



JO BUCK

Words **Jake Lemkowitz**

Images courtesy of **Joe Buck**

Joe Buck was at the bus station in Jamaica, Queens when Run-D.M.C. came out with a boombox, performed "It's Like That" for ten people, and left. It was '83, the right place right time for hip-hop. Graffiti was blowing up all over the City, and Joe loved it, but he wasn't going out to bomb train yards because he didn't want to get paint on his gear. Nothing too fancy then: shell toes, Wal-labees, sheepskins. He graduated from high school and his dad said it was time to trade all that in for a suit and tie. "I don't want to wear suits," Joe said, "I want to do something else."

He enrolled in the NY Institute of Technology in Islip, Long Island—land of small airports. Again: right place right time. Joe started making hand-drawn flyers for on-campus shows. Trugoy had gone to the same school and would come up with Maseo to hit the college parties now and then, and noticed Joe's handiwork around campus. One day, Trugoy met Joe outside a party and offered him the opportunity to design the album artwork for what would become *De La Soul is Dead*. "Are you serious?" Joe had never done any kind of commercial artwork before, and the group gave him almost total creative reign. Their only request: no daisies.

"People just looked at them one way, like hippies," says Joe, explaining the concept behind his cover. "That's

not really who they were. So it was definitely a total change of direction, in a sense, of what they were going to be about. A balancing." Joe sketched a broken flowerpot, and one of the most iconic hip-hop album covers of all time was born. "I don't remember how I came to that conclusion, but that made sense to me. 'That will be simple. They don't want more daisies.'"

The end of the D.A.I.S.Y. Age marked the start of Joe Buck's professional art career. He set up a studio in an empty dorm room where he used an upside-down bed as an easel. His wife was the floor's RA. The work kept coming in steady, but even after he had saved up enough money to buy a GTI, he didn't take his design work so seriously.



All that changed in '93-'94, when he flew out to Japan on tour with De La. The trip was an eye-opening experience. Joe explains: "I hadn't felt that type of impact where I flew 14 hours to somewhere, and people knew me. As soon as they heard my name they were like, 'You did the *De La Soul Is Dead* and the 'Saturday's' cover!' Over there, people were so into every bit of everything that was De La. It was a totally different feeling when people had this interest in my art that didn't know me and didn't know what I did, but knew that cover and wanted to know more. It totally changed my view of what I was doing and how I could do it. It was unbelievable."

Somebody at a club gave him a can of Japanese spray paint as a souvenir. He put it in his pocket. The next day,

he realized that the can had leaked a huge green stain across the side of his leather jacket. His old fear of graffiti messing up his gear had come true, 6,700 miles from Queens.

Buck struck gold more than once by doing things his own way. Like back in '98, the pioneer days of the Internet, when he taught himself Flash and designed an elaborate website called *Made From Scratch* because he thought it would be fun. Before long, Marc Ecko was calling him up on the phone saying it was the most unbelievable thing he'd ever seen, asking Joe to come work for him. Completing time-consuming projects strictly for kicks might not seem like the best business model, but it was what hip-hop was all about in its early days, Joe says. "It wasn't so much of a business



thing yet. Everybody was just striving to be the best. That was the only driving force. If you were doing graf, you wanted to be the best. If you were DJing or MCing or whatever you were doing, breakdancing, you wanted to be the best. Money was the last thing on your mind. A different kind of era."

That difference between then and now is crystal clear when you compare Buck's first album art for De La Soul, seventeen years ago, with this year's *Are You In?* In 1993, the cover for *De La Soul is Dead* was a way of reflecting the group's new direction. No computers were used, mostly just radiographs, rulers, an upside-down bed and an airbrush. In 2009, the album art for *Are You In?* is cross-branded with Be@rbricks and Nike. A whole line of clothing has been built around the graphics and color direction. The pro-

cess of creating the album art is less about an individual vision, and more of a collective marketing effort.

Of course, Joe is still doing his own solo artwork. "For me, I always had to keep my personal stuff. I can cut loose and do something that I really like, and balance that with having to do client work, so it keeps you from going nuts." One of his new, ongoing projects is a series of remixed album covers called *reVISIONS*. "I just do it, like, full on put the time in. But I'm having fun. Probably gonna do another one soon. Probably a De La one. I think I'm gonna redo *Buhloone Mindstate*. It's something different, something new, kinda fresh. I treat it like exercise." Artists got to stay in shape. The next right place right time could come at any moment.

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