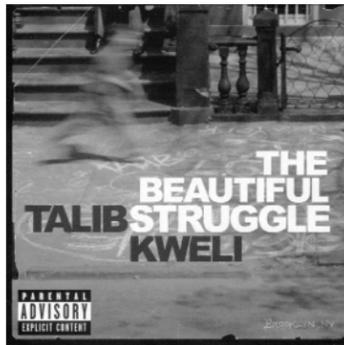


Beautiful Struggles and Gangsta Blues

Tom Jennings



'Life is a beautiful struggle / People search through the rubble / For a suitable hustle / Some people using their noodle / Some people using their muscle / Some people put it all together / Make it fit like a puzzle'

Talib Kweli, 'I Try'

'I'm tired of the hunger I see on people's faces / Tired of the animosity between the races / Tired of corruption in high and low places ... / Maybe life ain't as bad as it seems /

But if dreaming is the best I can do / Then I'll be dreaming my whole life through'

Tanya Stephens, 'What A Day'

In many ways 2004 has been one of the worst years in living memory, for all sorts of depressingly familiar reasons in the fields of politics, economics and the sheer ballooning scale of human misery and suffering. Things in the sphere of the mass media have also been far from hot—for popular music in particular given the relentless advance of vacant pretty pop idols and their attendant trivia masquerading as culture. But, scratch the apparently ubiquitous naffness of surface, and a surprisingly rich texture comes to light—with, for example, some of the most outstanding mainstream releases of recent times in all regions of the Black Atlantic rap/R&B/reggae nexus appearing in the course of this benighted year.¹ The fact that such intelligent, troubling,

uplifting, hard-hitting, heart-warming, honest and challenging material can coexist with widespread popular appeal in musically sophisticated, exciting and imaginative formats is testament to the creativity and persistence of its makers as well as the appetites of sizeable publics of all ages and backgrounds.

The Low Down

One noticeable trend from the grass-roots has been a welcome re-emphasis on dance and the party—understood as a local, community occurrence rather than the favoured corporate option of the stadium megaconcert. Younger UK generations may have spent teenage years in the rave and jungle scenes but were deeply, if subliminally, influenced by the parental record collections too—of soul and reggae for example. Now they turn to their other love—the hip-hop they've also grown up with—out of a desire to connect with wider audiences (and possibly earn a living); and DIY and independent labels are progressing along a slow but steady learning curve inspired by the US experience of playing the majors' game without losing all autonomy.

Across the Atlantic, the economic and cultural power of the diversified market for R&B and rap is well-developed, and its cultural practices more routinely recuperated. The production processes of digital sonic design are wholly integrated into the compositional complexity of music which—as with reggae—prioritises combinations of vocal

layers (spoken and/or sung lyrics and choruses), but whose origins sit squarely in dance music.² The most recent and wildly successful phenomenon here is the synthesised Deep South minimalism of Atlanta party hip-hop, exemplified in Lil' Jon's anthemic 'Get Low' and double album *Crunk Juice*. The precursors of this lowest common denominator (and no worse for it) approach, however, are more varied. When copyright holders increasingly interfered with and suppressed hip-hop's original sampling and repetition of broken

beats in the 1990s, further fascinating and fruitful paradigm shifts ensued: Dr Dre's G-Funk meticulously manipulates instrumental samples and studio orchestration; Timbaland's hypnotically sultry bass and percussion alchemy highlights organic recorded fragments;³ and the genius of the Neptunes creates compelling

stripped-bare synthetic beats capable of resonating with virtually any style known to humanity.

Quality Quirks

Together with the classic NY breakbeat structure and along with the slower jazz-inflected arrangements associated with Philadelphia production and nu-soul, this vastly expanded hip-hop palette has facilitated the reincorporation of musical and cultural traditions that its artists have long aspired to. Now, with the twin leverage of commercial success and (relatively) independent status, hip-hop is itself overflowing into other genres. Discounting Common's misfiring tribute to 1960s psychedelia (*Electric Circus*), Atlanta's Outkast have led the way, fusing Southern States soul and funk with Big Beat and the camp, irony and rhythms of disco in *Speakerboxx/The Love Below* (2003); *Fear Of A Mixed Planet* from Shock G⁴ reimagines both the music and the planetary humanism of George Clinton; Mos Def falters in his quest to blend raw electric blues with rap in the disappointing *The New Danger*; and, hooking up with various hip-hop guests, Zap Mama's *Ancestry in Progress* is a beautiful rendering of African vocal styles and 'World Music' in bluesy, soulful clothing.

