

RENAISSANCE MAN

If you believe the hype, LTJ Bukem is an inspirational DJ and record label entrepreneur who has changed the face of drum'n'bass. Well, in fact, he really is all these things, and remains humble and true to his cause. During his recent Australian club tour, *Next Music* spoke to the renaissance man for the digital age.

Eleven years ago, LTJ Bukem (aka Danny Williamson) was a rising star in the DJ world, getting his first big break playing for 10,000 clubbers at the Raindance festival. A year later he released "Logical Progression" and "Demon's Theme" on Good Looking Records. They came under the drum'n'bass genre, but they offered much more than just sped-up breaks – they had atmosphere, subtlety and a musicality which was not common for club releases at that time. Even Bukem wasn't aware that what he was creating was going to revolutionise dance music.

"You don't think about anything, you just have fun in the studio. For the first five years of Good Looking there wasn't an ambitious plan. We just put out records of some of my friends who I was DJing with. Now I think it has definitely got an identity. But it hasn't been so plain sailing. In the beginning a lot of press were saying negative things like, 'no, it's too musical' and it's taken a while to get through. But it was never a problem because I couldn't do anything else. You've got to deal with what's in your heart and soul and that was what was moving me."

Learning Curve

Bukem's childhood lessons of classical piano and trumpet helped shape his early appreciations of melodic music. "The guy that taught me piano was a jazz freak into 70s soul and jazz, so I really latched onto that. In making records, the lessons did help a little bit in terms of putting certain chords together. I was very young, I didn't take it to a level that I would now like to take it, but then again, with electronic music you don't have to play a single note to know how to make an unbelievable tune."

So it's not necessary for DJs and producers to learn to play an instrument as well as know their gear? "I don't think it's important at all. The best tunes I've got in my box today are made by people who couldn't tell the difference between A and C."

As a teenager, Bukem learnt to use turntables "by watching a guy called Alistair from Rap Attack Soul Sound System in the early 80s. As soon I saw what he was doing I wanted to play what he was playing and how



he was playing it, and that got me into DJing straight away. In those days it was a sound system – one turntable, one massive high stack of speakers, a big amp rack. You'd have four different people – one selecting records, one mixing down records, one putting the record on and one carrying the box of bins to play the music through."

Peaking Wave

Bukem's DJing and producing skills grew hand in hand. In 1994 he launched Speed at London's Mars Bar, which became the place to hear experimental new tracks from the Good Looking stable and Bukem's friends from the drum'n'bass scene. He cites Photek, Peshay and PFM as key players in providing the records he wanted to play for the crowds. The style wasn't darkcore but artcore – anthemic compositions which displayed an orchestration of sampled layers, but still put the beats and the bass to the fore. The music was



very visual, it gave a sense of journeying forwards. It found a place not only on the dancefloor, but gave as much pleasure in people's cars, lounges and boudoirs. Speed also introduced MC Conrad, who's been performing with Bukem for the past six years. When you're on the dancefloor and hearing his hip hopped vocals rolling over Bukem's selections, it certainly is like poetry in motion. The two have formed a strong partnership from knowing the moods and swings of their records so well.

The popular *Earth* and *Progression Sessions* compilations followed. Good Looking is now an established label but the hard work continues. "Because it's non-commercial music you can't just put it on the shelves and sell 500,000 copies. You have to do everything and a bit more and a bit more to try and make the music get through."

And here's where the Internet comes in. "It totally helps what we're doing as an independent label cos we haven't got a million pounds in the bank to put into someone's 12" to see if it sells and then lose like, two million and think 'oh well, we'll try again next time'. The Internet is a good way of promoting our work, letting people know when events are – a whole host of things.

"I really want Good Looking to be perceived as a musical label and not just a drum'n'bass label. We're not moving away from drum'n'bass cos we're putting out more drum'n'bass now than we have ever done. But I just want to have all the genres of music under one roof and provide platforms for that. The guys on my label are so diverse I wanna have a label for each of those styles so it can develop the way they want to."

Bukem's first solo album *Journey Inwards* is a testament to this commitment with drum'n'bass, house, downtempo, techno and soul all being represented. *Producer* (released through Inertia in Australia) is a collection of his classic drum'n'bass tunes which stand the test of time today – the music has the ability to relax and intrigue you at the same time. Bukem's tips for composing sound simple enough. "An infectious groove first of all, cos it is about the drum and bass and if you can catch someone with those elements and they can feel something and wanna move, you're three-quarters the

Bukem's Booty List

"My brain, that's my favourite one."
 "I've got a lot of percussion things I can recycle and put into machines."
 Akai EX24 sampler
 Two Fender Rhodes
 Platinum
 Logic

Bukem's Big Ups of the Moment

Quantic (True Thoughts label – downtempo)
Nookie – "I Need" (Good Looking)
 "He's making the best music of his life, it's a sick tune."
Makoto – "Take My Soul Baby" (Good Looking)
 "He's 21 years of age and making music like he's 41."
Mary Jane Girls "I played out an old set of soul and jazz the other day and had to rewind this all night long!"
Kenny Patterson – "I'm Gonna Love You a Little Bit More Babe". "The old Barry White tune but Kenny Patterson's version of it is unbelievable."

way there. Good sounds, sounds that make my hair stand on end, for me anyway. Soundscapes within the tune that make you want to cry almost. I get inspired by tunes that I buy, get sent, old tunes I collect, samples that I've had from ten years ago. Anything can spark off a tune idea."

Making History

Bukem is positive about the drum'n'bass culture but urges his peers to take more responsibility. "I think anyone with a name in any genre has got to do more to bring up people without a name and to educate others as to why we're here. You need to know where you've been to know where you're going. How can you progress and produce the music if you haven't got a background of what it's all about. New music is happening all the time, I think we got to find better ways to promote it. Like certain downtempo things and deep house – it's such beautiful music and it never gets heard."

The integrity vs. economy dilemma rears its ugly head. "Music in all scenes starts off being underground that's very deep and meaningful and soulful and then goes into a commercial field and gets formatted and has got to be a certain way. That's easier to sell and companies can make money from that. It's a business, so they're obviously going to take the easy option that's gonna sell the most units. Whereas I think a lot of the best music doesn't sell any units and that's a view shared by many people, but what can we do about that kind of thing?"

Virtually There

So how does Bukem work in his dreams of the technological future? "I believe it's the virtual world. I sit here with my laptop and I've nearly got as much here as I have downstairs in my studio, and that's what I'd like to see happen. You think what you can get physically you could get virtually and that would be unbelievable. I love working with the laptop – the whole studio's in front of you in one square screen. Now I'll go for this instrument or that instrument; you don't have to turn around, get up, do anything, it's right there in front of you. I could sit on a plane and work or be in my studio at home.

"I do play piano on all my tunes. So then I can plug into my laptop and carry on with it. It's wonderful how you can use technology and the live aspect of music. Playing live is something I'd like to do in the future. As much as can fit on the stage – live drums plus computer, 70-piece orchestra ... it's progressing. 10 years ago it was a girl and a bloke prancing about on stage sweating with a DAT machine."

This year Bukem and crew are on a world tour and releasing a plethora of Good Looking albums, including *Earth 5*, *Progression Sessions 6*, *Soul Food 2*, *Logical Progression 4*, *Big Bud* and *Blame*. The man who hasn't even had a two-week holiday in 10 years says his life is sacrificed to keep on making music but he does plan to make more time for himself and wants to take up piano again. Behind the calm, bespectacled face, Bukem has a lot going on. "I'm gonna die being frustrated at the amount of ideas and tunes in my head. I think most producers are the same way. The music is endless, there are no limits." ■

