

The beatbox goes on

Beatboxing is more than a party trick – it's creeping into the mainstream. By Matilda Egere-Cooper

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If you thought beatboxing was nothing more than a curious party trick with a mouth and a microphone, take note. Over the last few years, the purveyors of this art of vocal percussion have seen it shape up to become a credible scene in the UK, and it has had a recent revival in the mainstream. So if you need to give a new line of mobile phones a bit of street cred, add some light entertainment to a prime-time television show, or raise the profile of a German beer, then dial a beatboxer, because many of them will now happily be at your service. "Media is [sic] picking up on to it," says Jim Windle, manager of the website humanbeatbox.com and organiser of the UK Beatbox Championships. "You're seeing beatbox in adverts and you're hearing it on a few commercial tracks."



Beatboxer Alex Levan

Windle's event has even enjoyed the lucrative endorsement of car company Vauxhall since last year, which doesn't just mean a snazzy three-door Corsa SXi for the winner, but also ensures that the scene is basking in the limelight.

"With corporate sponsorship, it shows that it's a viable career for a lot of people; there's a lot of money involved in it these days," says Stig, the host for this year's battle. "I think the sponsorship helps to spread the message to those to watch it, who may not have done before. Rather than relying on the beatboxing community to push it forward, it actually becomes a showcase to the public. It's going to help push the beatbox scene, which is going to create newer beatboxers."

When beatboxers aren't filling their schedules with gigs and TV appearances, or attending conventions, the championships are one of the major events. Held annually since 2005, they feature artists like Killa Kela (the impressive West Sussex-born "multi-vocalist" who has shared stages with Prince and Snoop Dogg and once dated Patsy Kensit) and Björk-collaborator Shlomo as judges scrutinising the freshies, who attempt to do anything it takes to win the title. This could mean delivering a grime number, a drum'n'bass jam, or even something more obscure that defies the boundaries of beatboxing's hip-hop origins. Considering that it's also in the 8 Mile battle format, fans can expect contenders to show no mercy to their opponents.

"It's the sport of hip-hop," explains Kela. "The battle is always the athleticism that is involved in the music. It's more a showing-off of skills."

But, nowadays, finalists are more likely to incorporate technology into the mere 60 seconds that they have to win over the crowd – like two-time winner and reigning champ Beardyman, who has since pioneered a technique that enables him to sound like he's doing a DJ set in a club. The 26-year-old, who holds a monthly battle-jam in east London, is lauded on the scene not only for his mind-boggling skill of producing scratches, clicks and musical acrobatics with his voice, but also for using a loop machine on stage, which

enables him to build an entire song. As one of this year's judges, he encourages budding beatmakers to aim for the innovative, and says gimmicks are necessary to gain the popularity vote.

"Unless you put on a good show, no one cares," says the Brighton native. "I see these shows that I do and the idea is to rock a crowd. It's not necessarily artistic expression – I'm just really making people enjoy themselves, and that's what I see my role as being, rather than just being an amazing beatboxer, which I still strive to be... It's about making sure the crowd love it."

Kela endorses the idea that contenders need to be as clever on the mic as possible. And he should know: since breaking into the beatbox scene a decade ago, he has been renowned for promoting the musicality of beatboxing, evident on his debut 2005 album *Elocution*. Set on releasing a new single in July, he reckons that beatboxers should take advantage of the championships to become artists in their own right: "The thing about these battles is that they showcase names, and that's really important," he says. "You've got to make artists out of these beatboxers, and give them a platform."

That said, it's tough to predict how far beatboxers can develop within the scene, even if they're lucky enough to win the annual crown and drive away with a new sports car.

In the US, beatboxing was championed in the Eighties by way of Doug E Fresh and Biz Markie and by hip-hop legend Rahzel in the Nineties, and has since become widespread. But on these shores, the scene is still very young, with the ages of most beatboxers ranging between mid-teens and mid-twenties. Very few of those beatboxers produce albums (with the exception of occasional mixtape cameos), and the bulk of the community is based online.

