go the familiar party tunes. “I’m not complaining,” says Pacman. “When it’s a birthday party” — and this is a birthday party — “you’ve got to recognize.” He fires up the Trey Songz, and the girls whoop like crazy.

Go girl, it’s your birthday

Open wide, I know you’re thirsty

Say aah

Say aah

One girl spills her drink as she dances. An employee rushes over to towel it up, and the tipsy dancer freaks over top of him while he works. A girl who was stuck in the line to get into On Broadway shows up and starts drinking champagne straight from the bottle. More people show up, but the dominant force in the room is still that dozen pairs of bare legs twisting around each other on the dance floor.

Our DJ for tonight keeps it decently current — 50 Cent’s “I Get Money,” Busta Rhymes’s “Arab Money,” the Mary Jane Girls’ “All Night Long,” as well as the aforementioned “So Krispy.” That keeps it fun for the birthday crowd; he keeps it interesting for himself by playing with his fades between songs. Sometimes it’s seamless enough to be a little shocking — “We’re in a different song now?” — sometimes one beat drops into another; sometimes he’ll scratch in the beat. “It

depends on my mood, how much flair I put in," he says after working some low-volume scratches over the end of "Say Aah."

Pacman is 32, a year younger than Felt. But they both learned their craft long before the advent of mp3s and Scratch Live software, which came into use around 2005. These days, a DJ could conceivably work without a set of headphones to help him match the beat before making it live. He could, if he was lazy enough, content himself with simply matching the beat patterns streaming across his laptop screen. (Actually, if he was lazy enough, he could make his mix at home and hit "play" in the club, but that's the kind of thing that will get you booted if you get caught.) Thanks to the computer, you can just pick a couple of tunes with similar beats per minute, line up your runs of bass and snare, and let 'em rip.

For someone who trained on vinyl, it can rankle. "I mean, it's sort of like you're playing Guitar Hero on Playstation," laments Pacman. "You're not a guitarist just because you can play Guitar Hero; you're kidding me. That's kind of how we see it. Because of technology, you have a million DJs in one city now. Microwave instant DJs, you know? But I'm not saying that it's bad or good. Just that they won't appreciate the level of skill as much as we did — or do."

Consider: in the mid-'90s, when Pacman was starting out, "One single was \$5.99. And sometimes, a DJ would want to repeat a verse or do tricks — make a different beat from the song — so you'd need two copies. A lot of the old-school DJs had doubles of everything. People still do that kind of thing," but now, all they have to do is cue up the same mp3 on both sides of their Scratch Live deck, and away they go. Plus, they're not hauling crates of vinyl everywhere. Kids today, with their parties at Belo.

Back in the day, it was undergrounds in the ballroom at the Red Lion Hotel in Mission Valley. Or the Scottish Rite Center. Or the Ramada Inn on Clairemont Mesa Boulevard. Somebody rents the hall, somebody prints the flyers. "You'd call a pager to find out where to get more info. You'd go there, and if you looked cool" — i.e., not a cop — "you'd go to the party. A thousand kids would come, 16 and up. There would be competitions — breakdancing battles, DJ battles, graffiti battles."

Pacman and friends began by attending undergrounds hosted by locals like Kutfather and Z90's Big Daddy, but it wasn't long before they were hosting their own, printing flyers at Kinko's and passing the word. "We were all just teenagers. It's crazy to think about it now." It started with house parties. After that, "You started doing *quinceañeras* or sweet 16s. If I knew someone's birthday was coming up, I'd ask them if I could DJ their party. I'd charge 20 or 40 bucks — it was worth it to have people hear me. And you're making the flyers, and it says who's playing," and people come because, hey, the guy's name is on a flyer, and then they like the music, and here comes the reputation. "I remember my first paying gig, some hole-in-the-wall where they charged \$5 to get in. They even had a booty contest for a pager. These girls were, like, 16, and I was 17, and just seeing that, I was, like, 'Oh my God.' That was how it all started." And after a while, you hooked up with some DJs you knew and respected and formed a crew, just to help market the brand. So that today, when people hear Sharpshooters, they know they're getting "hip-hop DJs who have been doing this for well over 15 years."

For better or for worse. "When I was 21, I was doing E Street Alley, which is now Belo. We used to pack the house. That was our time. I used to have three gigs a week, every month — that was a good chunk of change. But you know, times change.

You get new owners in clubs, promoters fighting with each other.”

Those golden years of 21 to 26, “That’s the position that the guys in a crew like Minds Alike are in now. When people go clubbing, they’re in the DJ’s age bracket. The promoter wants a DJ who can bring people in. When I was younger, every time I came out, I would know at least 50 people in the place. Now, they’re at home with their kids. It was fun, but now it’s different.”