First class honours for innovation, though, go to Chicago's Kanye West—already a sought-after hit-making producer signed to Jay-Z's Roc-A-Fella—whose *College Dropout* breaks new ground for fun. Accelerating classic soul vocal samples is not itself unique,⁵ but West is particularly clever in mobilising them to suit a range of tempos and themes, and his rhythmic design perfectly matches the vocals. His concept album exploits the theme of education to attack the whole panoply of official and unofficial institutions which reproduce economic, cultural and social domination. His insightful and very witty lyrics reveal personal ambivalence, and the passion, pain and hope which persist in the face of the blight of consumerism and the damaging dishonesties of liberal and ghetto aspiration,



mainstream politics and religion. Meanwhile, the sheer brilliance of the arrangements transcends the weakness of his MC voice—as does the raft of ranking guests.

Highlights of Low Lives

Among those whose hip-hop credentials rest purely on their MC shoulders, though, there's nothing wrong with Jean Grae's vocal cadence—and her skills place her right up there with the cream of the wordplay crop.⁶ Her 2004 output includes a second full length release, *This Week*,⁷ which, although patchy in terms of production, displays exhilarating lyrical dexterity and range. Born in South Africa to jazz pianist Abdullah Ibrahim and singer Sathima Bea Benjamin, and having majored in singing at NY's La Guardia 'Fame' School, her frustrating travails in hip-hop have tempted retirement while also honing her hunger. Now with the option of joining the Philly hip-hop ensemble and live-instrument champions The Roots, her solo status will soar if only an appropriate recording and performing jigsaw puzzle can be assembled. *This Week* contains highly infectious germs; perhaps the next album *Jenius* (wholly produced by the gifted 9th Wonder) will release a Grae epidemic.

If Jean Grae's breakthrough is overdue, Masta Ace has long been a hip-hop hero—in the legendary Juice Crew and then for two early '90s rap classics: *Slaughterhouse* and *Sittin' On Chrome*. The reflective 5th release, *A Long Hot Summer*, will be his final album because "it's time for me to live through other people".⁸ Fortunately it's a superb bowing out, full of sonic poignancy, sober maturity and wisdom. The magical first single, 'Good Ol' Love' is possibly the most heartfelt affirmation of love for humanity, with absolutely no piety or sentimentality, you'll ever hear. And a deep, wry, affection for the warts-and-all potential of lower class guts shines through Ace's *Summer* (i.e. his young adulthood)—with a passionate and honest understanding of the misguided choices we all make in conditions we cannot control, and their ramifications for all of our karmas. In an ideal rap memoir, the consistently excellent guests and producers are privileged to pay tribute.

Nas is something of a veteran, too, but while also more seasoned he's stayed angry, sustaining an output of cutting edge ghetto hip-hop since the zenith of *Illmatic* (1994). His subsequent work has often suffered critically—largely through a persistent misunderstanding of his vision. The project has always been to chronicle, critique and overcome through musical poetry—mobilising as medium and metaphor his own responses and resonances—the existential anguish arising from the material and social reality of his people. *Street's Disciple*, the new double album, continues and in fact transcends prior achievements by more fully approaching a synthesis of personal and political spirit. Over throbbing beats he spits fury at the electoral charade, the damage done by the domestic and New World Orders, and the complacent stupidities of media stars and fantasy lifestyles. Suggestively interspersed with more melodic arrangements, allegories of sin and crime (passion, money, sex, violence, drugs, relationships) culminate in his impending marriage⁹ offered as redemption. Nothing is



resolved; as in life—which *Street's Disciple* is a magnificent representational slice of.¹⁰

Revolutionary and Gangsta?

