

BUCK 65

NOT A FAN OF PIRACY

Words: Gareth Stack

Analogue caught up with hip hop legend Rich Terfry aka Buck 65, just before his July 5th Gig at the Hub.

A: So how many times have you visited Ireland at this stage?

B: It's been quite a few times and in fact in the last few years I've been coming an average of two or three times a year. I don't even remember when my first visit here was. I've been coming here fairly regularly at least for the last five years or so. Interestingly one key memorable show that I did here, memorable for a lot of reasons, some good, some

bad to be perfectly honest with you, was the Trinity Ball a few years ago with 'The Rapture', 'Dizzee Rascal', 'Electrelane', and myself, I played with myself that night. And, that was a strange, strange, strange night.

The good thing that came of it is I met the girls from Electrelane for the first time, and we hit it off and became fast friends. Bringing things full circle from that event years ago to today, we're now actually working on some music together. So something really great ended up coming of that. It may result in some new songs, conceivably even an album, depending on how well it goes. So for that reason alone I'm really grateful that it happened.

The one thing that I found really bizarre about that event – aside from all the obvious factors about how debauched and drunken it was – was the fact that there was a programme, explaining what was happening and giving a little background on the bands that the school had invited. Maybe there was some kind of humour there that was lost on all of us. The write ups on each of the bands was basically slagging them off. So it's like, why invite us here just to diss us, and it wasn't just me, it was every single one of us. So we as the bands had to band together, so we ending up feeling like 'It's us against them, and they hate us but we're here, and if we stick together you know, maybe we can make it'. But we ending up all feeling really alienated, and just kind of terrified by the whole thing. But a lot of us were strangely upset that we had this invitation, and you think logically that you've put together this event, you want to bring people out, so you think you'd write something flattering about the bands, but it was all really really horrible, it was actually pretty nasty. Which, obviously we didn't like, but it just didn't make a lot of sense to us, if you're trying to promote an event that you're putting on yourself, to say bad and strange things about the acts. It was really bizarre, I almost wish I'd kept one of those

Photography: Brendan McGuirk

programmes.

A: *Can I just apologise on behalf of Trinity right now?*

B: No problem.

A: *You use your website's 'Love Letters' section, and MySpace and other digital media to keep in contact with your fans. You also recently have away your 'Dirty Work' EP, how do you find all these tools and technology help to foster community and develop a fanbase?*

B: Well it's really an invaluable tool, and I see it work really well, and the great thing about tools like MySpace is you can do something, and then get a sense from the response from it in a variety of ways, for example, if I do a show in a given city, the next day I'll have something like 200 new friend requests, and they're almost all from that city where I just played. In particular if I make a blog entry or post new music, you get feedback on it right away, and I really value that a lot. But, you know, although part of my thinking leading up to the decision to make a bunch of music available for free, whether it was the 'Dirty Work' thing through MySpace, or the 'Strong Arm' mixtape project that I did through my website, was I really got to the point where I believed that for better or worse, the value in music – or at least the perceived value in music, had just gone. People just didn't really see much value in it, and I was not going to continue to fight a losing battle or cry over spilt milk. So I thought well, if people don't really want to pay for music any more anyway then I might as well really try to adopt a new way of thinking, and try to find new ways to make a living, and as far as music goes, you might as well give it away for free, if people are not ever going to pay for it anyway.

Never the less, having done that, the response to that was so overwhelmingly good; I still get the sense that even though no one's really paying for music, even just the gesture, that they're not being fought by an artist, seems to mean a lot to people. Like 'You've met us half way on this, we don't want to pay, and you've accepted that, and we really appreciate it'. And so it's weirdly bittersweet in a way, it's really a Pandora's box that's been opened. You can't close it: it's not even worth trying. Mostly I try not to think about it. It's gonna taken even a little bit of time still. Like, for example on my last tour, I tried to help out my own cause. At a certain point, what becomes the focus for me is trying to make a living, and I don't really have a fall back plan, so I have to figure out ways within this one thing I know how to do, to try to get my rent paid. So on my last tour, I put together a whole bunch of bootleg titles, and I was selling them, and about half way through the tour, I started to see the sales go way down, and you know it didn't take a genius to figure out it only took that number of weeks for it to spread all over the internet. But I was coming face to face with people who were walking up to the merch table, looking at everything that I had available there, and saying, 'I've downloaded all this stuff, there's nothing here for me', and then just walking away. It's kind of like, it's one thing just to know that it's happening out there, and it's invisible. But to be confronted with it, face to face, to have a person walk right up to your face, and to say 'I've stolen all your art, and I don't give a shit, fuck you, you have nothing for me,' and then just walking away, it's weird, it's really weird. Then later that night, you're on stage, and you're looking at all these people, and you're performing for them, and you're there to provide a service for them, and at the same time trying to remember all the things that are valuable and good about what you're doing in the first place, i.e.: 'I love this, I love music and that's why I'm here'. But sometimes you have to fight off the feeling that your audience is also your enemy in a weird way. They're the people preventing you from putting food in your mouth. At the end of the day they don't give a shit about you. They will rob money right

