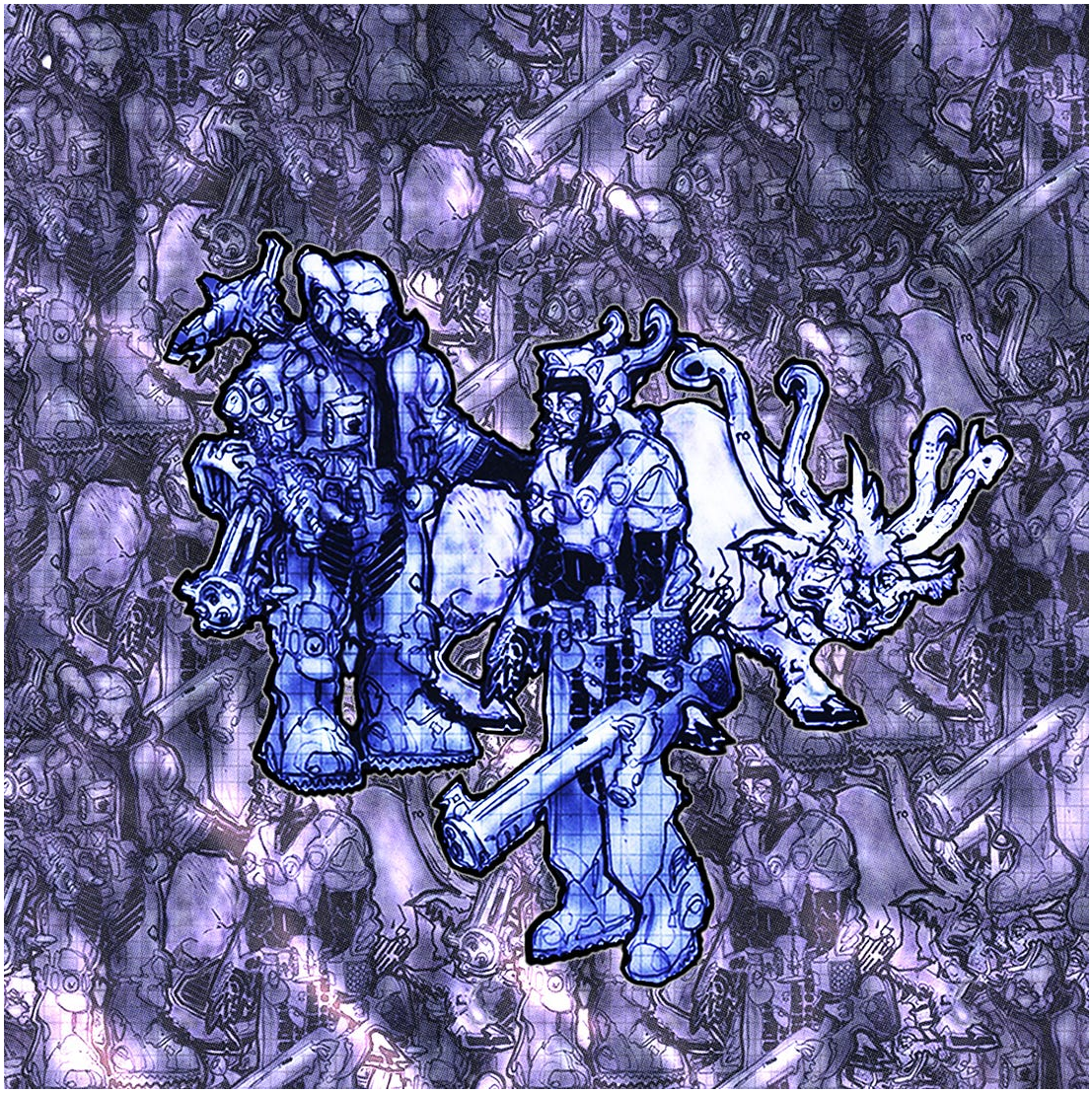
The 2001 Project: Cannibal Ox's The Cold Vein

For the second installment in our series reexamining hip-hop in the year 2001, Andrew Friedman revisits the Harlem duo's transmission from the, or a, future.

