



Nobody Beats DuBose

George DuBose

*A selected tour through the work and life of Hip-Hop's most recognisable photographer
Conducted at the Hip-Hop Immortals exhibition, Proud Galleries, Camden, London*

interview & George DuBose portraits: **Grubby**
main images courtesy of **George DuBose**

If you own any records or CDs, there's a strong chance that your collection contains several images created by **George DuBose**. As the in-house photographer for **Cold Chillin'**, DuBose shot sleeves for **Marley Marl, Biz Markie, Big Daddy Kane, Kool G Rap & DJ Polo, Master Ace, Roxanne Shanté, Grand Daddy IU** and **Diamond Shell**. Though he's worked with hundreds of other artists like **Soulsonic Force, Biggie Smalls, X Clan** and **Run DMC**, he has never been confined to hip-hop music. A lifetime of mainstream work has included documenting **Madonna's** first ever live performance, shooting nine **Ramones** album covers and working on artwork for the **B-52's**.

Born in Morocco, DuBose lived in New York City for twenty five years before relocating to his present home in Cologne, Germany. We were privileged to get a no-holds-barred interview during his recent London visit, allowing us to present this retrospective of his work in print for the first time. Many of the photographs here have never been seen before, so we're truly grateful to George for allowing us access to his archives.





grandslam: With regards to being inspired yourself photographically, who would you cite as your influences?

Yousef Karsch, he's a Canadian photographer from Ottawa, one of the most famous portrait-photographers in history. He photographed almost probably all of the presidents of his time. He did the most famous picture of **Winston Churchill**, in front of an old chair, holding a cigar, Winston looks real pissed-off... The story behind that shot: Karsch wanted the cigar out of Winston Churchill's mouth, Churchill wanted the cigar in his mouth and they had a battle over the cigar. Churchill stuck the cigar in his mouth and glared at the camera and Karsch had his big old 10x8 camera and took one shot. It's the epitome of the English defiance in World War II. Yeah Karsch was a big influence on me. Avedon was a big influence on me, to a certain extent.

There's a photographer named **Ira Cohen** who was a 60's photographer, he lived in New York. He photographed **Jimi Hendrix**, **Janis Joplin**, a group called **Spirit**. In a Mylar room - Mylar was like a plastic aluminium-foil, made by DuPont, Mylar, it's silver [*editor's note* - those familiar with indoor weed-growing techniques may also be familiar with Mylar]. He would put this all over the walls of a small room and enter the room with the artist, hide himself in the reflections and photograph the artist. The photograph of the reflection would look really warped, it would look really like you were on LSD and in a real heavy hallucination.

I wasn't even a photographer, it was 1970 and I was in the navy and my new girlfriend had come back to Florida from New York, to dry-out. She told me that her ex-boyfriend had shot a new album and I went into the store and bought it. It was *The Twelve Dreams Of Dr. Sardonicus*. It was this group from California, this psychedelic group, dressed as wizards in this Mylar room and it was totally like LSD and like wizards, I was totally impressed by that. I started to use the Mylar in about 1985 [when I was] photographing some unsigned rock-bands, their reflections in the Mylar. I had done about seven **Ramones** covers up to that time and I was kind of running out of ideas. They called me, like they did every year for a new album cover, and I went to show Johnny, CJ, and Markie my Mylar shots that I had been doing. So I said "what's the name of your new record?" and they said *Mondo Bizarro* and I said like "This is perfect, because this is what I wanna do!" And I show them these warped, melting LSD kinda pictures. And they said "That's... erm..." And I said "Don't worry! We'll put a normal picture of you on the back of the LP". And they said "Ok, that's cool". Then I had to go see Joey, and I called up Joey to make an appointment. Now I'm friends with these guys; Joey said "No problem, but I kinda wanna use this other photographer, he takes these melting pictures." So I say "You talkin' about Ira Cohen?" He said "How d'you know?" And I said "Because I've been copying Ira Cohen for the past ten years, I have his record covers, and this is what I've shown the other guys [in the Ramones] and they want me to do it". He said "There's gonna be a problem because if you do a picture like Ira, Ira's my friend and he's gonna think I gave you the idea to do it". The only solution was to meet Ira, so Ira came down to Joeys apartment and I came over and we had a talk and I showed Ira my portfolio. And I told Ira "I've done seven covers for the Ramones and they want me to do the next cover, cos' I'm real fast. So how we gonna work this out so you don't feel ripped off?". Ira's looking at my work, at first he's real grumpy you know, because he wanted the job too. The he kind of warmed up and he saw my pictures and he said "You kinda do good stuff, a little more slick than what I do, you know..." He was like a seventy year-old guy at the time! He said "I'll tell you what, I'll just come down to the session, smoke a joint and just give the thing my blessing." And the road manager, Monte, went "No no no, no joints!" Haha. So then I said "I got an idea Ira, this picture you're showing Joey of Jimi Hendrix in the Mylar room, how much does that cost?" It was like an 11x14 colour print of Jimi Hendrix and he said "It's \$1500". I said "I tell you what Ira, I'll buy one", 'cos I knew I was gonna make \$7-8000 from putting the cover together for the Ramones. So I said "I'll buy one and erm... Joey, you'll buy one too won't ya?" Joey said "yeah". I don't know if Joey ever bought one, but I did, I became good friends with Ira and I've been to his apartment, I loaned him Mylar film when he didn't have money to buy it. He lived with his mom and he was 70 so she must've been like 100, I don't know. So people that influence me, there you go.

