

## “3 Feet High and Rising”--De La Soul (1989)

Added to the National Registry: 2010

Essay by Vikki Tobak (guest post)\*



*De La Soul*

For hip-hop, the late 1980's was a tinderbox of possibility. The music had already raised its voice over tensions stemming from the “crack epidemic,” from Reagan-era politics, and an inner city community hit hard by failing policies of policing and an underfunded education system--a general energy rife with tension and desperation. From coast to coast, groundbreaking albums from Public Enemy's “It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back” to N.W.A.'s “Straight Outta Compton” were expressing an unprecedented line of fire into American musical and political norms. The line was drawn and now the stage was set for an unparalleled time of creativity, righteousness and possibility in hip-hop. Enter De La Soul.

De La Soul didn't just open the door to the possibility of being different. They kicked it in. If the preceding generation took hip-hop from the park jams and revolutionary commentary to lay the foundation of a burgeoning hip-hop music industry, De La Soul was going to take that foundation and flip it. The kids on the outside who were a little different, dressed different and had a sense of humor and experimentation for days.

In 1987, a trio from Long Island, NY--Kelvin “Posdnous” Mercer, Dave “Trugoy the Dove” Jolicoeur, and Vincent “Maseo, P.A. Pasemaster Mase and Plug Three” Mason—were classmates at Amityville Memorial High in the “black belt” enclave of Long Island were dusting off their parents' record collections and digging into the possibilities of rhyming over breaks like the Honey Drippers' “Impeach the President” all the while immersing themselves in the imperfections and dust-laden loops and interludes of early funk and soul albums. A kind of research and development period was taking place in the gloss of Long Island suburbia, which while a stark contrast to “harder” boroughs like Brooklyn and the Bronx, nevertheless produced iconoclasts like Rakim, Public Enemy, EPMD and MF DOOM.

A perfect storm. While the group was getting off the ground, another classmate at Amityville Memorial High, DJ Prince Paul, born Paul Huston, was already known in their small circle for his beat-making and studio skills. They knew each other's families and all thrived in the competitive crate-digging aesthetics of hip-hop at the time. The De La trio financed their passion for music by working as janitors while going to high school. Prince Paul meanwhile was

gaining local recognition for his DJ sets at The Ace Center Amityville, spinning everything from Trouble Funk to Parliament Funkadelic. In 1984, Prince Paul had been recruited into the Brooklyn crew Stetsasonic to serve as their showcase DJ. Stetsasonic pushed boundaries as the first hip-hop band, a live act with real street cred and lyrical prowess, even predating the Roots and other groups who paved the way for live musicianship in hip-hop. Around the same time, Paul caught the attention of his middle school music teacher who happened to be Everett Collins, a drummer for The Isley Brothers. Collins later introduced Paul to De La Soul member Maseo.

Prince Paul recounted that one day Maseo brought him the raw demo cut of 'Plug Tunin': "Oh my god, I've never heard anything like this. But I can make this better. It was just so raw and so funky and I had never heard anything like it." Maseo left him the demo cassette and Prince Paul went to work. He added a beat and some skits and presented the group with a stereo recording from a VHS recorder.

Prince Paul tells journalist Brian Coleman in his book "Check the Technique: Liner Notes for Hip Hop Junkies": "That demo was a rough sketch of the song 'Plug Tunin' and I really liked it. I did a two-tape-decks thing where I overdubbed some beats and added other things to what they had done originally." Coleman writes, "Paul's budding genius behind the boards was just waiting to be unleashed, and he put it to work in his role as 'mentor.'" Together, they pioneered a new direction in hip hop production, mixing and sampling.

De La Soul and Prince Paul recorded a three-track version of their demo in Calliope Studios, NY, which included the songs "Plug Tunin'," "Freedom of Speak," and "De La Games" (later "D.A.I.S.Y. Age"). The demo caught the attention of Tommy Boy's Tom Silverman and a young A&R for the independent label. Dante Ross was a New York City kid who frequented underground hip-hop parties, listening in on freestyle sessions and having a knack for identifying the one MC in a Cipher who was "the one." Brash and confident, Ross had entered the music business as a messenger for the Beastie Boys and, after a mentorship with Lyor Cohen at Def Jam, had come to work for Tommy Boy Founder Tom Silverman. Ross, who later championed the careers of Queen Latifah, Brand Nubian and Busta Rhymes, just to name a few, signed De La Soul in 1987 and, in 1988, they released "Plug Tunin'" as their first single. The song "Potholes in My Lawn" came soon after. Now it was time to record a full album.