out of your pocket if they have the opportunity to do so. You have to try really hard to not think about that, but the reality of it is, essentially that's what's going on, and it's gotten to the point, where people don't mind telling you right to your face, 'I don't know who you are as a person, you may or may not be nice, but as far as what you can do for me, you know, it's just a matter of what I can take from you, and if you can make some sort of separation, and separate out the human part of you, and really think about it in terms of, I don't know what, cause it's not business, stealing doesn't really fit into a definition of business in a way that really makes sense. But if you can make the separation, 'cause on a human level, to be confronted with that face to face, it's tough, so you kind of have to put yourself aside almost completely, and accept the fact that you're just this thing for people, and that's a hard thing to accept, and it is a lot to ask it's hard to say I'm going to put myself as a person with feeling aside as I try to do this job, but it's what you have to do. Nevertheless, like I said, giving away music for free, and trying to maintain that open channel of communication through MySpace or whatever else, does seem to have some value in it, and I wouldn't want to paint an entirely negative picture, because there's a lot of great things that come of it too. For every time I essentially have a person slap me in the face, I also have another person who tells me 'Your music has made a big difference in my life, and it helped me get through a tough time', or whatever, and when you here that, even just to know that someone's listening, obviously that means a lot, and I do try as much as I can to remove my ego from what I do as much as possible. When you hear something nice like that, it's really just all you need to keep going.

A: *Is it possible – you've got a major label distributor in Warner internationally – but as a semi-independent artist just touring and selling merchandise to survive, and to continue doing what you're doing?*

B: I think, and I hope so. That basically seems to be the last real avenue that's open to us in terms of making a living. I think it's maybe too soon to tell. To go back to what we were just talking about. There's a real hump you have to get over as a musician, to get to the point where you're touring and you're making money. And if you walk away from the end of a tour with a couple of hundred dollars that's ok, you can get back and pay part of your rent. That's not really making real money, and so the one way you can help your own cause is at the merchandise table. Even in that situation, if you try to do something really exclusive, I mean give it a day, it'll be on the internet, and people can and will get it, and they'll get it for free. So, I gave that a shot on this last tour, and the first few weeks were pretty good, and then like I said, it went downhill fast. I know, I was touring with a guy named 'Sage Francis', who in the US is bigger than I am, and he wasn't doing a lot of business at the merch table, he had a lot of music for sale, but it was the same thing, it was all material that everyone had and they weren't buying, so you know, you become like a salesman in a different kind of way, and the one way a musician is going to make money is by selling t-shirts or something like that, you can't download a t-shirt yet. So if I can put some creative thought in what might be interesting for people. You always hear people arguing for vinyl, there's still a few enthusiasts out there who really want to get their hands on a tangible thing, like on vinyl, but that's a really loud minority. They make a lot of noise but it really is a minority, and when you really believe passionately in something, you feel that you're right and you don't feel that you're alone, but the truth is that you are.

It's a fascinating thing, and it's a whole other discussion, but the DJ side of the game, and this is even starting to trickle into your casual DJ, is getting taken completely by Serato, this programme with this two digitised pieces of vinyl, that allows you to run your MP3's off

your computer, which again, most music that people have on their computer is stuff they downloaded and got their hands on without paying for it anyway. So now all you need to do is buy this programme which is pretty cheap, get these two cheap encoded pieces of vinyl and you never need to buy vinyl again. Apparently what I've heard, in the few years that this had existed already, it's had a major impact on vinyl sales. For serious DJs and the casual collectors, you just don't need it, if you want to hear your music on vinyl, all you need is Serato, and anything that you've ever dreamt of that you want to play on vinyl you can do, so it's make an impact particularly with the hardcore people, and anyone that's in the business DJ's and MC's they're all using Serato, or close to it, so what remains is those few hardcore collectors and fetishists.

A: Your lyrics are a huge part of your music, it's a cheesy question, but who would you say are your writing and lyrical inspirations inside and outside of music?