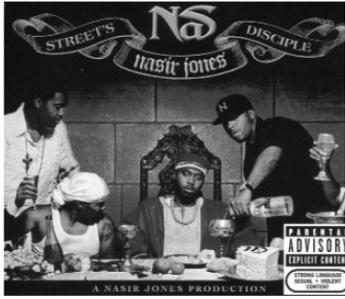
Despite the depth of lyrical talent and personal exploration all of these MCs express, however, the political consciousness in their work is, at best, confused. To compensate, and with explicit historical and political analysis, Dead Prez' album *Revolutionary But Gangsta* impressively showcases M1 and Stic.man's straight talking and powerful beats—as in their previous work.¹¹ But even better for that elusive combination of individual and collective consciousness in 2004 hip-hop is undoubtedly Talib Kweli's *The Beautiful Struggle*.¹² This album shifts current urban music gears with sought-after producers and guest vocalists queuing up in support—showing why so many hip hop fans name-check Kweli as simply the best.¹³ While an internet leak of unmastered versions backfired—since the remixes are even better—his uncompromising radical politics and fierce lyrical prowess embody a refusal to kowtow to commercial agendas.¹⁴ And if his vocal timbre lacks variety and depth and the delivery has difficulty capturing conversational idiom, the direct thematic and musical address to the grass-roots remains resolute.

What's really special is that the social and political implications arising from everyday life, society and history are broached and dissected with effortless aplomb—never self-righteous, patronising, or preaching. His honest, deeply personal perspective probes ambiguity, conflict, and human fallibility by acknowledging his own mistakes, confusions and limitations. Measuring your insights and experiences against those of people around you and your/culture and traditions facilitates the avoidance of moral posturing and sophistry, narcissistic self-aggrandisement, and all the other simplistic stupidities and dangerous duplicities that plague political philosophies and practices (not to mention rap).

Instead a pragmatic ethic stitches the personal to political (without reducing one to the other) with no hint of hierarchy or superiority. Anger, sadness and determination are present and correct along with exuberance, spirituality (irrespective of religion) and all the productive varieties of love in a mature race-, gender- and class-consciousness. Alternately (or simultaneously) angry and joyful, encouraging solidarity and direct action, Kweli regularly advocates revolution—seeing the beauty in struggle from its prefiguring of the results (a.k.a. 'creating a new world in the shell of the old'). For seriously pleasurable, street-level, contemporary music throbbing with passion, intelligence and integrity, Talib Kweli remains a beacon in US hip-hop.

Grime Pays UK

British hip-hop too has had outstanding ambassadors for a while, without breaking out of partly self-imposed shadows. Now finally maturing into a genuine art form in its own right, highly distinctive figureheads abound. Among 2004's notable releases were Tommy Evans' politically acute *New Year's Revolutions*, and the scattershot stand-up comedy of Pitman's *It Takes A Nation Of Tossers*.¹⁵ However, Skinnyman is probably the most talented UK rap lyricist and performer yet. Pushing roughly past industry indifference and the self-indulgent adolescent



arrogance of many peers, his first full-length album, *Council Estate of Mind*, presents an autobiographical odyssey structured around dialogue from the renowned television film *Made In Britain*.¹⁶ But rather than rehearsing yet another earnest wake-up call to the liberal middle classes, Skinny shows instead how the hardest of hard times can generate an astonishing degree of rebellious imagination, positivity and persistence—valuable resources in countering depression, self-hatred and sociopathy, but leading to neither conformist respectability nor resignation to domination. With vocal style and philosophy formed in a West Indian neighbourhood childhood in Leeds, the reggae influence is echoed in musical production, with a prevailing mood of laid-back hip-hop reflecting the tenor of the lyrics.



Skinnyman's single-minded intention to shine in music—putting in enormous amounts of work and with widespread acclaim from jungle, garage, grime and hip-hop enthusiasts, but hitherto without financial support—was preceded by years of exclusion from school, and repeatedly interrupted since by time inside for dealing herbal cannabis. This puts him in a good position to explore the marginalisation of the underclass and the neo-slavery of the prison system. All the while the lyrics ooze humility and warmth towards the communities which have nurtured him—while fully aware of their and his own shortcomings. Though too modest to make such claims for himself, he is a worthy ghetto griot with skills to rival the best in the genre.