De La Soul's breakthrough 1989 debut "3 Feet and Rising" was their coming-of-age. The album, laden with comedic skits, technical skill and a revolutionized sample-laden sound, is considered one of the most influential hip-hop albums of all time. The sound was high-concept and layered in complexities. Lyrical enough to please hip-hop mainstream but avant-garde enough to raise eyebrows. An early concept for the album involved music being transmitted from Mars by three microphone plugs (each one representing a member of the group). Though this idea was abandoned, the three members retained the pseudonyms "Plug One," "Plug Two" and "Plug Three," and the concept remained relevant on the album. Indeed, the album might as well have come from outer space in the ways that it disrupted not just hip-hop but American pop music overall. The skits and interludes on the album made you feel like you were sitting around cracking jokes, playing dozens with your most hilarious friends--or listening in on De La and Prince Paul's version of it.

Notably, sampling culture was at a fever pitch and De La Soul was determined to out-do their peers. The album opens with “The Magic Number,” over a sample of the “Schoolhouse Rock” theme song interspersed with John Bonham’s drum break from “The Crunge.” The group obliterated samples from the Blackbyrds, the New Birth, Led Zeppelin, and Billy Joel and Parliament. The competitive culture of “secret” breaks chopped to be untraceable and mysterious was a game of one up-manship among artists and producers of the time. The musical chorus of “Potholes in My Lawn” pointing to Parliament’s 1970 debut “Osmium” was just an example of how De La Soul went deep and dirty with their sampling. The power of the sampler --unleashed by producers like Marley Marl--allowed Prince Paul and De La Soul to get ambitious.

But ambition isn’t sometimes without peril. De La’s interlude “Transmitting Live from Mars” samples rock group The Turtles’ 1969 song “You Showed Me” and was used without permission and resulted in a lawsuit. Tommy Boy and De La Soul lost the suit, and had to pay more than \$100,000 in damages. The ruling was also a warning shot to hip-hop producers signaling that samples were a serious business and needed to be legally cleared. It caused tension between Silverman and Prince Paul. Prince Paul recounts in journalist Brian Coleman’s book “Check the Technique: Liner Notes for Hip Hop Junkies”: “When we finished the album we gave Tommy Boy all the samples and they just cleared the ones on songs that they thought would be popular.”

De La Soul’s visuals also equally disrupted norms. Their look ushered in an aesthetic of Afrocentric style marked by African medallions, Kente cloth accents, and a no-gold, anti-consumerism ideal that was new for hip-hop. For their album cover, Tommy Boy Records engaged the British art collective Grey Organisation to develop a bright, neon flower palette layered onto an overhead shot of the group. Most album covers of the time were power portraits conveying a straight forward confidence. “3 Feet High and Rising” was different. In his essay, “Hip Hop in The Daisy Age” for Snap Galleries, Art Director Toby Mott stated that they set out to “move away from the prevailing macho hip-hop visual codes which dominate to this day,” describing the album design process as follows:

We come up with the “Daisy Age” visual concept. De La Soul visit our loft where we lay them down on the floor facing up, their heads making a triangle. We photograph them whilst hanging precariously off a step ladder, one idea being that the cover would not have a right way up. CDs have yet to be the dominant musical format so the vinyl album sleeve is our most effective way of making a statement. We layer the brightly-coloured hand drawn flower designs made with Posca paint pens on acetate over the black and white photographic portrait print, which is rostrum camera copied...

The album cover is in the permanent collection of the MoMA. Questlove recounts in the documentary “Contact High: A Visual History of Hip-Hop,” that when he saw the album cover as a young man in Philadelphia, “I knew they were my people.”

In kinship to positive-minded, Afrocentric hip-hop, a collective soon formed known as The Native Tongues which counted De la Soul as founding members. Like-minded in their outlook and aesthetic, as well as their eclectic production style and jazz-influenced beats, the members included De La Soul, Jungle Brothers, A Tribe Called Quest, Monie Love, Black Sheep and

other notable artists. Native Tongues was also closely associated with the Universal Zulu Nation.

As hip-hop was reaching a new level of mainstream and monetary success, De La's "Me Myself and I" reached No. 1 on the R&B charts. The group was a full blown success but they were also somewhat misunderstood as to their place in hip-hop. Dubbed the "Hippies of hip-hop" for the messaging of peace, love, and daisies, the group felt their image was misunderstood. Writing in Pitchfork, journalist Jeff Chang said the group felt "Dejected and besieged, they returned to New York to their management's office one day and stared up at a whiteboard full of upcoming tour dates for all the acts, including their own. Trugoy decided he had had enough. Taking an eraser, he wiped off all their dates, and wrote instead: 'De La Soul is Dead.' The guys laughed. Now they had something to look forward to--album two."

De La Soul's second album, "De La Soul Is Dead" (1991) arrived as hip-hop as an industry was maturing. Budgets were bigger, stakes were higher and artists were increasingly having to grapple with the contrast of creating music born on street corners in an industry increasingly defined by money, power, respect. The sophomore effort addressed the dichotomy head on in their music. The album was critically acclaimed and dealt with mature issues of materialism, sexual abuse, mortality, and violence. The cover of the album features a broken daisy flower pot, symbolizing the death of the "D.A.I.S.Y. Age." The new dynamic marked a new direction for the group, pushing beyond their "peace and love flower child aesthetic" headlines to reveal their full magnitude.