GS: Thank you George. Ok I gotta ask you about the jacket...

This is an original **Cold Chillin'** jacket, everybody on staff got one.

GS: So they put your name on for you, yeah?

They put my name on it, they put the Cold Chillin' logo on the back. It's a Warner Brothers [jacket], they were distributed by Warner Brothers at the time. So I put the little gold chain around Bugs' neck [Bugs Bunny Warner Brothers logo, on the front of the jacket] cos' he's a rappin'-rabbit not a rockin'-rabbit! Haha.

GS: Were you rockin' the jacket when you were shooting a lot of the older hip-hop images?

...Yeah yeah, I wore it all the time!

Whilst showing me the book from the exhibition, Hip Hop Immortals, George seems concerned with the choice of font used...

This font's called *Old English Engraver* and I saw it on a hat that **Biz Markie** had on his first single sleeve. It said 'BIZ MARKIE' and it was in this font. So a couple of weeks ago, I made up my own invitations for this show and I used this font and then a 'tag' font, but it was kinda too unreadable. so I changed the 'tag' font to a normal font. But the Germans say this is a Nazi font, I don't know if they know.

GS: Maybe they were secretly into hip-hop back then?

Haha what can I say? ...haha!

Ok I'm giving a tour of the photos I took, here at the Proud Gallery...

I don't know what the year was, probably about 1981, I was standing on a corner in Manhattan, New York, trying to cross a street at a real busy intersection called Herold Square, 6th Avenue crosses Broadway crosses 34th Street. And it was such a bad traffic jam that I couldn't even get across, even with the lights. But I heard this music blasting out of a car and I recognised it... it was *Trans-Europe Express* by **Kraftwerk**. But then I heard the words and it was "rock rock the planet rock", and it turned out it was a group called **Soulsonic Force**. A month later they came to my photo-studio on 34th Street and [around that time] I was kinda like hangin' out in clubs, I'd done the **B-52's** first album cover and a lot of punk and new wave stuff that was happening in the late seventies and early eighties, and with Soulsonic Force it was my first exposure to Hip-Hop or Rap, whatever they called it then, and I couldn't believe these guys dressed up the way they did. I mean I had done a lot of rock bands, **Duran Duran** - I knew they used make-up and hair-spray, but these guys came into my studio with like major costumes... **Pow-Wow** was dressed like an Indian, **Mr Big** is dressed like some kind of Roman Warrior and **Globe** had some kind of applique where you can see the contents of the world on his outfit. And **Africa Bambaataa** is in the back looking like a Viking. These guys were so big they wouldn't even fit on my background paper... And then their record came out on **Tommy Boy** later on.

GS: Was there anything in particular from that shoot you can remember that stands out?

Well not really from the shoot, but two years later, I read in the paper that Globe and Pow Wow got busted for robbing banks. At that time [when I photographed them], they were breaking out with the Soulsonic Force record, [but] they had been robbing banks prior to that... So they were, you know, two bank robbers in my studio and I didn't know, anyway I don't know whatever happened to them...

Alright - then, I got hooked up with a record company called **Cold Chillin'**. I had been working with Island Records and Warner Brothers, and this new record label started called Cold Chillin' and they had an artist named **Alfonso Ribiero**, he was the original tap dance kid on Broadway, and a Broadway star. He was a young kid, he dressed like Michael Jackson, looked like Michael Jackson and he had a record out on this Cold Chillin' label. The next artist that Cold Chillin' dropped was **MC Shan**. [For] his first single, I had to go to the Queensbridge projects in Queens and photograph a pregnant girl smoking crack, the name of the song was *Jane Stop That Crazy Thing*. She wasn't really smoking crack, but she was really pregnant. Then for the back cover of that single was MC Shan smashing a crack pipe with his shoe in the stairway of the project building.





