50/50 Interview: SXSW 2010

- Posted on Mar 11th 2010 10:56AM by Denzil Coleman
- Comments (0)

Print | Email More

Kandi Cole and Miki Vale are 50/50, a Southern California-based rap duo whose classic hip-hop and soul influences reflect in both their artistry and thoughtful discourse. The Project Blowed alumnae are founding members of the mighty femcee collective known as The [Sis]tem. While 50/50 is conscious of the obstacles facing women in hip-hop, they are prepared to show SXSW that great microphone skills are not gender-specific. Spinner caught up with Cole and Vale to discuss first-timer SXSW expectations, the state of hip-hop as it pertains to women and "musical junk food."

How long have you guys been making music both separately and together?

Miki Vale: I started probably about 15 years ago. I started off doing poetry and then it kind of evolved into hip-hop. Together, I'd say about two years now, maybe a little longer.

Kandi Cole: Yeah, two or three years. I've been writing since I was younger but didn't really do my first show or really jump into it seriously until about '98 or '99, and it's been going ever since. I linked up with Miki a few years back and saw that we shared kind of the same work ethic and the same thoughts and feel of hip-hop as a whole and where we wanted to take it.

Do you feel like you are being categorized as female MCs?

MV: Yes. Not that it's uncommon, but you just don't see a lot of female MCs. Not as many as male, obviously. Just the fact that we're female, people always say "female MC." We're always categorized that way. My personal feeling about it? I'm just an MC and I do what I do. I do it because I love it.

KC: Musical junk food!

MV: (laughs) Yeah. Exactly. Every Friday night I'm overloaded with it, and I throw up in the morning. I have to go to the whole opposite end of the spectrum to keep my spirituality intact, because the music is awful. I mean horrific. The lyrics are terrible. It's the worst. And that's what I'm saying. When I listen to the lyrics I'm like, "Oh, my goodness!" And the kids love it. This is what's being pounded into their heads, Gucci Mane talking about "I'm geeked up" and off E and all that stuff, like it's a common, normal thing. Like that's the thing to do. The song is dope! Because hip-hop beats are so powerful, your head is just bobbing "Yes! Yes!" to everything he is saying. So I have to take myself the opposite direction sometimes and go back into my Mos Def and Black Star and all that stuff to come down off of that junk food high.

What is your biggest vice?

KC: I like Bacardi Gold. Sometimes I like it too much. I try not to drink before shows, or be up onstage slurring my words. I try not to do that, but after we step off stage it's to the bar.

Not even one to take the edge off before you get on stage?

KC: Maybe. Not too many. Maybe a shot, but I try not to go too hard before I go too hard.

Miki, what's your biggest vice?

MV: Mine's the same.

KC: That's why we connect so well. (laughs)

What's the craziest thing you've seen or experienced on tour?

KC: Mik', the show in Santa Maria. We saw an actual airplane crash into a car on the freeway. The nose of the plane was just sitting in the driver's seat.

Was everyone okay? Did you even know what happened?

MV: No one got hurt. We looked it up. Everyone was okay. It was just a little jet plane.

KC: There was no fire. The plane was just sitting there. We were like, "Is that a plane... in the car?" had a voice and were saying something positive and uplifting.

KC: My father used to play the drums and was heavy into funk, so I'm really into Parliament-Funkadelic, James Brown and Bootsy Collins. Those are some of the people I grew up listening to with my father. My mom was really into jazz, Anita Baker, smooth R&B, so that was a bunch on my brain. Growing up, I remember I stole my older sister's A Tribe Called Quest tape and I was just kinda hooked. Lauryn Hill or Ice Cube. Those were some of the people that kind of got me into picking up the pen and writing my own, because I could feel it. That's what I want to do and share with the world -- the feeling and emotion of the music.

Are there non-musical influences for your music?

MV: Yeah. Everyday life influences it. Everything going on -- good times, bad times, struggles. I work at a high school part-time. Just seeing the kids and my niece and nephews, how they're affected by what they hear and see. I think it's important that they see and hear something different. You know? A little balance. I'm affected by everything, especially things I feel need change. I want to try to help affect change and bring a different perspective to what the media is flooding people with.