The album was one of the first to earn the coveted "Five Mics" from "The Source" magazine, a momentous honor in the world of hip-hop. The single "Millie Pulled a Pistol on Santa" is the gut-wrenching story of one girl's dealing with sexual abuse from her father, while "A Roller Skating Jam Named 'Saturdays'" has become a cult classic for its levity and humor. In fact, the entire album remains true to De La's humorous, skit heavy, storytelling but solidified their long term place among hip-hop giants. The album, although disappointing in terms of sales, has been ranked by "Rolling Stone," "The Source," Pitchfork Media, and others as one of the greatest albums of the 1990's.

De La Soul's subsequent releases "Buhloone Mindstate" (1993) and "Stakes Is High" (1996), solidified the group as a genre-defining element as their output has continued to contribute to hip-hop's rich history of lyricism and imaginative production. "Stakes Is High" was the first album not produced by Prince Paul, with overall production credit going to the core group as well as a pioneering producer J Dilla, credited on the title track and first single. The album featured a brilliant roll call of guests including Mos Def, Common, Truth Enola, and the Jazzyfatnastees.

Throughout the 2000's and into current day, De La Soul's musical output remained robust. In 2000, they released "Art Official Intelligence: Mosaic Thump," followed by "AOI: Bionix (2001)." In 2004, De La Soul released a new full album: "The Grind Date" which was uncharacteristically free of skits but signaled a progression for the group nonetheless. The album was released on Sanctuary/BMG Records because the venture between Tommy Boy and Warner Bros. Records was no longer valid and the group's contract was shopped to the other WEA

labels. The band thought about having its contract absorbed by Elektra Records, but, instead, they decided to part ways with WEA.

The following year, a collaboration with Gorillaz on the hit single “Feel Good Inc.,” garnered a Grammy for Best Pop Vocal Collaboration--the first Grammy win in the group's career after three nominations.

De La Soul subsequently issued several releases independently or through alternative distribution. They released mixtapes “Hip-Hop Mixtape,” a collaboration with British dance magazine “Mixmag,” and “The Impossible: Mission TV Series--Pt. 1,” a release on the group's own AOI Records label.

In 2016, they released the Kickstarter-funded “And the Anonymous Nobody” was nominated at the 59th Grammy Awards for Best Rap Album. The group also found success in streetwear with a Nike collaboration to produce two versions of the Nike Dunk under their skateboarding division, Nike SB.

Despite a prolific output over the years and “3 Feet High and Rising” being added to the Library of Congress National Registry of Recordings, De La Soul's catalog faced major challenges in the era of music streaming and digital retailers. De La Soul's first six albums released under Tommy Boy have long been unavailable on streaming platforms amid disputes over sample clearances, royalties and music rights. Frustrated by inaction on the part of their label, Tommy Boy/Warner Brothers, the group, on Valentine's Day in 2014, gave away digital files of their entire Warner catalog to their fans without permission from the label. The majority of De La Soul's catalog has never been available to be purchased digitally.

“I don't know what [Tommy Boy's] deals were with clearing samples, but back then a lot was probably done on a handshake, especially when you're an independent [record label],” De La Soul's DJ Maseo told SiriusXM's Sway in the Morning in 2019. He added: “...there are still some infractions around the catalog, things we're sure aren't cleared, that might have new potential issues. Also, what's on the table [contractually] for De La Soul is unfavorable, especially based on the infractions that have taken place, the bills that exist over time. And we have continued to pay the price, and that's one of our big concerns.”

Later, De La Soul and their label Tommy Boy attempted to settle a deal over streaming royalties but the deal reportedly fell apart as the group objected to terms in which they'd only receive ten percent of royalties from streams while 90 percent would go to Tommy Boy. De La Soul alluded to previous efforts to clear the samples and re-releasing the catalog, but Warners was apparently not interested.

In a post on Instagram, De La Soul spoke directly to their fans: “Dear fans, Tommy Boy wants to negotiate, but only if we sign a confidentiality agreement first. Feels like they want to silence us to ensure that we cannot share this story with you, while they continue to short change our legacy at the negotiating table. How about we close a deal first, then we agree to keep the deal confidential.”

In our shared musical history, De La Soul stands out for challenging the norm and creating music that is still being unpacked and studied to this day. Their contribution to sampling culture, hip-hop aesthetics and raw individuality in the culture is unprecedented. Thank you De La Soul.

*Vikki Tobak is the author of “Contact High: A Visual History of Hip-Hop” (Clarkson Potter/Random House, 2018) and curator of the exhibition of the same name at the Annenberg Space for Photography and The International Center of Photography. She is an author and journalist whose writing has appeared in “Complex,” “Rolling Stone,” “The FADER,” “The Undeclared,” “Vibe,” and other publications. She recently curated the exhibition “Contact High: Visualizing Reggae” which premiered in Dubai as part of the Sole DXB culture festival.*

\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.