

Interview: MC Hammer's reality check



by David Wolinsky July 10, 2009

No one can accuse **MC Hammer** of living in the past. It's been 19 years since the Oakland rapper—born Stanley Kirk Burrell—first rose to prominence with his flamboyant parachute pants, formidable dance moves, and the release of his third album, *Please Hammer, Don't Hurt 'Em*. And he didn't slow down. Since filing for bankruptcy in 1996, Hammer continued to release a steady stream of albums, became a preacher, and harnessed his always-present entrepreneurial leanings to fashion himself as something of an e-mogul with **DanceJam**, a dance-focused website that launched in 2007. More recently, Hammer and his family stepped in front of the cameras for A&E's new reality show, *Hammertime*, which debuted last month. Before his free performance at the Chicago Sport And Social Club's 20th anniversary show **on Saturday, July 11**, Hammer talked to *Decider* about whether he or Michael Jackson was a better dancer, performing with **Vanilla Ice**, and what today's rappers owe him.

Decider: You performed with Vanilla Ice last weekend in Vegas and before that on your TV show. How does it feel to be performing with him again?

MC Hammer: Well, I performed a show with him prior to that in Utah on [*Hammertime*]. It wasn't the first time, but things went really well. Great turnout. LeBron James, **Jay-Z**, and a host of other NBA stars came out. It was great.

D: In a recent interview with Vanilla Ice, he mentioned beforehand you two occasionally hang out in Las Vegas. Who's luckier?

MCH: I haven't been going as much. I would consider him the lucky one.

D: Has *Hammertime*'s reception lived up to your expectations?

MCH: It's all over the Internet. Got positive reviews. Go on **my Twitter stream**, and there's not a day that goes by where I don't get posts. ["Jeremy Piven ... Mens Fitness cover... do yo Thang JP !!!" reads one of his recent posts—ed.] People love the show. But with *Hammertime*, the search bots are straight.

D: Aside from your friendship with Tupac Shakur, what attracted you to recording for Death Row Records in '95?

MCH: I always recorded. I recorded during that era. But what I planned to do at that time with Death Row didn't come to fruition because of all the things that transpired and the subsequent things that happened with the entire Death Row league. Certainly Row would have made a great Hammer record with all the personalities involved, and we were certainly aiming to put that record together.

We all come from the same environments. Suge [Knight] and I have been friends since 1987—went on part of my tour in '89, '90. I knew Suge very well. Obviously **Snoop [Dogg]**'s work, Tupac's work, and **Dr. Dre**'s work. We wanted to unite our efforts around the Hammer brand in the music I'm making and join forces. We had a great strategy.

D: You sent out a tweet about the Michael Jackson memorial. Did you two ever have a discussion about your gentlemen's rivalry over who was a better dancer?

MCH: We absolutely talked about it. And just because this is print and it's not audio in our television, I can't elaborate on that conversation because I'm not sure it would come out the way I would articulate it. I'm just saying we had a great conversation about dancing, and we talked about whom is a better dancer between the two of us, and we laughed and joked and complimented each other and it was great.

D: When did this happen?

MCH: I want to say in 1992. The basic premise of it was Michael called *me* up. And I'll add to that my respect and admiration for Michael. I put in a call to him saying, "Hey, I got this ["2 Legit 2 Quit"] video. I'm doing a little fun thing. I've accomplished everything I could accomplish on *Please Hammer, Don't Hurt 'Em*. As a live performer and entertainer, there's nothing else that will be achieved except the global level of the glove. And unless you give approval, I give you editorial control to say, 'Don't ever put that [glove] in here.'" And that's what we talked about. Funniest thing about this story is, while I'm describing the video, Michael says to me, "I saw it." I'm like, "What do you mean you saw it? I'm not done yet." He says, "I saw it. It's fine, Hammer." "Are you sure?" "What do you mean? I'm Michael." Oh, but then he showed me he already had people pulling in, getting the footage out, and bringing it back to him and letting him see it while I'm still editing it. We laughed about that. I said, "You joker, you. You already got people in there?" "Yeah, I know I did. I think it's fine." [Laughs.]

But again, he was my inspiration for the way I approached performing. We both looked up to The Godfather Of Soul [James Brown]. And I told him after The Godfather, if The Jackson Five can become a solo artist, then they'd be my drive, my inspiration.

D: In a recent interview, you mentioned that what was considered "selling out" in the '90s is today considered just "being a baller." Why has that behavior become more acceptable nowadays?

MCH: To diversify your revenue streams, you have endorsement deals and other things than just your core competency, which is making music. How the opinion went from "Oh, Joe, that's selling out" to "Hey, that's being a baller. That's being a fantastic businessman"? That change is very similar to the disconnect between how the world knows Michael Jackson versus how the media knows Michael Jackson. A big difference is just how it's played out in the press. Some artists at the time get jealous, liked success, and wrote solid measures; you catch a guy who's frustrated, who's not doing well, and trying to compete with you. You hand him some words and he just says, "Yes"—you got to use him to validate your story, your position. So that's what really changed. It's just that now, being obvious, it's a joke—everybody in the last 10 years has the top artists participating in the blueprint of the model I created way back then. Of course you would say that if you were being taken to task by social media and other places that have a voice, people will respond. They say, "What are you talking about? This guy is doing the same thing Hammer did 20 years ago that was considered not hip."

D: You're a TV star, a producer, and a recording artist. What's still on your to-do list?

MCH: What's next is to ultimately put on the greatest musical experience that I can put on for the people going forward. I already have a body of work that, in its large presentation, is exhilarating [and] already very well known. I can do 20 old songs in a row, songs that resonate with the people and the visuals that surround that, the memories that surround that, and the continued music added to that body of work. It speaks to a very bright future as a continued touring and recording artist. That's why I founded companies like DanceJam, and be a rabid user of a platform like Twitter and other things. I plan on continuing to explore all the possibilities of technology, and then finally film and television and movies. Embrace it.

<http://chicago.decider.com/articles/mc-hammers-reality-check,30186/>