And then **Biz Markie** came [out], starting out with *Make The Music With Your Mouth Biz*, and he was like the master of drum beats with his voice, you know. The picture here is from his second album *The Diabolical Biz Markie* and the picture we are looking at, Biz with a white wig on and a tennis visor, tennis sweater with test tubes and lab equipment, he's supposed to look like a mad scientist. Originally this was the cover for the cereal box that was going to be the back... Ok there was going to be a breakfast scene with Biz and **Cool V** the DJ. They were going to be eating breakfast and Biz was going to be pouring musical instruments, little plastic saxophones and trumpets out of the cereal box into his bowl. So we had to shoot Biz for the cover of the cereal box, and I had to make the cereal box, it looked like Kellogg's Corn Flakes but was 'The Diabolical Crunch'. Anyway that picture was going to be for the cereal box, but wound up being the front cover, and we used the cereal box for the back cover where Biz was eating breakfast. Biz was one of my favourite artists that I worked with, because he was so funny and his ideas were always so wacky. [On] *I Need A Haircut*, he's getting his hair cut with a chainsaw 'cos his hair was so tuft it broke all the clippers.

GS: I gotta ask you what your most memorable stories attached to the Biz covers are, 'cos they were so crazy - the golf cart [on the sleeve of Spring Again]...

We had those dancing flowers, when they heard the music they danced. I don't know why we did that, Biz was just totally Wack! ... We got some great shots from that shoot. But my favorite one was Biz... here's a story... Biz had a song called *Toilet Stool Rap*. It was after the *All Samples Cleared* album. Alright so Biz' first promotional poster for the first album *Goin' Off* was a drawing of Biz sitting in the toilet, with the door open, picking his nose. It was for *Pickin' Boogers*, it was a drawing like a watercolour, and I thought that was really cool, and I always wanted to do a photograph of Biz on the toilet. So the great day came, 'bout four-five years later, Biz has gotta do a cover for *Toilet Stool Rap*, so I said "We gotta get him on the toilet". So I said "Biz, I'm gonna come to your house". We'd made up custom pyjamas with little blue teddy bears on 'em, and a custom stocking-cap. Then I took rolls of toilet paper, and put two-three rolls together so I had this giant, actually not toilet paper, towel-paper, so I had this 18" thick roll. Then I put sheet music around it, all taped together, blank sheet music. So then it snakes up from the roll which is at the front of the picture, up to Biz' lap and he's writing with a feather. Like he's sittin' on the toilet writing his music. And I thought, this is pretty dope. So I get there and I'm all setting up ready to do this...

We get interrupted by people wanting to interview George for a video... Wait your turn!

So I go to Biz' house by myself, I didn't even have an assistant, 'cos I didn't wanna take an assistant to his house. I go there and I go in and Biz is on the phone. His brother lets me in and I'm upstairs in the bathroom setting up lights, Biz is on the phone. About 45 minutes later I'm all ready to go, I did a polaroid and everything... Biz is in his room, I go in and say "hey Biz, what's up?" "Ahh George, I don't wanna do a picture". I said "Wha' d'ya mean Biz?" "I just talked to Warner Brothers and they won't give me enough money for my next video, I'm really pissed off! I'm in a real bad mood!" I said "Biz, this is your brother George, I came all the way from Manhattan, I've been waiting for about five years to do this picture of you on the toilet, you know, please!" "Nah I still don't wanna do it George". I said "Biz, for me it ain't about the money, I don't care, I'm here, I wanna do this picture, please... just do it for me!"

[George, impersonating Biz]... "OK!"

Hahaha and then he got into it you know, haha!

[George continues to laugh...]

And then one of the other covers... *Let Me Turn You On*, I mean I couldn't think of anything else except to put Biz in a beauty parlour. And try to make him look sexy, haha, so we just got this woman's wig on, rollers in his hair, he's got big nails on and little pink furry slippers and he was into it. He looked so gay in some of the shots, he really got into the posing. Biz was my favourite artist, man.





GS: The concepts for the Biz Markie shots, where they a collaboration between yourself and Biz?

All, well most of my jobs - I mean, I hung out in the punk scene and I hung out in the new wave scene but I didn't hang out in the rap scene. It wasn't my thing and erm, it was probably a little dangerous for a white boy in those days. It got more acceptable a later on but [in] the beginning it was kind of a rough black thing. Most of my projects are the artist's concepts, and then [I had] to refine it to something that the record company would accept. So this picture here [of] **Big Daddy Kane**, this is from *Long Live The Kane*, Kane's first album. Originally, Kane told me that he wanted to be carried on a litter by four big black guys, and then in front of the four black guys carrying this chair were gonna be dancing girls throwing flowers. And there were gonna be dancing girls behind the litter throwing flowers. I said "Kane, that's a great idea for being like a Black Caesar or something, but by the time I get this onto a twelve inch, your head's going to be about 3/8ins high. You wanna see who you are, you're a handsome guy, this is your first record. People gotta see what you look like." So he took that 'Black Caesar' concept and, if you know the cover from *Long Live The Kane*, It's him dressed as an Emperor, he's sitting in the throne and he's got some slave girls around him feeding him apples and grapes and what not...