Meanwhile, the British drum and bass renaissance continues to feed hip-hop. UK garage exploded Ms Dynamite, The Streets, Craig David and sundry So Solid Crew cohorts into the mainstream, and now the roughneck exponents of Grime are stepping up. Both subgenres showed love to those like Skinnyman in temporary exile from rap, and it's clearly a reciprocal process. Dizze Rascal led the way back with a strange cockney speed-squawk which, when slowed down enough to make sense of, revealed prodigious MC skills. And judging by her debut, *Diamond in the Dirt*, Shystie not only has that competence to spare, but things worth saying as well. Equally at home in hip-hop, R&B or the mania of junglism, she revels in elaborate spiralling lyrics which are, as yet, unfocused while still in thrall to a wounded teenage ego. Even so, the underclass feminism of 'Woman's World', the contemplative, gospel-infused 'Can't Play' and 'Somedayz', and the singles 'One Wish' and 'Make It Easy' bode very well indeed. Grittier angles are also handled with complete conviction and ease—hinting that if she develops more ease with herself, Shystie could be sensational.



Not-so-new and Nu Soul

Two other UK debuts of 2004 sprang from slightly older heads. Veteran MC Rodney P (ex-

London Posse), delivered *The Future*—an accomplished, languorously soulful set with lyrical flows built on dub basslines. Even better is Estelle's exuberant *The 18th Day*—a long-awaited treat for those who've witnessed her fearsome, committed and effortlessly top-ranking MC spots on guest verses for those brave enough to host a strong woman who suffers fools gladly, not.¹⁷ But if her lyrics can blow away the best, her singing style has that rare raw quavering emotionality that can make you weep. Mix in passionate intelligence, an activist's ardour and a very

determined self-confidence, and you get pure inspirational soul. The album is full of highlights, with utterly authentic personal biography more interesting for eschewing self-indulgence. The arrangements are a surprising bonus, with up-tempo gospel flourishes, bass-heavy dance beats, and a deep love of hip-hop, funk and R&B breaking out all over the place in exemplary fashion.¹⁸

For 'soul' more conventionally understood, these shores could also muster a solid *Affirmation* of Beverley Knight's diva larynx,¹⁹ and a second album (*Thank You*) by young pretendress Jamelia—whose catwalk looks imply the adage about exceptions and rules, as her musical potential is considerable. In America Angie Stone's latest release, *Stone Love*, has some decent tunes to show off her thrilling style—but far more filler than the first two; and Anthony Hamilton's debut *Comin' From Where I'm From* reveals both a depth of secular spirituality and a rich soul voice to rival Jaheim or D'Angelo. For pure joy, though, *Beautifully Human* is simply majestic. Equally at home soaring acrobatic with Minnie Ripperton, earthy as Kitt, melancholic as Nina Simone, or whimsically bad(u) like Erykah, Jill Scott demonstrates nu-soul's unique capacity to quantum leap beyond all standards. Any one of 'Golden', 'Bedda At Home', 'Family Reunion' or 'Rasool' would make an album on its own; together they are breathtaking. Apparently she's had a good time in her life since blowing up with *Who Is Jill Scott?* (2000)²⁰—but if *Beautifully Human* is the harvest of happiness, heaven knows what will crop up when she gets the Blues ...

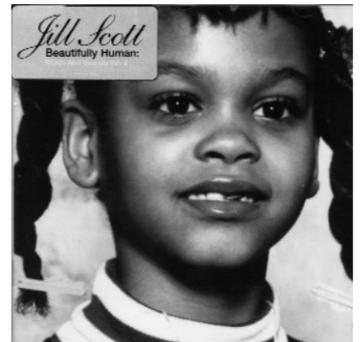


Reggae of the Decade

... Speaking of which, for my money, Tanya Stephens' *Gangsta Blues* is not only the best album of 2004, but also one of the most significant releases of the dancehall era—extending and expanding the scope of what reggae can do in several unique directions simultaneously. This multiplicity of innovation is even more adventurous than Buju Banton's *Til Shiloh* (in relinquishing his prior nihilism), Capleton's *Prophecy* (in heights of production sophistication), or the similarly strong and ground-breaking work of, for example, Bounty Killer, Sizzla and Anthony B. And whereas other crossover attempts have had largely commercial motivations—abandoning Jamaica along with the generic conventions²¹—Stephens stays true to her St Mary's roots while excelling as riddim rider, lyricist, songwriter and social critic. All these forceful personality facets were already abundantly apparent from her previous singles and albums.²² This time they're fully integrated into a thoroughly satisfying whole.