The fact that beatboxing is more visible now is a plus but, according to 24-year-old beatboxer Shlomo, there's a danger that the scene could fizzle out.

"The number of awful scripts I've been sent is shocking," he admits. "These big advertising companies go to their meetings and say, 'what's cool at the moment? Oh, beatboxing!' They don't really find out what beatboxing is, so I end up getting these phone calls with offers to be on telly and go all over the world... but I'm trying to be creative. I have so many ideas that I'm trying to get off the ground. The problem with the scene potentially being a flash in the pan is that people might waste beatboxing on crap ideas."

Shlomo, who describes himself as "part human beatboxer, part jazz drummer, part musician-at-large", took on the task of creating "the world's only human beatbox choir" and is working on other projects to redefine the nature of the genre. "I find beatboxing is an incredible tool for making music and you can call it serious music," he says. "That doesn't mean it's not fun. It's actually creative and something original. You can mix beatboxing with any type of music, as long as you know what works. But with the competition, you have the people that are in it for self-glory and world domination and you've got the people who've just want to make some music."

Stig, however, reckons that this year's finals could have some surprises in store. "I think this year people are technically really good," he says. "A lot of the time, people tend to rely on beats the audience remember, and that's the more gimmicky side of things. I think this year, a lot of them are a lot more tight-sounding. People are also distancing themselves from the hip-hop side of things... whether it's bashment, or garage or grime or drum'n'bass, people are just generally being more experimental with it and trying to take it to different places."

One of the eight finalists, MC Zani, from London, is positive about his chances in the competition. Currently touring with R&B star Jay Sean and signed to Shlomo's beatboxing agency, he has already been in the final four times. "Luckily I've got a chance to win this time. I'm quite confident, so it should be cool," he says.

Meanwhile, Minamus, a 20-year-old from Bristol, hopes his training will ensure he outshines the rest. "I didn't think I was going to make it through. I was just doing it for fun and I actually came second," he says of the heats. "I'm really looking forward to it. I'd love to make a career out of it and I'm just practising to become good enough to make a career out of it."

Windle believes it's possible for an up-and-coming beatboxer to build their profile after the championships but, whatever happens, it's all about having the full package. "When they've got the stage presence, they've got the routines and the talent, and they've also got the work ethic to go out there to fight for jobs, that's one of the biggest differences between the guys who make it off the back of the champs and those who aren't going to make it. It's a launchpad, but they do have to be prepared to work at it."

The Vauxhall UK Beatbox Championships Grand Final, is at Carling Academy Islington, London N1 (www.ukbeatboxchampionships.co.uk) tonight

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Shlomo

The Leeds-based beatboxer was heard by 4.5 billion people around the world when he and Björk performed "Oceania" at the opening ceremony for the 2004 Athens Olympics. He was also invited by the Icelandic star to beatbox on her all-vocal album Medulla. In addition, Shlomo has worked with Mr Scruff, Damon Albarn, Martha Wainwright, DJ Yoda and Nitin Sawhney, and toured the world with his own UK hip-hop crew Foreign Beggars. He is a classically trained percussionist, a jazz drummer and heads the world's only human beatbox choir, the Vocal Orchestra.

DJ Scratch

The Philadelphian gained his name for a beatboxing style that sounds like a DJ scratching. He made his name in the rap group The Roots, and, since 1998, Scratch has shared stages with Jay-Z, Eminem, James Brown, Usher and Kanye West. The hip-hop artist's upcoming solo album Loss 4 Wordz features Kanye West, Gorillaz. He also performs in Schoolz of Thought, a rising group rapping on the heavyweight subjects of politics, religion and life.

Beardyman

Known as Darren Foreman to his mum and dad, 26-year-old Beardyman is the current UK beatboxing champion, winning the title two years in a row. Beardyman started beatboxing at an improvisational show in 2002 after seeing beatboxer and The Roots member Rahzel playing live. He has worked alongside Grooverider, Killa Kela, Jazzy Jeff and Andy C.

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