GS: The ladies, where were the ladies from? Were they models?

Nah... his girlfriends, Kane always came up with some shorties for his covers.

[laughter]

It was always somebody different...

GS: What, he had 'em stockpiled?

Yeh, ever-changing I suppose, whoever was at the club the night before that he wanted to pick up!

[laughter]

I did all of [Kane's] covers for Cold Chillin', then he got signed by MCA after his Cold Chillin' contract ran out. I lost a couple of covers to the MCA crew, but then Kane came back to me for *Daddy's Home* and *Veterans Day*. And the interesting thing is, Kane has some of what they call Zoot Suits from the '40's, remade by a tailor custom for him.

GS: Have you any idea how much those suits would've cost?

At least over \$1000, because they were totally handmade, silk-striped gangster suits. But real long jackets and real baggy pants. '40's style, real New York gangsters. We did a whole shoot with him in the Zoot Suits, and the record company rejected the shoot. They said the suit was 'too corny'. So we shot the whole thing again...

This picture of him in the blue light and the red background with the cigar is his epitome shot I think. I mean he is the epitome of cool, and he looks cool in that shot. This comes out of a relationship we developed over a period of about ten years. You know the funny thing is though that about a year after the album *Veterans Day* came out, I was walking down 8th Sreet in Manhattan, in between 5th Avenue and 6th Avenue and there's a lot of

stores that sell shoes to black people, hats to black people and they had some beautiful Zoot Suits there. So the record company was just being too ignorant to know that Kane was so avant garde, that he would've set a trend instead of... They rejected the whole shoot because of this suit that they thought was too wack! Well, it was just ahead of it's time! That was a problem with a lot of the rappers, they were [extravagant] and I guess still are to a certain extent. Biz Markie had a suit made that looked like it was brown leather pig skin, and it had the Louis Vuitton logos printed all over it. With short pants and a short sleeved shirt, so he looked like a walking suitcase. Then Lil Kim went and did the same thing, except she had the logo put on her body.

GS: The [David] LaChappelle image?

Yeh... I mean, I say I'm the original old school photographer, there were photographers that were shooting rappers before me, but there weren't that many rappers before I started.

GS: Could you cite any names of the older photographers involved in the game before you?

No, no I don't know...

Ok now I had worked with Kane for three albums and one day **Mr C**, Big Daddy Kane's DJ, calls me up and says, "George, I need a favour, you done a lot of work for us, and I really like your work but I gotta photograph this artist. Nobody knows who he is, this is his first single that I produced for him". Mr C produced the first single for **Biggie Smalls**.

So C and I had to go to Biggie's neighbourhood, which turned out to be Bed-Stuy, which if you know, was one of the most dangerous neighbourhoods in Brooklyn if not all of New York. So I went over there with my Hassleblad, but I really wasn't too worried because I was with Mr C and the rest of the bad boys of the neighbourhood, so you know I felt protected by them. I had been in places like Trenchtown in Kingston and if you're with the bad guys your safe. Nobody's gonna fuck with ya. Anyway so I shot B.I.G and his DJ, **\$50 Grand**. Then after I shot them, B.I.G. asked me if I'd shoot his posse and I said "sure". You know, I had some film left, so the next thing I know, there's like twenty guys. I don't know where they came from. But just, Boom, they were there. So I look around, because I needed more space to line 'em up. I looked across the street and there was a bright red brick wall, without too much graffiti on it. I went over there and I get 'em all kinda close together, and I looked down. You know with a Hassleblad, you have to look down into the camera. I'm looking down into my viewfinder, and I flip up the little magnifying glass so I can get a focus, and I'm looking and I see this UZI! Pointing right at me! And I say "GOD DAMN, EMPTY THAT THING, AND MAKE SURE ITS EMPTY AND THEN ONCE ITS EMPTY POINT IT SOME PLACE ELSE BESIDES THE CAMERA!"

[gwan George!]

So if you see in that picture, B.I.G.'s got a real UZI in his... This happened to me a few times with other artists too, they'd pull out guns for the picture. I was in the Navy so I know about handling weapons and I always made sure the guns were completely empty, the clips were empty and that there was nothing in the chamber.