Throughout the set her gorgeous mesmerising contralto and consistently sharp poetics are seamlessly enriched by musical depth—looking forward via the lush production possibilities of dancehall and harking back to roots, dub, the blues and R&B heritage and the barefaced cheek of calypso.²³ The uninhibited humour of her sexual patter always favours female empowerment without degenerating into caricaturing either men or women,²⁴ yet the disappointments of romance never dampen her spirit. The intransigence of the material world and its politicians in allaying suffering come in for harsher, more pointed attention—but here too familiar clichés are avoided while the historical and class (as well as gender) awareness rings true and clear as a bell.

One tiny caveat with *Gangsta Blues* is that I'd



have lapped up more of the driving, pounding, bring-the-house-down grandstanding of her best party tunes.²⁵ But then, she's already been there and done that, better than anyone else, for a



decade (apart from three years purgatory in the Swedish alternative rock wilderness!). In Tanya Stephens' own words: "If you want a collection of played-out singles—don't buy this album. If you want a bunch of recycled lyrics—don't buy this album. If you're looking for innovation and free flowing creative juices, prepare to be blown away"²⁶ ... Fair enough; I was.

Notes

1. Those pictured constituting my 'Top Ten'.
2. See my 'Dancehall Dreams', *Variant* 20, 2004.
3. E.g. a stallion's whinny, signalling female phallic power in Missy Elliott's 'Hit Em Wit Da Hee'; an infant's chuckle, evoking the nurturance of love in Aaliyah's 'Are You That Somboddy?'. Missy Elliott has recently pioneered the move back to simulated 'old school' party beats, using only synthesised basslines and percussion—starting with the 2001 single 'Get Ur Freak On'.
4. Prime joker of California's legendary Digital Underground, here critiquing both white racism and black nationalism (e.g. Public Enemy's *Fear of A Black Planet*).
5. 9th Wonder uses a similar technique with, if anything, even more haunting results—see his work for Jean Grae, Masta Ace and any number of others artists. Outstanding examples of voice manipulation in *College Dropout* include 'Spaceship', 'All Falls Down', 'Slow Jamz' and 'Jesus Walks'.
6. Not only having one of the best female flows ever—rivalling Roxanne Shante, Rah Digga, MC Lyte and Lauryn Hill—but potentially the level of poetic complexity, attack and attitude of a Nas, MF Doom, Jay-Z or Eminem. See, for example, *This Week's* 'Not Like Me', 'Supa Luv', 'Going Crazy' and 'Whatever'.
7. Plus the viciously apposite *The Grae Mixtape*—joshing a slew of hip-hop pretensions, including Jay-Z and Danger Mouse scavenging the Beatles (in *The Black Album* and *The Grey Album* respectively). Going for the thug jugular, the forthcoming *Jean Unit* mixtape further flays the fashion for gangster narcissism (as in 50 Cent's *G-Unit*). The previous releases are *Attack of the Attacking Things*, and *The Bootleg Of The Bootleg* EP.
8. From an interview in Philip Mlynar, 'His Masta's Voice', *Hip Hop Connection*, Jan/Feb 2005, pp.70-73. Now busy building his own M3 label, Ace emphasises that he'll continue to write and guest perform for others, as well as nurturing the flowering of newcomers—so thankfully his measured dulcet tones will not disappear from the ether altogether.
9. To R&B singer Kelis, who he woos with biographical tales of his overlong adolescence and excess as a pledge of present change and future growth—see, e.g. 'The Makings Of A Perfect B****', 'Getting Married' and 'No One Else In The Room'. And if the listener may occasionally cringe (perhaps with self-recognition)—well, that's part of the process.
10. Aided nobly, by production in tune with the concepts—a potted history of hip-hop over the period of Nas' career being made explicit in the track 'Unauthorized Biography of Rakim' (Nas' prime MC influence); and with valiant vocal support from Scarlett, Quan, Kelis, Emily—and jazz trumpeter Olu Dara (Nas' father) in 'Bridging the Gap's generational meeting of psyche-somas.
11. The superb *Let's Get Free* and two excellent mixtape CDs—*Turn Off The Radio* and *Get Free Or Die Tryin'*—the latter playing on 50 Cent's fashionable NY gangster rap nihilism in *Get Rich Or Die Tryin'*. Stic.man and M-1's latest release continues their hard-hitting juggling act—translating their political activism into commodity form without losing the plot or pandering to commercialism. According to M-1, "the critical part of revolutionary struggle is taking power out of the hands of people who stole it from us all these years and returning back those resources ... a conscious worldwide struggle with decisive victory won in the area of defeating capitalism