B: Inside of music I would say, I mean a lot of the obvious ones, I'm always taking inspiration from the people that completely blow me out of the water, I mean the problem there is that sometimes those very same people humble me to the point of making me want to quit. Looking at people like Leonard Cohen, whose early work is just completely devastating to me, or, there's a really small handful of people that I'm utterly in awe of, in terms of their ability to write magnificent words. That David Berman guy from the 'Silver Jews' has some moments that are really, really impressive. Sometimes you know, it's little handfuls and people have little flashes of brilliance, and when I look at it that way, there's a lot of people I could name that have one song, that completely floors me. There's a few I can look to that are like a rock that are always there that are always going to inspire me. I suppose if there was one it would have to be Leonard Cohen. Anyone else that mystifies me or that gives me a lot to think about or try to figure out. Someone like Captain BeefHeart, or someone like Thom Yorke even. His writing is so strange, and he's begged people not to interpret what he's saying, which leads me to believe that maybe he doesn't even write for the sake of meaning, maybe it's all just phonetics to him or something. But it's interesting on some level never the less. The problem there is that I will listen and I'll analyse and if I come up with answers that demystify people, then it's like, ok, I've finished with them, I've figured out what their trick is, where they're coming from. Outside of music, that's more where I get my influence, and that can come from a lot of different places, and a lot of different artists that don't even work with words at all.

So like looking at the work of a really great photographer, whether that's someone like Robert Frank or artists like Egon Schiele, or filmmakers like Andrei Tarkovsky, or Alejandro Jodorowsky, or Jan Švankmajer, or people like that, I'll watch their work and feel really inspired and feel compelled to sit down and write, but to be perfectly honest with you, and I take this as a really good sign, and hopefully as a sign of some kind of maturity or something, but the one thing that is inspiring me the most to write these days, and consistently so, is just real things that are happening in my life, more than anything else, even some of my old sources that used to work for me every time, sometimes they're not even working for me any more, but it's real life, and just real things that are happening. Luckily my life is interesting enough that it is constantly providing me with inspiration and ideas, and I'm not the sort of person that's afraid of trouble or pain or whatever else, and I like to throw caution to the wind even at the expense of my career, sometimes, maintaining like a real life. I know a lot of musicians, they have to surrender it almost completely. That's helped a lot, I've been going through just some unbelievably weird things lately, and at the end of each day it just has me running for the pen and paper to get it down

more than anything else. It's nice to be reminded about beauty or great ugliness, which a good artist can help you do, but when it comes right down to it's just my own experiences that I find that I'm writing about the most, and it's those experiences that are moving me the most you know emotionally and so on, and that's good, I think that's good, because I've been trying to shed influence as much as I can and I think I'm getting there.

A: Trying to voice?

B: Yeah, my own.

A: Your stuff, at least in the last few years, is quite radically different from a lot of what's going on in hip hop, have you faced resistance or criticism from the quote unquote Hip Hop community, for that more lyrical, more introspective, intelligent material.

B: When I started to break away, and I guess if I was going to pinpoint when that happened in more of a conscious way, I guess I'd say back around '99. When I started almost consciously doing things that felt like risks, or that were taking guts. Shortly after I certainly was getting resistance, almost like a hostile resistance to it. And I had to, almost for the sake of my own sanity, hang onto a belief, that one day they'll get it. Lo and behold, from my observation, and my perspective, I think that's happening now. I do admittedly get this really juvenile sense of satisfaction sometimes when I sit back and I look at the work of some of the same people, peers, who were criticising me, who are now doing what I was doing back then. I kind of end up saying to myself, 'Well I told you so, I knew that in time, you would get to the same place that I got to a few years earlier. And it took time, and maybe at first people weren't quite ready for that yet. But music's changing fast, and the world is changing, and more and more I kind of feel like people are getting it. Even if they don't necessarily like what I do, which I don't expect everyone to at all, more and more people are accepting that there is a place for what I'm doing, and a general just embrace of diversity these days, which again maybe the internet plays into that, but I think people are digging that more. I'm seeing more and more musicians becoming more and more adventurous. Even like mainstream ones. Think about it, it's hard to do this, we always were in the times we're in right now, and we enjoy being in the times we're in right now. And we just go for it, and we look to the people we've chosen as mavericks or whatever, and we trust them. And so, if Kanye West decides to hook up with Daft Punk, or sample Daft Punk or whatever, we believe in him, and we say to ourselves, 'It's ok', and we go with it or whatever, and we dance. But if he or anyone else had tried doing that X number of years ago, it would not have been happening, and there would have been that same kind of hostile resistance, like 'What the fuck are you doing?' and 'Stop!'.

But it's changing, and not only is that ok for the hot rapper of the moment to be getting into like French dance music or something like that, which you know, people would have got punched right in the face for that years ago you know. Now it's welcomed with opened arms. It's amazing to me, and it does make me smile, and I do get this perverse sense of satisfaction from it certainly. Not that I had anything to do with it, you know what I mean, but just thank goodness people's minds are like opening up, and people are becoming a little more liberal. Cause granted, for a long time, Hip Hop music across the board, from your biggest commercial level, all the way down to your deepest underground stuff, was really conservative, and it's loosening up now, thank goodness.

Buck 65's next album 'Situation', is expected in October. For more on the gig, and a snip from an acoustic styled version of 'The Centaur', check out the excellent Nialler9 blog.