Kool G Rap & DJ Polo
Copyright GeorgeDuBose©
Grandslam Issue 2

I also worked with one of the original gangster rappers, **Kool G Rap**, he was also on Cold Chillin' Records. Like I say, he was one of the original gangster rappers, and it was in his lyrics. His first album cover was just a pretty tame portrait and this picture we're looking at was on the inside of the cover. I think the single was actually called *The Yellow Brick Road*. So we painted plastic bricks yellow and put them in blue jump suits, this was the art-director's idea. Later on I did a cover for G Rap, because I was doing all the covers for Cold Chillin' Records. G Rap said in a meeting, before the shoot, he said "I wanna rob a bank, I want the picture on the album cover to look like it's from a closed circuit camera in the bank. And me and **DJ Polo** will be in the bank robbing it". So I said "G Rap, this is not a movie production, this is a small label. We ain't got no money to pay a bank a couple of thousand for a few hours to do an album shoot, and they won't support this idea. Forget that!" The idea I had was to get a van and put like bags of money in the van, and I would be inside the van. I was going to have a big piece of plexi-glass in front of me. In New York City you can rent guns, actual guns, you can rent them for movie props and sometimes they fire blanks and what not. So I was going to rent the most modern Tek 9, Mack 10, I don't know what these weapons were, but I was gonna get these really glorified automatic pistols and have G Rap and Polo outside the van, and I'm in the van. I'm looking out the back of the van, you see the money

bags so it looks like they're robbing a Brinks truck and they're shooting into the van. Well, turned out the record company said "No way, no guns!, we can't get the records distributed by Wal Mart in America, we can't get the records into Texas, if black guys have guns." It was ok for the country and western guys to have guns, and Hank Williams. It was ok for some of the white rock-bands to have guns. But not for the black guys.

So what I did - this is the album *Live and Let Die* - I refined that concept, they wanted violence, they wanted guns, but we couldn't do it. So what we wound up doing was we got two white guys, two of my buddies, dressed up as narcotic agents with army fatigue jackets. One guy had D.E.A. printed on the back of his jacket for Drug Enforcement Agency. And these two white guys are standing on chairs with nooses around their necks, real big thick rope, in what looked like some kind of warehouse. Standing on the chairs with the rope/nooses tied up to the ceiling. Attached to each leg of each chair was a chain, and at the other end of the chain was a Rottweiler. Kool G Rap and DJ Polo are dressed up as Ninjas with masks, full black masks, full black clothing, and they had steaks. Waving them at the dogs, you know "here doggy, here doggy", haha... So the dog goes for the steak and pulls the chain, the chair comes up, etc... So it was like the violence they wanted but in a safe humoristic way.

I was always in between what the artist wanted and what the record companies wanted.



Master Ace
Copyright GeorgeDuBose©
Grandslam Issue 2

GS: Ahh, more Guns... Was there a big call for them back then?

Walk this way, over here. Roxanne Shanté was one of the only musicians I know who could get away with guns, this picture we're looking at is for a single, the single's called *Dance To This*... she was a Gangster Bitch. Actually come to think of it, I think I took the picture for her album cover too, it slips my mind. It was called *Shanté*; she had a Derringer tucked into her garter belt. But all you see is her hand, with a nice watch and long perfect nails and the little Derringer tucked into her garter belt... and her thigh. This went, you know this went into the stores, I don't know why?

GS: For the benefit of our readers, a Derringer, is that a hand gun?

It's a very small pocket gun, two shot, normally 38 caliber, like the type of thing the Mississippi river boat gamblers would use. So yeah that was used for Shanté... you know *The Bitch Is Back*, I think that was the name of the album. Anyway this picture we're looking at [*Dance To This* cover shot] was shot on blue background paper and Shanté is holding two sawed-off shotguns, we air-brushed in the flames coming out of the barrels. If you know anything about western movies, a lot of the time you'll see one gunslinger mad at someone else, point a gun at their feet and say "dance", you know "dance" and make the other guy lift up their feet. So this was kind

of a joke on that. We had Big Daddy Kane's two dancers, **Scoob** and **Scrap**, and a couple of other guys silhouetted, just bouncing around in the shot.

Ok lets see, **Master Ace**. He was also on Cold Chillin' and Master Ace, he was an intellectual rapper. He still puts records out, though I'm not sure what label he's on. He took the opposite side of the gangsters. Instead of glorifying violence he sort of in his own way protested against it. Because of that, he wasn't too popular with the black youth. But he does sell records. This picture is taken in front of a slaughterhouse with Master Ace. I like this picture because he is smiling on one side of his face and grimacing on the other. It was taken with multiple flashes going all round his body, with him sitting real still so it looks like he's got two faces.