and imperialism". Or, to Stic.man, "Revolution is based on the victims of a certain society—government—that recognizes that they are being used and abused by the system and it's not in their best interest ... seizing control over the institutions that are oppressing the people such as the court system, police department, military system and educational system all together. Food and all the things needed for life are being exploited and people recognize that you have to have control over these things, so revolution is the process in which you seize that power" (interview in www.thetalkingdrum.com/rbg.html).

12. Following the innovative underground hip-hop classic *Black Star* (with fellow Brooklyn MC Mos Def), the sublime jazz/blues/soulful *Reflection Eternal* (+ producer Hi-Tek), and *Quality's* powerful R&B/funk.
13. Including Jay-Z and 50 Cent—commercial superstars not often noted for their political acumen—as well as Nas.
14. Kweli doesn't object to piracy for those who can't pay, just lack of respect for half-finished art. Anyway, a bigger obstacle was the Beatles sample not being cleared on the fantastic 'Lonely People'. Even without this track, *The Beautiful Struggle* is strong from start to finish.
15. Another reference to Public Enemy, this time *It Takes A Nation Of Millions To Hold Us Back*.
16. Directed by Alan Clarke (1982); following Tim Roth's delinquent youth through an official 'system' whose callousness, hypocrisy and brutality inevitably produce a vicious anti-social thug. The album title refers to a benchmark for the ghetto poet MC—'New York State Of Mind' by Nas (from *Illmatic*)—and rather than Queensbridge, Skinnyman riffs on his travails in and around Finsbury Park, London. Standout cuts include 'Hayden', 'Love's Gone From The Streets', 'Life In My Rhymes', 'No Big Ting' and the title outro.
17. Noticeable in her part-embarrassed, part pissed-off, part-fatalistic acceptance of 'Best Newcomer' awards; and on the record in, for example, the impatience of 'Dance Bitch', the imperious 'Don't Talk', the urgent feel of 'Change Is Coming' and the urgings of 'Why Don't You?'.
18. Why 'Freedom' (featuring Talib Kweli)—b-side of second single 'Free'—was not included is a mystery. It would have been the pick of the album, both musically and lyrically. Estelle's voice is also on fine form in 'On And On', 'I Wanna Love You', and 'Free', and the lyrics are especially powerful in '1980', 'Hey Girl', 'Go Gone' and 'Gonna Win'.
19. Regrettably, record company shenanigans may be messing with Beverley once again—with an awful rock power ballad version of 'Come As You Are' released as first single. That's no way to treat a proverbial 'national treasure', now is it?
20. With material covering her round-the-way-girl youth; followed by a live double, *Experience*, showcasing her quest for maturity and justifiably emphasising her awesome stage presence.
21. Famous examples include Shabba Ranks and Patra. Beenie Man learned from their mistakes and maintains parallel careers in softer R&B overseas and hardcore ragga at home.
22. *Big Tings A Gwan*, *Too Hype* and *Rough Rider*. The Jamaican tradition is that a rapid turnover of single releases keeps a reggae artist hot. Tanya Stephens' hits since 1994 would fill several albums, any of which would likely be considered superior to all comers.
23. For down and dirty blues variations, hear especially the heart-rending 'Sound Of My Tears', the vicious 'The Other Cheek' the mournful 'What A Day' and the defiant 'I Am Woman'. Unusual twists on calypsoesque subjects can be found in 'Little White Lie' and 'Tek Him Back'.
24. Something which can't always be said of the most popular and celebrated female exponent of slackness—Lady Saw—whose own push for seriousness, the more spiritual *Give Me The Reason*, was largely ignored by the grass-roots. This may have been due to its relative lack of lyrical and musical imagination compared to the sheer magnetic power and commitment of *Gangsta Blues*.
25. Really only kicking in 'Boom Wuk', 'Good Ride', 'We A Lead', and especially in the lustful, wistful 'It's A Pity'—riding the old-school 'Doctor's Darlin' beat most familiar from Gregory Isaacs' 'Night Nurse'.
26. Quoted from the unusually accurate press release for *Gangsta Blues*.