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Art by DJ Short

Editor's note: Over the course of this year, we're publishing a series of essays about the rap albums that defined 2001, both creatively and industrially, and whether they predicted or were abandoned during the quarter-century to follow. See the first installment, on Tech N9ne's Anghellic*, here.*

When people say a rapper sounds like the future, it can mean a few different things. It can be "this dude will be the literal face of the genre" (see 50 Cent's *50 Cent Is The Future*). It can be "this dude is doing things that are going to fundamentally change how rap music sounds" (see Nayvadius Wilburn, aka Future). Or it can mean the literal, temporal future, in that it evokes *Blade Runner* or *The Matrix* or the William Gibson creative universe. When people said *The Cold Vein*, the 2001 debut album from the Harlem duo Cannibal Ox, sounded like the future, they meant all three.

The late '90s were a pretty good time to be an underground[1] rapper. Napster and MP3 sharing were loosening the major labels' stranglehold on music distribution, while internet message boards were building scenes that transcended geography. Labels like Rhymesayers, Anticon, Solesides, and others were on their way toward moving serious units, getting actual radio play, and doing numbers on tour. This is a very long story, but Rawkus was the first and arguably most successful of these labels. With the backing of James Murdoch (Rupert's son), they would propel Mos Def and Talib Kweli out of the underground and into the mainstream.

Things did not go so well for other Rawkus artists, including El-P. He signed with the label in 1997-ish as part of Company Flow, the boundary-pushing trio of him, Big Juss, and Mr. Len. The first full-length Rawkus release was CoFlow's *Funcrusher Plus*. It was a beefed-up version of the group's 1995 self-released *Funcrusher* EP, whose album

art somewhat ominously featured the slogan “INDEPENDENT AS FUCK.” But whatever El-P was expecting from an independent rap label, he did not get from Rawkus. He would later rap that he would rather “be mouth-fucked by Nazis unconscious” than work with Rawkus again.



After wriggling out of his deal, El-P started Def Jux, his own label. The first release was two singles packaged together. One record was the official last few songs from Company Flow, a confirmation that the group was (amicably) disbanding. The other was “Iron Galaxy” b/w “Straight Off The D.I.C.,” the lead single from Cannibal Ox, the duo comprised of Vast Aire and Vordul Mega, from New York’s sprawling Atoms Family crew. Their LP would be El’s first project as an auteur executing his vision with complete creative control, on his own label. And that made it the most anticipated album in—or: the future of—this rapidly growing part of the rap landscape.

It’s hard to think of an act whose first song summed up their entire value proposition as well as Can Ox was encapsulated in “Iron Galaxy.” Vordul delivers a series of ephemeral images that flip between shit-talking and world-building. He starts his verse proclaiming “Life’s ill,”

which would become the duo's de facto mantra, and closes with what is probably his most quoted line ("Fuck five, I want 108 mics"). Vast raps more intentionally, coherently, introducing motifs that will be further explored across the full album ("A pigeon can't drop shit if it never flew"). Together they render a Harlem full of poverty, misery, humanity, and strength, in which they happen to be a couple of rapping superheroes. It is a few stops on the train from Manhattan proper, but might as well be on the moon. It is definitely in outer space. Why else would El-P's beat sound like it does?

A few short months later, *The Cold Vein* would deliver on the promise of "Iron Galaxy" and demonstrate how Vast Aire and Vordul were a perfect match for El-P's time-flattening aesthetic. Vordul's style is best described as "in media res," like he started rapping before the mic found him, and kept going when the tape stopped rolling. But there are moments of lucidity where he snaps into a traditional cadence, like the end of "Pigeon" ("Rocking my 'hell I made it' wetsuit stitch/So I can swim in elevators crazy wet through piss"). The guy talking to nobody is suddenly talking directly to you. In contrast, Vast has a slow, deliberate flow, like elephant tracks. He isn't in any hurry to move past a line he wants you to sit with for a second. You think about his punchlines even if they aren't "thinkers," even if they aren't punchlines. Abstract one-liners ("We use bear traps to catch weasels") become objects of meditation because he gives you time to consider them. Deceptively simple phrases that could have been throwaway lines ("Peace, keep breathing!") get depth and weight.