We stroll on and chat photography a little more, then George unleashes another gun-slinging episode...

...Well, **Grand Daddy IU**, another Cold Chillin' artist. He had the foulest mouth out of any of the artists. I don't know if he was so much of a gangster, but it was just more... curses and demeaning to women. One time I photographed Grand Daddy IU for a single, and they wanted to do a drive-by. Which is something that comes out of Los Angeles normally where one drug-gang will be trying to eliminate the other drug-gang.



PADVERT

The guys will just pull-up in a car and just open up with their automatic weapons on the street, just take them out. So we wanted to do this, I forget the name of the record, but Grand Daddy IU wanted to do a drive-by. But the record company said "No guns, No guns!" I say "No problems, what we're gonna do... ok the guys in the street will have crow-bars and baseball bats. We'll get about twenty guys, so it looks like a gang, that are gonna attack Grand Daddy IU, in the car." He wanted to have... The name of the single was *We Got The Gatt* and Gatt comes from Gatling gun, which is one of the early machine guns. They still make em' and they shoot mad amounts of bullets every minute or whatever.

So *We Got The Gatt*, was "our gun's bigger than your gun!" Grand Daddy IU wanted to have a Gatling gun, but that was going to be too expensive. Plus they said "no guns on the cover!" So I said "Ok we'll have the drug dealers on the street holding baseball bats and crow bars. Grand Daddy IU, you'll just be sitting in the back seat of the car. You just get up and put your hand into your jacket, like your going for your piece. So it's like, not your gun is bigger than their gun, it's the fact that they don't have a gun and you do. So you're still bigger!"

We go to Hempstead, Long Island, which is a pretty run down suburb of New York, and a lot of black people live there, It's a pretty dangerous neighbourhood for white boys to go to. But I'm there with the badboys again, so I felt safe. I have got together about twenty baseball bats and crowbars, and Grand Daddy IU was going to organise some tricked-out cars. He had some nice fancy Mustang convertible and he had a nice Firebird that was all tricked-out too.

The idea was that this was going to be a Police surveillance camera, so it would be a kinda real grainy picture that was tinted green like from the infared. Then we would add some red lines to it, so it looked like a scope kind of a thing, with the wind direction and the temperature and the compass and all this kind of stuff. So it looked like a police surveillance of this drive-by. I get up on top of my old '67 Volvo, I have a tripod up there and I get one big strobe-light up really high, on a pole/light stand. About thirty feet in the air, so you know the whole thing looked like a street light. I get up on top of my car and I'm like "Ok so everybody knows what to do, I'm gonna count to three and I want the guys in the street to run back and I want IU to jump up from the back seat of the convertible and reach for your gun. 1...2...3!..." Well Grand Daddy IU and his DJ, I forget his name, and the driver and the other guys, four guys in the car. They all jumped up and Grand Daddy IU pulled out an AK47, another guy had a thing called a 'Street Sweeper'- which is a 12-gauge automatic shotgun. They add a four-shot Derringer and they had some other evil weapon. I didn't even take the picture. I said "STOP!, IU you know they said no guns in this picture!" and he just said "aw, George", he knew me from doing other covers and stuff. He said "George, just take the picture for us and then we'll do something without the guns". So I'm like "ok" and I climbed down off the car. I walked over to IU and I said "IU I gotta tell you, there's two things in life I don't do. One thing is to ride on the backseat of motorcycles; and I don't take pictures of guns unless I know they're unloaded. So if you'll please open up your AK47 and show me that it's empty, we'll proceed." Well that gun was not empty, it had a fifty shot banana-clip on, it was full of bullets and it had a round in the chamber. IU didn't even know it was loaded, someone had given him the gun. All he had to do was pull the trigger by accident and that thing would've gone off like popcorn and taken out half the neighbourhood... we unloaded the gun and proceeded...

GS: As you do George... I understand you produced work for Run DMC too?

Well this Run DMC picture, I got a cheque from my photo-agent two months ago for \$1600 and that was half of the sale price, it was for two pictures of Run DMC. The invoice said "Run DMC's Greatest..." so I called up my agent and said "Run DMC's greatest what? Book?" Y'know 'cos I didn't know what it was. It turned out it was for their Greatest Hits CD. The cover of the CD is another picture I did, this is seven o'clock in the morning in a photo-studio. The photo-studio I had, had a helicopter-pad on the roof that I had access to, and it had a beautiful view of the Empire State Building. So that's the shot that's on Run DMC's Greatest Hits.

This shot is one of my favourites, I've used three spotlights on three guys wearing black clothes, black hats and gold chains. So you just really see the spotlights, it looks like they're wearing hoodie's, especially him [points to MC Run] - looks like he's wearing some kinda ninja hood or something but its just the curve of the spotlight. It's one of my classic shots.

