

Rex 'n' effects

Hip-hop producers battle for supremacy at Dante Ross's King of the Beats.
By **Jesse Serwer**

More than any other music culture, hip-hop's always been defined by direct competition: Its history is colored with career-making (and -ending) MC battles and mythic warfare for DJ supremacy. Hip-hop producers, however, have never really figured into that equation. At first, beats came courtesy of moonlighting disco arrangers; later, many producers' individual identities were hidden behind collective units like the Bomb Squad and Organized Noise. That changed with the arrival of Sean Combs, and in recent years, beatsmiths like Pharrell, Timbaland and Kanye West have become hip-hop's biggest names. With affordable technology placing the tools of the trade into more hands than ever, hip-hop producers, like MCs and DJs before them, now have a subculture of their own that's fostered by entities such as *Scratch Magazine*, a beat-based offshoot of hip-hop periodical *XXL*. It was only a matter of time before the knob twisters started holding battles of their own.

"Me and my boys are always bugging out in the studio, battling each other, like, 'What you got?'" says Dante Ross, a veteran producer and former Elektra Records A&R man who helped launch the careers of Busta Rhymes, Ol' Dirty Bastard and MF Doom. More recently, he's

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worked with artists as diverse as Korn and Santana. Along with brothers Mike and Steve Malbon of the quarterly magazine *Frank 151*, Ross roped in the hip-hop-savvy carmaker Scion as a sponsor and created King of the Beats, a nationwide round-robin tournament for producers. Contestants face several separate challenges, judged by Ross and a panel of production icons including Prince Paul and Pete Rock. They must make unique beats



DANTE'S INFERNO Ross heats up the competitive instincts of hip-hop's rhythm aces.

out of a preselected sample source, create a work using a classic hip-hop cappella and, in the final round, blow the other contestants out of the water by manipulating a beat of their choosing into a winning track. Regional competitions are held in Los Angeles, Atlanta and, on Monday 16, NYC; a nationwide final is slated for November 4 at B.B. King Blues Club & Grill. The ultimate winner nets \$5,000 and a year's worth of bragging rights.

Beat battles didn't originate with Ross. Beat Society, a monthly Philadelphia party that grew out of the online forum of the same name, has blossomed into a traveling showcase (with frequent stops at New York's Knitting Factory) that's inspired big names like Alchemist, Just Blaze and 9th Wonder to mix it up in four-man competitions with lesser-knowns like Street Orchestra and Bean One. Another online forum, the International Producers

Association, has hosted its monthly Beat Battle at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe in the East Village since August 2002, and the Five Spot in Clinton Hill puts on a similar event. But while Beat Society showcases established producers in a somewhat friendly, concertlike setting, and other competitions allow contestants to use their own beat CDs to create tracks, King of the Beats ups the drama with its all-the-way-live combat-zone scenario.

"The only rule [for entry] was that you can't have any major-label credits," says Ross. "I called every rapper and producer I knew to spread the word, hit dudes up on MySpace.... After listening to about 4,000 CDs, I found 30 quality dudes who sound like they could be making records." Eight competitors and two alternates take part in each of the three regions, with the respective champs and one wild-card runner-up set to go head-to-head at the finale.

Recruiting Doug E. Fresh and Rahzel as comperes (Fresh hosts the New York regional, while Rahzel will run the finale) and Big Daddy Kane and Raekwon for postbattle performances, Ross streamlined the processes of earlier beat battles to create a pace he describes as "kinda like *Iron Chef*," cause dudes are scrambling around the stage to set their equipment up."

Ross's advice for would-be beat battlers: "Don't play any slow beats. Everyone who played slow shit lost. Beethoven, who won in L.A., was dope because he played a piano melody and bongos live on top of his shit. He understood the performance angle more than the other guys."

The King of the Beats New York regional competition is at Canal Room Monday 16. King of the Beats' grand finale is at B.B. King Blues Club & Grill November 4.

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