The Cold Vein closes as strongly as it opens, with the one-two punch of "Pigeon" and "Scream Phoenix." The pigeon is the Black Harlemite living a rough life ("Ethiopian skin mechanical/Trapped in ghetto's mega yard"), while the phoenix is the ascension to something greater. Or maybe it's just another chance to do things better. Or simply resilience. "Mom can't post bail? You gotta scream phoenix." Vast starts his verse on "Phoenix" with his opening lines to "Pigeon," but flips it with a punched-in "no, no, no." He is different now.

El-P's music gets tagged as "retro-futuristic," but this always felt inaccurate. Retrofuturism implies a distinct past and future, while El has long committed to demonstrating the way time collapses on itself, that things are so cyclical that nothing goes away long enough to come back. The breaks, the samples, the synths, the drum machines, the vintage compression, the digital recreations of outboard gear that no longer exists. A rap style that only sounds "advanced" if you don't acknowledge what Kool Keith was doing in 1987, or what Rammellzee was doing in 1983, or dancehall, or Gil-Scott Heron, or talking mad shit for any reason whatsoever, or getting lit off assorted substances and

seeing crazy visions. This is the secret to El-P's whole aesthetic vision. As abstract and unconventional as he may seem, he is standing on the shoulders of giants, right next to plenty of more "conventional" rappers.

This is important to keep in mind when talking about what it meant to say *The Cold Vein* was the future of rap in early 2001. It's easy to look at the tracklist of *Soundbombing*, a 1997 mixtape that compiled the singles Rawkus had put out thus far, and see Company Flow as standing out a bit from Talib Kweli, Mos Def, Newark legends The Artifacts (incognito as The Brick City Kids), Kool G. Rap affiliate B-1, and future Dipset associate Agallah. And it's easy to jump from there to an assumption that Rawkus and CoFlow were always a weird fit, especially with the benefit of hindsight.



But this is the fundamental fallacy of the hip-hop industry. The tent is huge, big enough for everyone. The problem is that a lot of very popular rappers don't align neatly with previously defined segments of the market. If labels don't know how to market you, they don't want to sign you. If they do sign you, they are going to fight tooth and nail to make you more marketable. By 1996 or so, "pretending you were

Scarface" was what A&Rs were looking for. If you were not interested in doing that, it was an uphill battle to get promotion and a release date. And even if you were doing that, if you weren't in the tri-state area, you would need to be making enough noise locally to be worth the flight from New York. Rap-A-Lot was able to lock down the entire state of Texas because it was just straight up hard to get to Houston without getting on a plane. Same thing with Rhymesayers in Minnesota. The Bay isn't far from L.A., but it was far enough for No Limit, Sick Wid It, and Solesides to all become indie powerhouses before the majors caught on.

The idea of *The Cold Vein* being the future of hip-hop was, in some part, the idea that three incredibly talented people could make a rap album that could be successful on its own terms. If there was ever going to be an album to prove this point, this was the one, and this was the moment to do it.

The Cold Vein dropped in February of 2001, and expectations for its cultural impact could not have accounted for what would happen later that year. 9/11 and its fallout were, to put it lightly, all-encompassing. *The Disintegration Loops,* "Get Your War On," "Why?," Immortal Technique's whole steez, *The Body The Blood The Machine*, "Flag Shopping," that fuck-ass Toby Keith song, "Dipset Anthem," and even *Trap Or Die* were or would be the meta. Drowning Pool are Iraq War champs for the way the soldiers in *Fahrenheit 9/11* talked about listening to "Bodies" while in active combat. *Children of Men* was a vibe. A lot of people's stories about what they were doing when the towers fell end with going to the record store to pick up *The Blueprint*. There are some distinctions here (9/11 art is not war in Afghanistan art is not war in Iraq art is not Bush's America art), but there is a clear demarcation between "before" and "after."

The Cold Vein is a “before” album. No mentions of Homeland Security or Islamophobia or jingoism, let alone the literal disfigurement of the skyline of the artists’ city. There is no post-Bloomberg conversation about how New York was changing. Their New York is pre-gentrification Harlem, when 135th Street still felt sketchy. The fear of NYPD is post-Diallo. It is about the eternal Manhattan: street meat and MSG and *hey I’m walkin’ here*. Pigeons. The outer boroughs barely get a nod.

