



"I said a hip..."

"...hop..."



"...you don't..."



"...stop"

# THE GRAND MASTER

Carl Craig's pushed the limits of techno for nearly 20 years, inventing d'n'b along the way. But it can't compare to meeting Quincy Jones...

Words Ralph Moore Photos Naki

**C**ARL CRAIG IS worried about his shoes. The techno legend is sitting in the white marble lobby of a hotel in the Spanish city of Bilbao, the scene of his final gig before the Grammy awards for which he is nominated, peering out of the tall windows at the overcast sky with the look of a worried man. "Can't we just stay in the hotel?" he asks. To be fair, these shoes are Carl's favourite, and like the man himself, pretty special. "They're snake," he explains. "Rhythm, actually." Only when *Mixmag* points out that he's playing a gig in a dirty great warehouse in a couple of hours does he relax a little about risking the rain. "So you're a smart-ass?" he chuckles, conceding the point and stepping onto the empty street. Unusual (and possibly endangered) footwear is not the only thing that makes Craig unique. He doesn't look like most people's idea of a Detroit techno producer; dapper in a cashmere scarf, expensive jeans and

matching black cap he's shorter than you'd expect and carries an air of European sophistication. Indeed, a seriously deep attention to detail and an inability to be pipped down have always been priorities of Craig's.

As the label boss of Planet E – the imprint that gave us records like 'Throw' (the bass-slung groove at the heart of this month's Dennis Ferrer covermount) and more recently, the pure adrenaline blast that is 'Full Clip', he's consistently flown the flag for techno infused with the jazz, soul and even world music that are his other loves. Since joining the second wave of the genre 17 years ago, his influence has steered techno away from cold, metallic instrumentals and shifted it towards a more soulful, widescreen sound. If the 2008 incarnation of techno is one of the most exciting sounds in dance music, the man in the snakeskin shoes is the main reason.

Oh, and he also invented drum 'n' bass, according to such authorities as Ron Size, who credits his 1992 *Mo' Wax* smash 'Bug In A Bassline' with lifting the genre out of hardcore and jungle.



**OUTSIDE, AMONG THE** bright lights and swooping post-modernist architecture of the pristine streets of Bilbao, we keep Craig's mind off his footwear with talk of pop music. He speaks in a laid-back, Detroit drawl, his words concise and considered. The flow is peppered with the music of three people – firstly, Michael Jackson and Prince, "I'd forced to choose, I'd choose Prince, but I like Michael too, I'd like to hang out with Prince more."

As an artist, Craig has used more aliases than Carlos The Jackal: aside from 'Throw' (as Paperclip People), he's recorded as BFC, Psyche, Designer Music and, perhaps most importantly, Innerzone Orchestra. And as a producer and remixer, his work in the past three years has reached all-new heights: reworks of Theo Parrish, X-Press 2 and Della and Gavin all turned the original and more recently, the pure adrenaline into finely-tuned, machine-made anthems for T In The Park and Panorama Bar alike. His Junior Boys remix is the reason for his Grammy nomination.

But most of all it's fellow Grammy nominee Amy Winehouse who fascinates him most. "Where does she live?" he wants to know. "Are her parents wealthy? Middle-class? And has anyone else noticed that she doesn't actually have any hips?" We discuss how his trumpet hero Miles Davis's career was also blighted with drug problems. Every time *Mixmag*'s seen Winehouse, we note, she's been visibly troubled but sung brilliantly. "Well, you only have to perform for one hour," he says, something his original jazz idol knew only too well.

Jazz is one of several key elements in Craig's make-up as an artist and a man. Others include a life spent in Detroit, a wife ("my back-bone") and his three young children (12, six, three and the latest addition who, he says, is "minus four months old"). Classic Looney Tunes cartoons also figure, "especially Speedy Gonzalez and Bugs Bunny. My favourite is where Bugs Bunny is trapped in a mad scientist's lab and they all end up taking ether and walking real slow. I try to make my kids watch cartoons – seriously!"