And on top of that, “Because of the technology, you have a million DJs. Some of them doing it for free, just to get their name out there, get a little bit of popularity. It creates competition, which I see as a good thing,” but again — if everybody’s special, then nobody is, and building a reputation becomes more and more of a marketing game. “The way I learned it,” recalls Pacman, “Kool Herc was credited with inventing hip-hop. He would take the break from a record and just repeat it, so that it made the beat. But that beat can be made on a computer now, and repeated on a computer. There’s a slight delay as compared to analog,” which can make scratching tricky, but digital still wins. It’s just too easy. And the DJ “just fades into the background.”

Well, almost. Pacman concedes that marketing heat “is based on a lot of things. It comes down to originality and technique and execution. And stage presence. You’ve got to be into it.” And Pacman is still into it. “I’m doing smaller places, dive bars. Sometimes I’ll get hired for the more mainstream stuff, and I’ll do it. But I like the smaller venues. It’s more personal. You can play the stuff you don’t hear on the radio.”

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Well, most of the time. Tonight, I’m in one of those smaller venues: **River Bar**, tucked in behind the Lucky Lady Casino on El Cajon Boulevard. No windows, and not much in the way of signage, but a good crowd of (mostly Asian) regulars. The bartenders are pretty and low-cut, but the crowd is mostly regular folks — nothing too glamorous or clubby in the outfit department. Still, the DJs have to cater to the crowd, and just like in the clubs, what they want is what’s familiar. Danity Kane’s “Showstopper” slips into Flo Rida’s “Be on You” slips into Estelle’s “Come Over,” the bpm creeping from 73 to 82 as the floor starts to vibrate from the bass. (It’s early, so they stick mostly to the clean versions that also get used in all-age venues.) A couple of light projectors start spinning colored dots around the room. One DJ reaches up to press a button on the canopy over the dance floor, and a couple of emitters spit out a cloud of dry ice that catches the rays of the light.

The DJs, Tu and Slim, hail from the Silly Entertainment crew. They’ve got their own thing going now, but they’re still tight with Felt1 and Pacman, who they’ve known since the days of house parties and undergrounds. “Back then, the hotels were easy,” recalls Tu. “We’d rent our own security, have our own people at the door, our own people taking care of drinks. Pretty much everything.”

“And we’d have to rent a U-Haul to load all our gear,” adds Slim. “It took two or three guys just to lift the amp rack.”

Tu has been Tu since the day he was born, Slim is Slim because it sounded better than his other nickname, Bones. River Bar is their regular biweekly gig; they’re friends with the managers, and they like to hang out there even when they’re not working. It’s a scattered sort of bar — couches and wide-screen TVs in one corner, foosball and darts in another, a couple of pool tables that stay well lit and in use

even as dancers fill up the square of wood floor in the center of the room. Slim and Tu have set up their gear on a table in front of the back wall: Technics turntables in Odyssey cases, heavy cables running to an 800-watt subwoofer and a couple of 400-watt Yamaha speakers on seven-foot tripods, topped off by the ubiquitous Mac laptop. A promotional girl sashays over with shots of flavored vodka; usually, the two stick to Heineken in the bottle.

The whole scene is a lot more low-key than, say, eight or ten years ago, when Slim was getting flown to Vietnam or Denver to headline rave parties. But the two don't mind much; if things have changed since the old days, so have they.

Tu was in eighth grade when he started playing around with his older brother's turntables. "My brother, DJ Kam, grew up with Slim — they were DJing back in high school. He heard me, and he thought I was pretty good. So he started taking me to gigs back when I was 16."

Now, Tu is 30, and as he mentioned, he has a day job. He finds that popular music doesn't grip him the way it once did, and not because he got older. "Back when hip-hop started, the lyrics were about trouble and struggle — what you saw. We could all relate to it. Nowadays, you have people rapping about the cars they drive or about a cup of noodles. I don't like it. I play it, so that people can dance, but I like the old stuff better. It talked about things that happened on the streets."

Slim, 34, spells it out. "We lived in a bad neighborhood — I went to Horace Mann, then Crawford. My folks sent me to live in San Francisco for a year because they were afraid I might go down the wrong path — that was the environment I grew up in. My friend got shot in the alley behind my house when I was 15. I was walking home, and I didn't recognize him, just saw a body lying there with the brains splattered on the ground. I went to his house and saw his brother. I said, 'When he gets home, tell him there's a body behind my house,' and then I went to play football. When I got home, I turned on KUSI and found out it was him. I taught myself to DJ in '89 on a couple of Radio Shack turntables, and I'm glad for it; the music thing saved me from a lot of that." Because while the music was *about* the street, it didn't put him *on* the street. It took him to house parties, to clubs, to college campuses. "Our first non-house party was at Grossmont College," remembers Slim. "We had, like, 800 people. I still have video. That was, like, the best moment of my life."