Discography

DJ Tomcat's Top Ten 2004:

- Gold: Tanya Stephens, *Gangsta Blues* (VP)
 Silver: Talib Kweli, *The Beautiful Struggle* (Rawkus)
 Bronze: Estelle, *The 18th Day* (V2)
 Joints: Jean Grae, *This Week* (Babygrande)
 Masta Ace: *A Long Hot Summer* (M3)
 Nas: *Street's Disciple* (Ill Will/Columbia)
 Jill Scott, *Beautifully Human: Words & Sounds Volume 2* (Hidden Beach)
 Shystie: *Diamond in the Dirt* (Polydor)
 SkinnyMan: *Council Estate of Mind* (Low Life)
 Kanye West: *College Dropout* (Roc-A-Fella/Def Jam)

Others:

- Aaliyah: 'Are You That Somboddy?' (*I Care 4 U*, Blackground, 2003)
 Buju Banton: *Til Shiloh* (Island, 1995)
 Capleton: *Prophecy* (Universal, 1996)
 Common: *Electric Circus* (Universal, 2003)
 Danger Mouse: *The Grey Album* (2003)
 Dead Prez: *Let's Get Free* (Sony, 2000); *Turn Off The Radio* (Holla Black, 2002); *Get Free Or Die Tryin'* (Boss Up, 2003); *Revolutionary But Gangsta* (Sony, 2004)
 Missy Elliott: 'Hit Em Wit Da Hee' (*Supa Dup Fly*, Elektra, 1997); 'Get Ur Freak On' (*So Addictive*, Elektra, 2001)
 Estelle: 'Freedom' (B-side of 'Free', V2, 2004)
 Tommy Evans: *New Year's Revolutions* (YNR, 2004)
 50 Cent: *Get Rich Or Die Tryin'* (Shady Records/Interscope, 2002)
 Jean Grae: *Attack of the Attacking Things* (Third Earth, 2002); *The Bootleg Of The Bootleg* (EP, Babygrande, 2003); *The Grae Mixtape* ([White], 2004); *Jeanius* (forthcoming); and *Jean Unit* (mixtape, forthcoming)
 Anthony Hamilton: *Comin' From Where I'm From* (Arista, 2004)
 Jamelia: *Thank You* (Parlophone, 2004)
 Jay-Z: *The Black Album* (Roc-A-Fella, 2003)
 Beverley Knight: *Affirmation* (Parlophone, 2004)
 Talib Kweli: *Black Star* (with Mos Def, Rawkus, 1998); *Reflection Eternal* (with Hi-Tek, Rawkus, 2000); *Quality* (Rawkus, 2002)
 Lady Saw: *Give Me The Reason* (Diamond Rush, 1996)
 Lil' Jon & The East Side Boyz: 'Get Low' (*Kings Of Crunk*,TVT, 2002); *Crunk Juice* (TVT, 2004)
 Masta Ace Incorporated: *Slaughterhouse* (Atlantic, 1993); *Sittin' On Chrome* (Delicious Vinyl, 1995)
 Mos Def: *The New Danger* (Universal, 2004)
 Nas: *Illmatic* (Columbia, 1994)
 Outkast: *Speakerboxx/The Love Below* (Arista, 2003)
 Pitman: *It Takes A Nation Of Tossers* (Son, 2004)
 Public Enemy: *It Takes A Nation Of Millions To Hold Us Back* (Def Jam, 1988); *Fear Of A Black Planet* (Def Jam, 1990)
 Rodney P, *The Future* (Riddim Killa, 2004)
 Jill Scott: *Who Is Jill Scott: Words & Sounds Vol. 1* (Hidden Beach, 2000); *Experience* (Hidden Beach, 2002)
 Shock G: *Fear Of A Mixed Planet* (SG, 2004)
 Tanya Stephens: *Big Tings A Gwan* (X-Rated, 1994); *Too Hype* (VP, 1997); *Ruff Rider* (VP, 1998).
 Angie Stone: *Stone Love* (J Records, 2004)
 Zap Mama: *Ancestry in Progress* (Luaka Bop, 2004)