**C**ARL CRAIG WAS born in Detroit on May 22nd 1969, the third of four children, and was surrounded by music from a young age. His musical history begins as a teenager living in Detroit, the son of a teacher and a post office worker. Although he wasn't into school ("I hated school, I couldn't handle it")



It's behind you...

## "Dance music should increase the health of music in general"

he was fully aware of the Motor City's musical heritage, but as with so many dance artists it was a diminutive man from Minnesota with a penchant for purple that kicked it all off. "Prince opened my ears to a lot of stuff," he recalls. "I was nine or ten when 'Soft And Wet' came out in '79. Detroit radio was really good for playing new shit back in the day. We had some of the best radio in the world for a long time."

The first instrument he picked up was a guitar – "because my brother had one" – and he still has one somewhere, despite confessing he plays it "badly". His early inspirations included seeing Ron Hardy and then Derrick May at The Music Institute ("the DJ was the preacher"), and from listening to jazz and world music. "I went to college for a year and that was better because they had an electronic music class," he says. Although at school he told his mother he wanted to be "an electronic Mozart," his all-time living hero was and still is Quincy Jones, not just for 'Thriller' but also for his style and elegance. When Craig finally met Jones at the Montreux Jazz Festival last year it was a real high point.

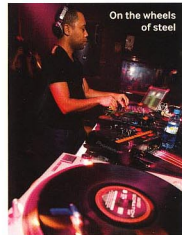
"I remember saying in an interview in 1990 that I wanted to be the next Quincy Jones," he says. "I sat down with him for 20 minutes at Montreux. He was very gracious. Supposedly, if you want something to happen in Hollywood, he's who you go to."

The Grammy nomination, he says, feels like "a new beginning. I love it that both these things have come together within six months of each other. For so long, people didn't take DJing seriously, especially in Detroit. That ain't no job, you're making records," people would say. As you might expect, Craig likens electronic music to jazz at its best. "It's techno the new jazz? It might be! I don't think there's anything else out there that takes music to the heights that electronic music does right now. When I make music, I'm sculpting sound. Why do I do this? Am I on a mission? I'm on a mission from god!" he booms. "Nah, I just do it because I enjoy it!"

Suddenly a text comes through and he stops for a second. "My graphic designer friend says I can't meet Amy Winehouse," he says, shaking his head at the vagaries of the US visa system. "See, even in Detroit they know about Amy fuckin' Winehouse!"



**T**2AM. CRAIG takes to the CDs at a 2,000-capacity warehouse just outside Bilbao. While the second room plays –



On the wheels of steel

whisper it – indie anthems from Paul and The Strokes, in the main room Carl drops modern techno smashes like the Joris Voorn remix of 'Bassline' alongside newer white noise hits like Radioslave's 'Bell Cap Dance' and Dubfire's 'Emissions'. The crowd – techno-flavoured teenagers and early 20-somethings – are dancing like crazy, although they seem more interested in drinking than dressing up. James Murphy – who sometimes performs a fierce live version of 'Throw' with LCD Soundystem – might be pleased to hear that his vocal on 'Sound Of Silver' melded to Carl's heavyweight production makes this the high point of the set.

Of course, when you have been making music for the best part of 20 years you have a certain perspective that youth cannot give. So what does Carl make of dance music in 2008? "I think it's very healthy. But music is music, man. I would like to see the health of dance music increase the health of music in general. It's still guitars versus synthesizers, although there will always be someone like LCD Soundystem making electronic funk or Bloc Party doing a more electro-led version of things. But really, I just want to see it all link up."

An hour later – there's no time for sleep on this schedule – Craig jumps on a plane to LA, where he's due at a pre-Grammy's award party. But there's his frustrating news ahead. On Sunday, unbelievably, the Grammy for best remix goes to – deep breath – Benny Benassi's Satisfaction remix of Public Enemy's 'Bring The Noise', which is insulting for many reasons: it's a terrible remix. It's not even a new Public Enemy song, and, most importantly, because the person who deserved the honour was Craig. >

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