

Exponent of 'chap hop,' Mr B the Gentleman Rhymer chats with Editor Anastasia Grabova about a more genteel sort of rapping

A JOLLY GOOD SHOW

In this day and age of looting and rioting and what have you," Mr B tells me, "I think some people wish that we would return to manners and that sort of thing. Some rap stars are trying to sartorially improve themselves, and I like to think that I am helping them along on their way." Such is one man's quest to reinvent hip hop into a gentlemanly artform, rhyming about cricket instead of gang shootings, Surrey instead of the ghetto, and smoking a good pipe instead of more illegal matters.

Mr B has called it 'chap hop,' inspired by the Chappist movement, which has primarily been led by The Chap magazine; "The Chap believes that a society without courteous behaviour and proper headwear is a society on the brink of moral and sartorial collapse, and it seeks to reinstate such outmoded but indispensable gestures as hat doffing, giving up one's seat to a lady and regularly using a trouser press," says their website.

In a previous incarnation, during a time Mr B (real name Jim Burke), likes to refer to as his "oik period, my street urchin days," Jim experienced his first taste of fame in the band Collapsed Lung, rapping most memorably to Nineties anthem Eat My Goal. "It was all good fun at the time I have to say, but I doubt I'll be returning to those days," he says with the air of someone who has found a better calling in life. "I certainly won't be returning to the days of jeans and t-shirts."

More likely now to be found in a quality tweed suit, the Gentleman Rhymer, has rapidly gained popularity over the past few years, appearing at cabaret and burlesque nights all over the country, as well as some of the UK's biggest festivals. Having wowed the crowds at ten different ones this year, Mr B has found himself too busy to indulge in the camping shebang: "what I tend to do is turn up, have a little look around, and then go back home to put the kettle on," he says.

"Bestival was the last one I did," he tells us. "That was really good fun. They put me on The Afterburner, which was quite a techno outdoor thing, with flames coming out of it [A 360 degree DJ stage which shoots giant 30ft flame balls from its spire and is surrounded by 12 fire breathing lamppost tree sculptures, along with high-powered lighting... and all beating in time with the music played by a DJ] says the website]. It was quite an odd experience. Rob Da Bank came up to me just before I started playing to say 'we're taking a bit of a risk, putting you on here.' And I said 'You're taking the risk? I'm



surrounded by 1,000 people who may be expecting some Groove Armada and are getting me instead! It went really well actually, I was quite surprised, and pleasantly so."

With rising success comes the obligatory rivals, and for Mr B this comes in the form of Professor Elemental, another chap hop artist, also hailing from Mr B's home town of Brighton. The Professor's songs run on a similar vein, but he's dressed instead in a colonial style, consisting of khaki shorts and a pith helmet. Having made his feelings about Mr B clear in his 'diss tune,' Fighting Trousers [look it up on YouTube], a feud was born.

"It's entirely his beef," explains Mr B. "He seemed to be getting a little upset at the fact that I was doing quite well and he was just becoming sick of the sound of my name and that sort of thing." We had a little battle earlier on in the year [also worth a look-in on YouTube], and got the whole thing settled. I like to think I came out on top, but I think it was called an honourable draw, as these things should be." Will it end in a shoot-up, I ask tentatively. "There is none of that sort of thing," is the brisk reply. "Maybe the occasional drive-by glove slap. But it never would have got any further than that."

If there are any vices at all, to the Surrey-born gent, it seems that whiskey is the proverbial poison; "I do like a little nip of whiskey before I go on stage, just to get the vocal chords all nice and loosened up," says the chap hop artist. "Towards the end of my run at Edinburgh - you do a show every night and the voice gets a little bit rough - the stage man had to remove it because I wasn't realising how many nips of whiskey I was actually taking during the show. He had to run off at some point. I turned around and the whiskey was gone. Yes, I was slightly bemused but then I realised that I was probably drinking a little too much. I was starting to slur my words."

See Mr B the Gentleman Rhymer live at the Colchester Arts Centre on Friday 11th November. To book tickets visit www.colchesterartscentre.com.



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