I am admittedly an unreliable narrator for how 9/11 changed the world. It happened when I was in college, barely an adult, without much perspective on what life “used to” be like. I was already politically active, or at least aware, but the Iraq War would end up pulling me deeper into the game. I got involved with Billy Wimsatt’s League of Pissed Off Voters, did some organizing around the 2004 election, and even more around promising candidates local offices in St. Louis. I saw Howard Dean come and go and knocked on doors for John Kerry knowing goddamn well he had no chance. I watched the Bush administration play in our faces, assuaged only by how DailyKos spoke truth to power. I soaked up game from jaded elders and learned harsh truths about how little people care about politics. I moved to Brooklyn in late 2005. A few years later, America elected a Black president. On election night I made out with a woman who would go on to be a successful Lego artist.



On the tenth anniversary of *The Cold Vein*, Cannibal Ox briefly reunited to do a show at The Knitting Factory in Brooklyn. I spent most of the night explaining the backpack era to a young writer. I don't remember the actual performance. At the time, I probably looked back through two terms of George W. Bush and thought about how much progress we had made as a society. I was proud to live in a country that had elected this son of an immigrant from Chicago to be our leader, whose mere existence made the opposition throw their hat on the floor and stomp on it like a frustrated Elmer Fudd. Give or take a pretty gnarly recession, Obama was doing a good job. I might have wondered if Can Ox would make the same abandoned moonbase rap in an era when their president was Black and their Lambo was blue.

But after a decade in Donald Trump's shadow, 9/11 feels less like the moment that changed everything, and more like the beginning of a loop that has since closed. Our president's brain is stuck in Manhattan of 1991. Rudy Giuliani, namechecked multiple times on *The Cold Vein*, is once again a presence in American politics. We—everyone from children to grown-ass men with families—are calling things "gay" and "retarded" again. We are afraid of Russia and China. Cities are "scary." Teenagers are wearing JNCOs. America tried something different but ultimately it

didn't work. We moved back home and went back to smoking weed in our parents' basement, rotting on the same couch that was there before we were born, watching a TV older than we are.

A Harlem Whole Foods opened in 2011, on 125 and Lenox, a mere ten blocks from Big L's "Danger Zone." Gentrification is a colonial process, not a rising tide that lifts all boats, an definitely not a phoenix-style rebirth. Rents go up and anyone without rent control and/or a good lawyer is likely to have to relocate. The Harlem of *The Cold Vein* still exists, inasmuch as there are still impoverished sections of New York City, evil at its core, where the kids drink quarter waters and dodge stray shots on the corner, in that exact order. It's just largely been pushed further north into the Bronx—which, you may be surprised to find out, is the poorest county in America. Poverty can move but it will always be an integral part of New York City. Not unlike pigeons.

One night in mid-2001, a steroid enthusiast named Will High sucker-punched Vordul at a club.[2] People were talking shit on the internet and, for reasons lost to time, this made Will mad at El-P. He never found El, but he did find Vordul, a normal sized-dude, and broke his jaw. It needed to be wired shut. Sneak attacks do more damage. It was (probably) the first rap beef to start online and mutate into real-life violence, but it was also functionally the end of Cannibal Ox, or at least the version that created *The Cold Vein*. Vordul was already having a rough time with his increased profile, and the attack exacerbated tensions that had been escalating within the group.



In the ensuing years, there would be fits, starts, rumors, leaks and, more recently, some extremely bad vibes. But the closest their first LP would get to a follow up was a 2016 album of questionable provenance. Vast kept rapping, with five albums to his name since 2003, and Vordul's legacy is coming together in real time. Def Jux had a ten-year run putting out influential and really good albums by the likes of Aesop Rock, RJD2, Del the Funkee Homosapien, Dizzee Rascal and El-P himself. Run The Jewels remains one of the strangest collaborations in rap history, and also one of the best.

But *The Cold Vein* is Def Jux's high-water mark, a statement album from singular artists whose story got derailed in equal measure by petty bullshit and intercontinental warfare. Life's ill.

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1 The scope here is millennial backpack rap, but No Limit and Cash Money and anyone else who ever sold tapes out of their trunk is part of the same conversation!

2 An event which Jon Caramanica has on tape for some reason!