GS: Did anything happen during this shoot?

Man, it was seven o'clock in the morning, you know - no story there. They were in and out and this picture was used for an advertisement for Penthouse magazine, in the subways.



RUN DMC
Copyright GeorgeDuBose©
Grandslam Issue 2





We then move on to view a couple of other images...

We're looking at **Mobb Deep** from their first album cover session, these two kids were fourteen years old. **Prodigy** and **Havoc** were fourteen when they released their first record and they came to my studio for the album cover shoot. Before that, I had met them and they had shown me this Japanese rice-cutter, it was like a little scythe. And they wanted to use it in the picture but they only had one, they needed two of them. So I made two little choppers that looked like sickles, made 'em just for the photo-session. Then this particular picture, we were in the photo-studio and the smoke machine broke down in the middle of the shoot and wouldn't make any more smoke. So we just took some tissue paper I had collected, a pile of garbage all around the East Village of New York, and brought it to the photo-studio. So we just stuffed tissue paper into the trash and just really started burning it and making more smoke. That made a pretty cool shot.

Up there is **Rammellzee**, Rammellzee was one of the original subway graffiti-artists, not tags - he didn't do tagging, he did full-blown paintings on subways. He also invented Gothic Futurism, painting a subway train that looked like a tank with guns and rockets. He invented his own style of writing, it was like a whole alphabet but it was so stylised, you couldn't read it. So when the record company wanted to put his record together, Rammellzee wanted to use his own alphabet, his own name but it was totally unreadable so he had to use a big sticker that said Rammellzee. Rammellzee comes from Rommel the general, the German general, so he was into this militaristic, futuristic subway thing...

GS: Do you have photos of his art?

Well I have a piece of his original art-work...

GS: So no documentary footage of him?

No, no - I went to his studio a few times, the guy was... actually by the time I met him he was getting kinda crazy from breathing all the epoxy fumes. In his art, he poured a lot of epoxy and that really makes you nuts. He influenced... He was before Futura 2000, for people who know about graffiti artists, he was one of the original guys that went to the Bronx train yards and painted the trains. It wasn't just writing your name or a tag, he was painting! And he would be there all night long working on these things.

Bill Blast, was another graffiti artist that imitated Rammellzee. So Rammellzee is like [one of the Grandfathers] of graffiti artists. He influenced a lot of guys that came after him.

GS: Did you ever get to know any of the artists you worked with personally?

Biz I kinda got to know personally, I went to his house a few times, but I mean I'm not gonna lie, I wasn't really part of the hip-hop culture. I'm an old hippie, I like rock, I like blues... I like some hip-hop. Biz I like because he's funny, he's not threatening to me, Kane I like because he's intellectual. I, you know, just can't get behind a record that's talkin' about shootin' all the honkies in the neighbourhood.





GS: What were your views on having guns and violence in the images?

Well it never was my intention to put guns in the pictures, I mean if they wanted them then I'd do it. As opposed to Nitin Vidukul, where his pictures are his ideas, my job was to take their ideas and make it palatable to what I would hope would be a major audience. My image of Biz Markie in the white wig got picked up by the video company. They put Biz Markie in another white wig, a powdered wig, playing a harpsichord for *Just A Friend* and he looked like Mozart, like a black Mozart. The video image was so ridiculous that it sold that album gold.

Big Daddy Kane, he came to a photo-session a day late, but I didn't take it personally. Musicians are always late, especially for photo-sessions. One thing musicians are on time for is gigs, and recording sessions. There was another artist, I don't know if you ever heard of him. He had a group called **XCLAN**, his name was **Lumumba Carson** [a.k.a. **Professor X**], he was a pretty bad dude. He wasn't a gangster, he was a black Nationalist, a sort of African Nationalist. He was about helping the black people uplift themselves in American society. He was a kind of angry guy and he had a big posse, they were very into Egyptology and they used a lot of Nubian references. I had done a couple of records for XCLAN and now Professor X was going to have his own solo record, he was selling a lot of records at the time. We had a meeting and he told me a couple of concepts that he wanted to do for the photo-shoot that was coming up in a few weeks. One of the things he told me was that he wanted a flag that was Red, Black and Green. He didn't say what country it was from or what group it was from or anything. So I experimented with red, black and green paper, it didn't work. I finally wound up making a three meter wide flag of red, black and green cloth sewn together. The day of the photo-shoot, I was there taking pictures of his whole crew, and there was like twenty people that had to be shot. And I had to shoot the principle guys - Professor X, **Brother J**, who also had a solo career, and another artist whose name I can't remember. My assistants came out with the red, black and green flag, and Lumumba Carson said "where did that come from?" I said "Lumumba, we had a meeting a month ago, you told me to make a red, black and green flag". He said "No I didn't!" So I'm like "Lumumba, I ain't gonna make up something like this outta my head, I'm not gonna pick these colours. I mean green, black and gold are Jamaica's colours. I'd be using those colours if I was going to be using anything for a flag." He's like "I didn't tell you to do this". I'm like "you did!" He's all "I didn't!" etc... And then he said "Don't give me this white racist honky shit!", and I said "listen Lumumba don't you start with that, you're an African born in America that makes you Afro-American. I'm an American born in Africa, I'm Ameri-African!" Hahaha it's true, I was born in Rabat. That kinda took the piss outta his sail, and we became - not social friends, but he respected me and I respected him and we did more work together. It got to the point where the respect was so deep that he wanted me to smoke blunts and drink overproof rum before the sessions, and I couldn't take pictures when I was stoned or drunk or what not so I said no. The next session I did with him, I got two assistants to help me. I was gonna let them take care of everything that was technical. All I had to do basically was point the camera in the right direction and take the picture. So then I said "alright now I'll smoke your blunt's and drink your over-proof rum"... and we still fucked up the pictures, hahaha!



