

Gang Starr: Original Architects of the Underground (Long Live the Ka & Ba of Guru aka Keith Elam 7/17/1966 – 4/19/2010)

By Khalif 'Ras' Williams



On April 19th, 2010 the Hip Hop World lost one of its greatest emcees. Keith Elam b.k.a. G.U.R.U. (Gifted Unlimited Rhymes Universal) passed away from complications stemming from a battle with cancer of the immune system called Multiple Myeloma. This hit me hard because Gang Starr has shaped my development as a Hip Hopper, a man and as an artist. In 1989 they splashed on the scene with their debut Album *No More Mr. Nice Guy* this album released the Jazz influenced singles *Positivity* and the single that would be the first single I ever bought on vinyl *Manifest b/w Deep Concentration*. This album would be the one to set off a wave of artist's interests in sampling Jazz music in the years to come not only did they influence one of Hip Hop's most important groups, A Tribe Called Quest (known as the quintessential Jazz influenced Hip Hop group) whose debut album was released the following year they also influenced me as an individual emcee and my group as well.. Gang Starr's debut would also be one of the albums that would cement the infusion of 5%er philosophy and ideology with its hieroglyphic metaphorical use of the English language to empower African American youth on a quest for self knowledge.

The Gang Starr Foundation was started by Guru and back in the mid 80's in Boston, Ma. They released a couple of singles under Wild Pitch Records. In 1989 the Group split and the only member that continued under the Gang Starr moniker was Guru. That same year he met DJ Premier formed the group Gang Starr releasing their first Album *No More Mr. Nice Guy*. Guru and Premier would continue the tradition as set by Hip Hop's founding fathers by having live, incredibly dexterous cuts made with the precision of a laser surgeon and tracks laced with earth shattering 808's, thunderous bass kicks and snares that snap like the neck of a chicken in the hands of a Santeria priest. Guru spittin' lyrical lead peppering Premier's sonic tapestries with nimble rhymes laced with 5% speak and flows that were unapologetically honest and introspective at times and at others battle raps and freestyles spit in his signature "monotone style" but deadly sharp as

Myamoto Musashi's blade. Sadly we lost this prolific emcee and with him all chances of him and DJ Premier being able to reconcile their differences...



The influence this group had on my life personally was immense. As a young artist myself who started rhyming in 1990 my group used to work in the same building as D & D Studios which was located on W 37th St. between 8th and 9th Avenues in New York City. Our studio was on the 12 floor (The Play Room) and D & D was on the 8th floor. I met and became friendly with many artists that came through D & D but one person I saw on the regular was DJ Premier¹ and I also met Guru on a couple of occasions. It was DJ Premier who actually tried to help my group get into the business after hearing my group's self produced material and liking it. Though things never panned out with Payday Records or their management company I will never forget the man Premier

was on the occasions we built and the advice he gave me for getting on and standing strong in the face rejection. Guru was always respectful but reserved and encouraging. I have every album Gang Starr ever released up to and including *The Ownerz*. Gang Starr's many albums were soundtracks to my life especially in the crucial Golden Age of Hip Hop when I was coming up in High School. My three all time favorite Gang Starr albums are *Daily Operation*, *Hard to Earn* and *The Moment of Truth* these albums pushed the envelope not just sonically but they also showcased Guru at his most impressive, creative and innovative. His flows changed and blended with Premier's tracks in a marriage of Hip Hop potency that was eargasmic. *Hard to Earn* and the *Moment of Truth* also displayed Guru's own production skills as he lent his talents of a few of the tracks like *Code of the Streets*. A lot of fans didn't know that Guru also was a producer as well though Premier handled a majority of the production duties. One thing I always knew about Gang Starr was they were one of those groups where I never had to question the quality of the music I would blindly buy their albums expecting high quality every time because that is what I got. They fell into a special class of artists from whom which I expected quality EPMD, Redman, Tupac, Big, G-Rap, ATCQ, De La Soul are some others who fall into that category as well. The only album that was somewhat of a disappointment in my opinion was *The Ownerz* but the shift in the relationship between Guru and DJ Premier to me was mirrored in the way the album came out. Sadly they broke up after *The Ownerz* came out and weren't on speaking terms when Guru passed away.

My son who is now 14 going on 15 was devastated when he got the news of Guru's passing. No More Mr. Nice Guy was the first Hip Hop album he ever listened to when he discovered my library of Hip Hop and asked me what the rectangular case was with that plastic thing in it? He was eventually told it was a cassette tape! This album was the one that facilitated the day he fell in love with Hip Hop. It was the album that sparked his quest for the origins of the culture he loved so much that his father was an intimate part of as a participant. Gang Starr was his introduction to Hip Hop. Amongst all his friends he is the only one in most circles who can name the founding fathers and artists before 2003 to the Golden Age and back to the beginning.

¹ Premier would buy D & D Studios and renamed it Headcouterz after his man and fellow Gang Starr Foundation member who passed away.

