

PHOTO BY JOSHUA KESSLER/PRETNA LTD.



# DOUBLE TROUBLE

Outkast's new album delivers the best of both worlds

o it's good to be king. That's certainly the view of Outkast, the explosively popular hip-hop duo from Atlanta. Considering the mad props given them by fans and critics alike, the rappers—Big Boi and Andre 3000—could certainly be considered music royalty, but today they're literally being treated like kings. The two sit on thrones situated atop a three-tiered white lacquer platform. An old reel-to-reel tape player stands on a table below them. Their

subjects—20 women wearing headphones, high-heels, bikini bottoms, and little else—sprawl seductively on the steps below them.

It would seem to be the ultimate groupie concubine fantasy; in fact it's an elaborate setup for a magazine cover shoot. But that doesn't mean Big Boi and Dre enjoy it any less. "You can never have enough girls, man," remarks Dre. He is resplendent in an all white sailor suit and a zebra-stripe ascot—a hip-hop version of Thurston Howell III. "It's my



“YOU CAN NEVER HAVE enough girls, man,” says Dre on the joys of doing publicity

gentleman look,” says Dre. “It’s all about finding your own style, and I know what I want.”

Big Boi (born Antwan Patton) is not usually as flamboyant as his high school homeboy Dre (born Andre Benjamin). For the first part of the photo session he chooses a Lacoste shirt and silver chain with large medallion to accompany his shorts. Before ascending his throne, he takes a floppy white hat out of a brown valise. Big Boi says Outkast worked with the designers to sketch the concept for the shoot. “It’s real imperial,” he says. “I love it.”

The pageantry is all part of the prerelease publicity blitz for Outkast’s much anticipated new CD, which drops on August 19. Their last joint, 2000’s *Stankonia*, sold 3.9 million copies, received raves from the critics, and got a Grammy nomination for best album. Outkast owe their success to a sound unlike anything else you’ll hear on the radio. Beyond beats and flow, they deliver a heavy dose of funk, with guitars and horns, as well as sing-along choruses. “We don’t go into the studio thinking we’re going to make a hip-hop album,” says Dre. “We just go to make rhythms and melodies. That’s all it is.”

On their fifth disc Outkast once again showcase their unique brand of music. *Speakerboxx/The Love Below* will be a double album, which makes it unusual in rap. Adding a further twist, the new disc is really two solo

records from Big Boi and Dre, complete with two album covers. On past records the duo typically traded lyrics on each track. But on *Speakerboxx/The Love Below* they make only about four appearances on each other’s discs, though they collaborated on the production of both CDs. “It’s like cell division: One part broke off from the other,” says Big Boi. “But we’re still doing music together.”

Dre elaborates a bit. “I’ve always started songs before albums, or sometimes written little personal songs at home,” he says. “I always had certain songs I wanted to put out that wouldn’t necessarily go in the vein that Outkast fans would be listening for.”

As with previous Outkast releases, the new material employs actual musicians, which is still something of a rarity in a rap world that relies on samples and scratches. But Outkast’s new disc will also boast some special guest stars. Jay-Z appears on Big Boi’s side, and Grammy-winning chanteuse Norah Jones sings on Dre’s portion. And befitting the experimental nature of the album, Dre even plays the sax—which is unusual, since it’s an instrument he barely knows how to play. “I’m not a saxophone player, but I play it on the album,” he says. “It’s a songwriting tool for me. I make these noises because I like the way they sound.”

Outkast’s musical mélange has managed

to unite a diverse group of fans, from hard-core hip-hoppers to R&B and funk traditionalists to alternative rockers. But even with Outkast’s reputation for outlandish antics, could the dueling solo CDs be a risky career move after so much success as a duo? “I don’t know and I don’t care,” says Dre. “There’ll never be another *Stankonia*!” In some ways the new album is an apt reflection of the band’s spirit. “The style is Outkast: Expect the unexpected,” says Big Boi.

The pair, now each 28 years old, attended the same Atlanta high school, but they met in a shopping mall. They became friends, then joined forces musically, initially calling their duo 2 Shades Deep. In 1993 they became Outkast and got signed by respected local label LaFace Records. They didn’t linger long in obscurity. Their first single, “Player’s Ball,” hit number one on the rap charts, and their debut album, *Southernplayalisticadillacmuzik*, had gone platinum by the end of 1994. They haven’t touched ground since. “Musically, what sells people is the dichotomy of it all,” says Dre. “Big Boi is like this and I’m like that, so it’s two different types of people trying to make something new.” In their past songs, Dre comes across like an introspective—and outrageous—poet, while Big Boi positions himself as the macho, pit bull-collecting hip-hopper with a conscience.

PHOTO BY MATT DOYLE



As *Bullseye* went to press, Dre was still finishing his disc, while Big Boi's side was ready to go. The process took about two and half years to complete. While touring for *Stankonia* the two would scribble down lyrics and beats. After they completed the tour, Outkast brought the half-baked ideas back to their Atlanta studio and started noodling with them to turn them into the fine art of an Outkast production. "Anyone can throw something together to put out two to three records a year," says Big Boi. "But it takes some time for our funk to simmer and marinade."

In some ways, Dre says, he'd just as soon not promote the new album at all, or be asked to explain its meaning. "I like to sneak 'em out," he says. And despite the group's success, he worries about the backlash of overpromotion. "I hate it when artists hype their albums up, especially when it comes after an album that was successful," he says. "Because I've seen it happen a lot of times that the next album isn't as great."

If Outkast isn't fond of pumping up the new album, the pair do enjoy the prerelease

parade of photo shoots. Always known as a stylish band, the guys are better described as ever-changing sartorial jesters, especially Dre, who sometimes wears boxy blue suits, a purple genie outfit, or a customized military uniform. The two have even formed a clothing company to sell some of their designs. "With us, it ain't just going to be a basketball jersey," says Big Boi. "We like to look like the music."

Big Boi reflects that attitude at the second photo shoot of the day, which has the girls—now wearing bikini tops—carrying each rapper Cleopatra-style on a long litter. Fortunately for the ladies, wood supports hidden from the camera's view mean that they don't have to hoist the rappers themselves. Make-believe fog begins to emanate from a machine, giving the scene a ghostly aura. Big Boi is now dressed in what he calls his "whupass" karate uniform, which is beet red. He's wearing a vintage Houston Astros baseball cap.

Between styling clothing and recording music, Outkast keep busy. Big Boi is putting

out a DVD to coincide with the album's release. *Big Boi's Boom Boom Room* features home videos and tour footage, a collection he calls a "rapumentary." He filmed 130 hours of footage to come up with enough quality material for the release. "It's just like a *Behind the Music* or a *Driven*," he says.

Meanwhile, Dre has just finished his first movie, a small part in the Harrison Ford-Josh Hartnett action film *Hollywood Homicide*. He's also going to appear in a movie just beginning production called *Love Hater*, in which he'll play a classical pianist. "Onstage you have to be this character and performing," he says. "In acting you have to let go of all vanity."

With the photos complete, the girls begin to put on their clothing and start to leave the studio. A few linger to talk to Big Boi and Dre and pose for snapshots. The rappers appear happy with the attention. They know the scene will repeat itself, as other magazines line up to put Outkast on their covers. Just another day in the life of a king.

—Warren Cohen