We take a look at images produced by some of the newer photographers. I'm interested to see how he thinks the image-based representation of Hip Hop artists has changed from when he was shooting. He gathers his thoughts, and then delivers...

Ok yeah, Jonathon Mannion. He came into rap when it was getting to be mainstream, it was accepted by the blacks that a lot of whites were down with the programme, and liked the music. But I'm, as I said before, I'm an old hippie and rap was not part of my culture and I couldn't go hang out in the black clubs and meet artists like I did when I met the B-52's and Klaus Nomi, [that came about from] just hangin' out in clubs. I had seen the early artists I had worked with, and you know that's just where I was going, that's what I was seeing, that's who I was hangin' out with. That's how I got album covers, when I started. But by the time hip-hop started I was sort of a known photographer around Manhattan, and I was always on the cutting edge of whatever was going on in those days. So that's how I started working with the rappers. But I wasn't gonna go hang out in the clubs up in Harlem to get more jobs, you know I was just getting the jobs from the record companies and meeting the artists that way, because it was a lot safer.

GS: You mention the fact that back then it was less accepted for a guy such as yourself to go into these neighbourhoods. But did you ever venture into them, and indeed the clubs in Harlem, around that time?

I have been to some seriously bad neighbourhoods. Brooklyn - you know the Master Ace image - that was shot in a real bad neighbourhood. And erm... Grand Daddy IU, we went up under some bridges in Harlem and did some shots, yeah I've been there. Roxanne Shanté, we shot her in front of a real Crack House, and you know the crack-heads had to run out the back when we came up to do shots. But I wouldn't go there on my own, maybe I would scout some locations a couple of times, but quickly. I'm not a racist, I just know you do not wanna go somewhere where you're not known. And if you're not with the right people you just don't go there. Like you don't go to Trenchtown unless you're... If the rude boys think you're a tourist then they'll take you out in a heart-beat.

GS: Ok - so you just see the whole scene now as being a lot more open and accepting?

Yeah, by the time Mannion gets in there it's acceptable to whites, and the whites are being accepted by the blacks, and he had a lot more access to their home-life than I did. He speaks the Ebonics better than I do, and he is just more of a part of their culture than I was at the time. When I got into it, hip-hop was a new thing, but then when Mannion got into it, hip-hop was more established and mainstream. I'm not taking anything away from him at all! I think he's got some really cool shots, and he documented some important events that were ten years down the road from when I started... B.I.G., he's like a second or third generation rapper, and you know [points to Mannion's shot of B.I.G. at his platinum party] this picture's at his platinum party and, well hell, hello, it was years after I started with Biz and Soulsonic Force.

GS: There are other photographers here too, for example Danny Clinch...

I like Danny's work a lot, I always have. My favourite photographer here at this show is Nitin Vadukul. He's known for his concepts, he has a concept and he sells it to the artist. I think his reputation has established itself so well now that people like to be photographed by him because they know that he will come up with the dope concept.

GS: Anything else you'd like to add?

I'm looking for work, I'm looking for new jobs. I got a website www.george-dubose.com, check it out! I'm selling my old school photos, I'm selling my old punk photos [all available through his site], I did nine Ramones album covers... I met a German girl, I chucked New York and moved to Cologne about five years ago. But I'm looking to travel now, and get back in the game.

Go to www.george-dubose.com for more information, to buy original work from George's archives, and to inquire about hiring him for work.



A small selection of George DuBose LP and 12" covers