But over time, Slim tired of the mainstream scene. He started drifting into electronica, the kind of stuff you'd be more likely to hear at a house party in Orange County or a rave out of state. "Crowds up there are different," Slim explains, "more into Euro dance music. It was pretty underground, and I liked to play stuff that no one had heard."

And he was good at finding it. "When you play electronic music, the records are imported, so it cost twice as much. Every week, we would go to the record store and spend \$100-plus, stocking up on vinyls — Tower Records, the Warehouse, Sam Goody. But electronica wasn't like mainstream hip-hop, where everybody knows the song. If you had a rare track, it was to die for. I would call a guy in the U.K. at a couple of dollars a minute and ask, 'You got any new stuff?' He would play it over the phone, and if I liked it, he'd send it to me. I bought three or four records a week, and it cost a lot of money. And then two weeks later, the record stores would have it."

But it was worth it — for those two weeks, Slim was the man, because he had what no one else had. “I had a friend, his older brother offered a guy \$100 for one record called ‘China Girl’ by Fun-Tomas, and he wouldn’t sell it. He was the only one who had it, and every time he played it, the crowd went crazy. I finally found it last year on the internet.”

Ah, the internet — more digital democracy. Back in 2000, Kam and Slim marketed themselves by selling CDs of their mixes. Fans bootlegged their performances, and “the bootleg stuff sold at the mom-and-pop record stores, and that made us even better known.” Now, of course, making a mix is just a matter of fiddling with your iTunes playlist or doing some scratchwork and uploading the whole thing to YouTube. Nobody pays for mixes anymore. And if Slim can find “China Girl” on the internet, so can somebody else. No more exclusivity.

Still, it’s all good. Slim and Tu have friends here at the River Bar; friends who stop by the turntables, shake hands, and toast, and everybody’s having a good time, especially once the girls get out on the floor. The two DJs work off a common playlist, held on a flash drive plugged into the Mac. Tu’s scratching looks a little more aggressive and less silky than Slim’s, but the difference in sound is hard for the untrained ear to detect — they’re both fast. Not that scratching is all that matters, or even most of what matters. “If someone tells me they want to be a DJ,” comments Slim, “the first thing I ask them is, ‘Can you bob your head to the beat? Can you dance?’ That’s step one, before you even learn how to mix. And scratching is the last step. I’m not a scratcher; I’m a mixer. My goal is to keep the beat as long as possible. The main thing is to learn how to beat-blend, because if you mess up the beat when people are dancing, it’s a train wreck. Still, I like to entertain myself, throw a little flair in there,” of the beat.

Another reason it’s all good is that Slim isn’t hanging his hopes on performing so much anymore. He’s moved over to producing. “It was the right step. Music is still my passion, and I always wanted to make music.” In ’95, his family moved to El Cajon, a single-story house on a broad and quiet street full of neatly trimmed lawns. “But the back was all a dirt lot. So, with my brother’s help, and with everything I saved from my DJ gigs, I built a studio back there. In ’98 or ’99, I took a year off to learn the equipment. I disassembled everything and connected all the wires myself.”

From the outside, Empire Recordings looks like a smaller version of the house it sits behind. Inside, the foyer plays home to a miniature basketball hoop and a couple of arcade-style video games, and most of the rest is space for musicians and space for Slim and his equipment. (The musicians’ room does hold bins full of vinyl records, and there is a couch overhung with a poster of Pacino as Scarface.) Slim started out by advertising, then let word of mouth and his company tag on produced product take over. “I deal with everybody — local artists, famous Asian artists. I just did a song featuring Philadelphia Freeway, who is originally from Jay-Z’s label. And I’m trying to come up myself. I just did a bit for a high-budget Asian film company. They told me, ‘You’re going to do a segment where the group is getting high, so you need to have some crazy rave music.’ I brought the film down here from L.A. and did the soundtrack. When I produce a track, I draw from my environment — a lot of it comes from the street.”

Back at River Bar, of course, it’s more about the crowd. Tu might get to spin a little Latin freestyle, put a little of himself out there, but mostly it’s about making sure



people stay dancing and happy. “We like to have people pleasantly surprised when they come here. We’ve been DJing for 14 or 15 years, but we don’t do a lot of marketing; it’s for the love of the music.” And that’s a long way from way back when: “When we were doing events, we would be the most important people — front of the line. It’s a cool feeling, especially in this day and age, when everybody just wants to be somebody.”

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