Sadly when Solar took on Premier's duties I lost touch with Gang Starr as a fan. I always loved Guru's Jazzmatazz series and his independent work outside the group and Premier's work with Hip Hop's and some of music's most influential and important artists from Nas to Biggie to Christina Aguilera through his Works of Mart imprint. For me Gang Starr always is and will be DJ Premier and Guru (Keith E.) I couldn't envision it any other way and until this day that has been and will be how I feel. You just had to be alive during this most important era of Hip Hop and live in New York City during that time to really understand how it was and where Gangstarr fit in the scheme of things. They just went together Rum n Coke that eternal marriage of Hip[Hop love, loyalty and creative intensity. Then came the break up.

There was something amiss about Guru and Premier's split. Guru in his so called last letter to his fans said something's that shocked me for a man who was with his partner from 1989 – 2004 a total of 15 years. On one's death bed one always tries to reconcile with the people in their lives that had any significance. I cannot believe that the two men I met were no longer significant in each other's lives with the impact and legacy they created and maintained within the Hip Hop Nation. As well as how close the men were they were brothers. Whether they were on speaking terms or not I could not believe Guru doesn't and didn't have love for Premier. Even Easy E made it clear, even though all parties venomously insulted each other that in the end their love and friendship trumped the B.S. and he wanted to reconcile with Cube and Dre. You mean to tell me Guru put Solar in charge of his affairs and insulted his ex partner and family so maliciously in the last letter he would ever write and have it released for public consumption? Something is wrong. Premier has been mum the entire time while Guru went public with the break up siding with Solar. Kind of reminds me of how Tupac was so vocal about his hatred for Big and Big's guilt while Big remained silent and reserved in the truth of his innocence and was actually being the bigger man in that situation.

Premier handled this "last letter" with poise and as a man. Something I love and most of all respect Premier for. I don't know nor ever met Solar so I can't judge him as a person but something with the relationship between him and Guru and subsequently how that affected the relationship with Keith's family and Premier doesn't sit right. It was after the addition of Solar his relationship changed with everyone close to him. The people he made clear his entire career were his everything. The man who could write so beautiful a song as *Life Saver* just couldn't have written that letter in my opinion. All that said, I pray the soul of Keith 'G.U.R.U.' Elam the man, the Sun, the artist, and family man rest in eternal peace. May his voice rock the Hip Hop Nation forever and may he rest with the ancestors!!!!

Khalif 'Ras' Williams

After the some of the things Solar has said about Premier since Guru's passing, Premier has really dealt with this situation as a man would do. My condolences go out the Keith Elam's family and to DJ Premier. Stand Strong and may all who knew and loved Keith Elam and his music find solace and closure. We're with you Premo you're not alone!

Official Statement From DJ Premier On The Passing Of Guru



IT WAS A SAD DAY FOR ME TO GET CONFIRMATION ON THE DEATH OF A MAN WHO I WILL CONTINUE TO CALL MY BROTHER, KEITH ELAM, BETTER KNOWN AS GURU OF THE LEGENDARY GANG STARR.

FROM 1988-2004, WE EXPERIENCED SO MUCH SUCCESS TOGETHER THAT WE WERE ABLE TO EXPAND OUR BUSINESSES INDEPENDENTLY AND GIVE EACH OTHER WHAT GURU CALLED "CREATIVE SPACE", BEFORE PLANNING TO REUNITE FOR OUR 7TH LP WHEN THE TIME WAS RIGHT. TRAGICALLY, WE WILL NEVER REACH THAT DAY.

I'VE BEEN ASKED TO COMMENT ON A LETTER SPEAKING ILL OF ME WHICH WAS SUPPOSEDLY WRITTEN BY GURU IN HIS DYING DAYS. ALL I WILL SAY ABOUT IT IS THAT OUR TIME TOGETHER WAS BEAUTIFUL, WE BUILT A HIP HOP LEGACY TOGETHER, AND NO ONE CAN RE-WRITE HISTORY OR TAKE AWAY MY LOVE FOR HIM. ONE THING I WOULD NEVER DO IS PLAY AROUND WITH THE TRUTH ABOUT HIS LIFE.

I WILL CELEBRATE GURU'S LIFE... I WILL HONOR HIS MEMORY... I WILL GRIEVE WITH THE ELAM FAMILY OVER HIS UNTIMELY DEATH... I WILL REMEMBER THE GANG STARR FOUNDATION AND ALL OF THE ORIGINAL MEMBERS OF GANG STARR WHO CAME BEFORE ME - WE ALL KNOW EACH OTHER... MOSTLY, I WILL CHERISH EVERYTHING WE CREATED TOGETHER AS GANG STARR, FOREVER. I'M GONNA MISS HEARING HIS SIGNATURE MONOTONE VOICE WHEN HE WALKS IN THE ROOM, BUT THE SONGS WILL ALWAYS BRING IT BACK TO ME....HIS RHYME FLOWS WERE INSANE, AND I WILL NEVER REMOVE HIM FROM MY HEART AND SOUL.....REST IN PEACE TO THE MAN WHO FELT "SATISFACTION FROM THE STREET CROWD REACTION" ... I LOVE YOU GOO.....DJ PREMIER