

Divine intervention

Fritz the Cat passes the mic to local MCs at weekly workshop

BY LIZZ MENDEZ BERRY

London, Ont., may seem like a strange place to begin a hip-hop quest. But that's where a cat

named Fritz and his friends united in search of an MIA MC called Divine Styler. Once a member of Ice-T's Rhyme Syndicate,

Divine Styler is an astonishing wordsmith whose classic debut, *Word Power*, was so potent, it forced Fritz and his pals to drop everything (i.e., the 40s of St. Ides they were holding) and start a zine with the specific aim of finding the legend.

Last Sunday, Fritz and I meet for drinks on a Parkdale patio close to his apartment to cure our respective hangovers, and he reminisces over his life since the beginning of *In Search of Divine Styler*.

"We started in March '96, with myself, B-Side and Drunkness Monster being drunken, skateboarding hip-hop idiots who didn't understand why Divine Styler wasn't still in rap. So we decided, on acid I think, that we had to find him, no matter what. I figured the best way to do it was to involve as many people in the search as possible, and that's how the magazine started. The few people who knew who Divine Styler was were always so excited, like, 'You're trying to find him? That's amazing!'"

A while later, Divine Styler's ex-wife's new husband (got that?) picked up a copy of the mag and showed it to her, and she phoned Fritz, then cashless in Toronto. And then Divine called.



Fritz recalls, "At the time I had no money, no job. I was sleeping beside a furnace. He called and I was with a bunch of friends and they all just knew it was him. We talked and he was so cool and then he ended up coming to do a show, in '97. At that point, Divine was thinking about coming back and he took us as a sign that people actually wanted him back."

Not only was *In Search of Divine Styler* the catalyst for Divine to return to rap (his *Word Power 2: Directrix* dropped in '98), but it also gave exposure to underground gems like Medusa and Aceyalone. The magazine is no longer, but Fritz continues to write about

obscure geniuses in his *Vice* column and other publications. He's also put together a (soon-to-be-released) *In Search of Divine Styler* compilation, featuring such artists as Styles of Beyond and, of course, Divine Styler.

In the tradition of rhyme incubators like Los Angeles' weekly hip-hop workshop series. Thursday, August 17: Asicks & Fatski, Drunkness Monster, Sonny Thrasher, DJ Moves, Hooch, 817 Queen W. MC sign-up line: 532-8505.



Good Life/Project Blowed, Fritz's latest project is a night called In Divine Styler, happening Thursdays at the Hooch. "I was thinking about the talent that came out of these little places," he explains. "You've got 20 or 30 amazing groups that came out of the Good Life/Project Blowed thing, and there's so many MCs coming out of New York that came through the Lyricist Lounge. And Planet Mars in Toronto had such an energy around it. It was getting people motivated to do more shows, to record and collaborate. Something like that is a regular push — otherwise you just chill for too long."

A freestyle friend himself, Fritz believes in the zen of the free-form flow. "Ever since I was 16, 17 and we all started listening to Pharcyde and the Freestyle Fellowship," he says, "the things these people are able to do off the top of their heads blew me away. I started practising and practising. You don't think, you just channel. It's kinda like satori, which is a martial-

arts word for when you're one with everything. It's not you fighting — you just are the fight. "Sometimes it takes a while, but in London we'd have sessions where it was Paul the Apostle and his old rhyme partner Kirk, me and Bill B-Side and my buddy Jedi, and we'd be rhyming all night, drinking 40s. We'd end up in a pitch-black room, just in our boxers, sweaty as hell, screaming at the top of our lungs, at 5 in the morning after eight hours of rhyming nonstop. When you stop thinking about what you're gonna say and it just comes through you, you're just a conduit. It's the biggest high in the world."



Fritz the Cat (centre, second from left) gets some love from his In Divine Styler crew, while local MCs and DJs bust their moves at Hooch

At last week's In Divine Styler, before the performances began, the resident DJs (including Drunkness Monster and Sonny Thrasher) played seldom-heard underground classics like the Freestyle Fellowship's "Hot Potato" and newer cuts like Latyrx's "8 Pt. Agenda" and De La Soul's "I.C.Y'all." Says Fritz, "I want In Divine Styler to be a place to do your thing if you're a DJ or an MC. If there's people who wanna come up and kick writens, that's cool. If they want to read poetry, that's cool too. Whether you know every-thing or know nothing about hip-hop, you can come down and check out some good music and some MCs rhyming in a really relaxed atmosphere." ◀

PHOTOS BY CELINE SAKI