KC: What she said (laughs).

What's in your SXSW survival kit?

KC: Lots and lots of CDs. Lots of business cards. A camera. My bible.

MV: Mine is about the same. Lots of promo materials.

What can SXSW audiences expect from your performance?

MV: Excitement. Something different. A lot of energy.

KC: Definitely a lot of energy.

MV: Fun. We have a lot of fun when we perform. I love performing, period. When I do it by myself it's great, but it's even better with Kandi. It's just fun. We both love it. We love doing it and it shows when we perform.

KC: Right. There are definitely smiles on stage and we're into it. You can feel it. I love it. The goal is just to engage the audience and, once again, bring that emotion up and share it, express it.

What's your musical guilty pleasure?

KC: Miki! (laughs) Miki Vale also DJs.

MV: I have lots of them because I DJ. I hear all types of different stuff. I have so many, but right now, Gucci Mane is a guilty pleasure.

Very guilty.

MV: The beats and stuff, I don't know. It's very catchy. Whenever I play Gucci Mane people go crazy. The stuff people are feeling in the clubs, I feel it too.

KC: That was kind of the main goal of how The [Sis]tem was created. Project Blowed and a member of The [Sis]tem named Devious, she used to put on a show called the Female Perspective. It was just one show with nothing but female MCs. From that they all came up with the idea to make a crew. It's not really a like a group. It's more of a collective. We're all individual MCs, and then when we come together we're the crew. At the same time, we all kind of pump each other up. We do that because in this industry, this male-dominated hip-hop right now, you kind of get lost in the sauce when you're a female MC. When you're booked on a show they put you on first. It's like, "Okay, let's get that out of the way. Let's get the real show going." So, we came together with more of a "strength in numbers" approach. That way you guys have to pay attention and have to see that we're really rhyming. We really take this serious, and we're really just as good or even better than some of the artists they put on after.

How do you feel about the current climate of female hip-hop, so to speak? What do you think of its current state?

MV: I think its current state is a lot like it's been. It doesn't seem to change too much. At any given time in the mainstream there's like one hot female MC at the moment. The industry is just flooded with men, and there'll be like that one female... There are a lot women who do it. They just don't get the shine that males do.

KC: Women in hip-hop have kind of been more of an accessory, not really a part of it on the mainstream. On the ground level there are tons of us. There are tons of females rocking and have been writing forever. You just don't see it. The climate right now, like [Miki] said, is kind of the same. You got this one, the sexiest one -- "We don't really care how much is being said, just how you look, because you're a girl, so you're not supposed to be doing this anyway." What we've been doing is trying to change that landscape. As babies, we were raised on this hip-hop. We were raised in the same culture as the men. We've been doing it just like that. The climate right now is... It's money. It's sex. It's not really focusing on women being true MCs, and I don't think it should be that way. If you're just selling sex, it's going to sell out pretty quick.

How would you describe your sound in your own words?

KC: As a duo, I would say Black Star meets OutKast with a ladies' touch.

MV: We're both very powerful MCs in our own right. We have two notably different styles. Putting those two styles together is kind of like a powerhouse... I don't try to do whatever's trendy. I do what I feel. I'd say eclectic, kind of mellow at times--

KC: Soulful.

MV: Soulful. Kind of introspective. I try to drop a little bit of knowledge here and there.

KC: Lots of knowledge. She's being modest. (laughs) Miki is very into making good music versus, like she said, making what's hot for right now. That feel-good music. When I rap it's like a "rahhh," in-your-face kind of rapid-fire. When you mix smooth, soulful with a "rahhh," you're going to get something that's just kinda brilliant. We are on both ends of the spectrum, still speaking somewhat in the same context, but when you put those sounds together it's "50/50." It's just dope. It's just good music.

You started the description of your sound with a comparison. What are your musical influences?

MV: A lot of the music that I grew up listening to. My parents were listening to Marvin Gaye, Michael Jackson and Minnie Riperton. I like the poetry of the music back then. The lyrics were very poetic. As far as hip-hop,