Interview with Schoolly D (*New York Press*, 2001)

Schoolly D is a great example of an axiom embraced by many in the music industry: “It doesn't matter who does it first; it's who does it second.” (I've heard this statement attributed to David Bowie, but do you really think he said it first?)

Schoolly, on the other hand, did the gangsta rap thing first on tracks like 1986's “PSK What Does It Mean?” and 1987's “Saturday Night,” but he never had the chart success that those who followed in his wake attained. He's ready to make another stab at it with a new record out later this year on Rykodisc called *Funk N' Pussy*.

Reached by telephone in Philadelphia recently, Schoolly sounds more philosophical than pissed off about the fact that he hasn't reaped the full credit for his innovation and influence.

“The winners write history,” says Schoolly. “Whoever's making the most money can fool the public and say that they created it themselves.” Schoolly adds that the real irritation for him is that “artists like Prince or Chaka Khan or jazz artists give props. Some of these guys don't. That's what's wrong with hip hop.”

Acknowledgment via sampling, Schoolly observes, is the real payback. “It feels good in my pocketbook,” he notes dryly, adding that when rappers use his early stuff, “there's always evidence. It has a unique sound. Shit, I can't even recreate it anymore. I know they can't.”

Not that he's sweating it too much. “I just do my own gig,” Schoolly argues. “I don't have time to sit around and think about this kind of shit.”

The first call on that time is *Funk N' Pussy*. Schoolly says the title and inspiration came from a North London club night ("Funkin Pussy") that London's *Time Out* says is a mix of “ol’ school funky breaks, hip-hop and P-Funk.” Schoolly says he hung out with that crowd on his trips to London, played there with his band and eventually ended up recording a record that's closer to his roots. 'When I played it for a friend," Schoolly continues, “he just said, ‘That's that Schoolly D shit.’ It's about what's going on with me – smoking, drinking, hanging out, y’know?”

There were vice and hijinks to spare in Schoolly’s early work. His first three records – 1986's *Schoolly D*, 1987’s *Saturday Night: The Album* and 1988’s *Smoke Some Kill* – married dense and sprawling sonic landscapes crafted by Schoolly and his DJ, Code Money, to laconic and deadpan raps. Listening back to tracks like “Gucci Time,” and “Do It, Do It” and “Mr. Big Dick” across a hip hop timeline littered with Too Short and the Geto Boys and Eminem, there's a humorous and almost innocent quality to much of Schoolly’s music. The important elements of the gangsta palette (drugs, bitches, guns, conspicuous excess) are there, waiting to be exploited, but Schoolly’s touch with them is defter and lighter than what followed in his wake. (Schoolly followed those albums up with the massively underrated 1989 album. *Am I Black Enough for You?*, an album that mixed gangsta moments with a bit of Sly Stone-era political funk, and two less well-received and now out-of-print efforts, 1990's *A Gangster’s Story* and 1994's *Welcome to America*.)

The other calls on Schoolly’s time are a variety of film and TV projects, including a new RuffNation film called Snipes and an as yet unnamed project for Cartoon Network. Most notably, he's worked with Abel Ferrara, scoring the director's 1998 film, *New Rose Hotel*, and he's involved as a composer and actor in a number of productions, (Schoolly D's “Signifying Rapper” – with its hook from Led Zeppelin's “Kashmir”– was used to great effect in the original theatrical release of Ferrara's *Bad Lieutenant*, but it was dropped from the video when the Zep complained that it had been used without permission.)

“When I met Abel 10 years ago,” Schoolly says, “he told me that if I took the lyrics out, my music would be perfect for film.” When people doubted his move into film music, says Schoolly, he'd just bring up Quincy Jones. “The same thing happened to him,” he continues. “People told him he was crazy, and he told them, ‘I'm gonna be 50 one day.’”

When I ask Schoolly about the Cartoon Network gig, I remind him that he was one of the first people to be interviewed by Space Ghost on *Space Ghost: Coast to Coast*. “One of the producers is a big Schoolly D fan,” he says. “When they called me up and asked if I wanted to be interviewed by Space Ghost, I said, ‘Damn right I'll be there. I watched Space Ghost when I was a kid.” The new cartoon that he's writing music for, he says, is about some soft-boiled detectives who want to be tough guys. “My girlfriend and I were in bed watching it,” Schoolly says, relating the program's harder-edge vibe, “and we were saying, 'I can't believe this is going to be on Cartoon Network.’”

I tell Schoolly that it sounds like his own gangster story is finding itself a happy ending. He corrects me quickly: “I don't know about happy ending, man. But it's a happy transition.”

*– Richard Byrne*