



infinite jest

The Oakland quartet of misfits **Souls of Mischief** stood apart from the pimp and gangster rappers of the Bay Area when they dropped one of the most recognizable and beloved hip-hop singles of all time, "93 'til Infinity." While the track's cult status has cemented their legacy forever, they also proved that a rap group could go at it on their own terms and have a long, independent career. Now, at their twenty-year anniversary, they've connected with producer Adrian Young for an analog concept album to keep the creative fire burning long into the next era.

by **Alice Price-Styles**



Picture rugged beaches and urban rooftops alongside dingy pool halls and national park cliff-drops, and add in four young Oakland cats rapping against the backdrop of these various scenes of sublimity. Throw in that intangible feeling of youth and a bleating hook, and you have the music video for Souls of Mischief's single "93 'til Infinity" from their 1993 debut album of the same name.

Creating a unique space for themselves within the multifarious hip-hop landscape of Northern California, Souls of Mischief represented a youthful, and at times deviant, though ultimately innocent, outlook inspired by their respective Oakland backgrounds. Though less heavily controversial or politicized than the output of fellow notable East Bay artists such as Too Short and the Coup, Souls of Mischief's music was at once highly intelligent and highly playful.

"In all of our families, education has always been stressed as one of the most important things, if not the most important," says Souls of Mischief and Hieroglyphics member Opio Lindsey. Coupling that influence with their position to soak up the diversity of life and thought that exists in the Bay Area, Souls of Mischief were able to touch on sentiments and philosophies broader than teenage life in the East Bay. As a result, their music remains vastly accessible and can translate well to listeners around the globe and of various walks of life. "You can see that our fan base is so diverse, and it's a direct reflection of our upbringing and living specifically in Oakland, California," affirms Opio.

The four MCs in question, Tajai Massey, Opio Lindsey, Adam "A-Plus" Carter, and Damani "Phesto" Thompson, all met during their school years and within scholastic settings. "I met Tajai in the first grade. Miss Fransmen's class, I think. We were in the same class and that was that. We've been partners ever since," recalls A-Plus. And, despite Phesto and Tajai attending rival schools at one point, the quartet was completed years later in high school with the addition of Opio and Phesto.

Rather ironically, one of the group's best-known and most-coveted works is the EP they recorded in 1992 in an attempt to attract major-label attention: a record that was never actually released. Featuring now-revered tracks such as "Step to My Girl" and "Cab Fare," which uses a sample of Bob James's "Angela (Theme from *Taxi*)," the EP could not gain clearance for its use of sampling; however, it brought the group closer to their first deal with Jive Records in 1992. After signing to Jive, Souls of Mischief released the now-classic *93 'til Infinity* on September 28, 1993.

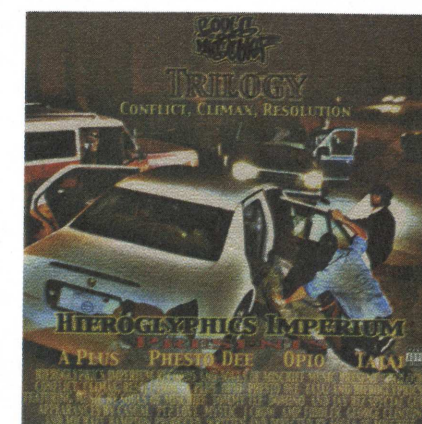
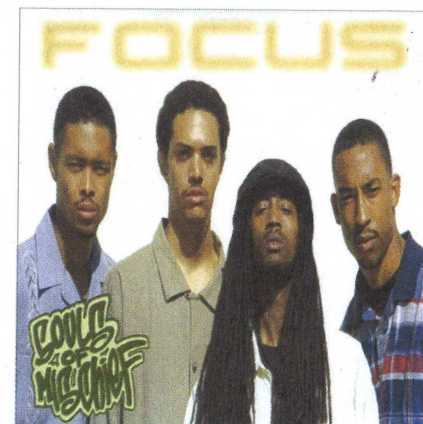
Not the immediate hit record that many now perceive it to be, the title track slow-burned its way up to the cult status that it has today. Now, with the album hitting its twentieth anniversary, the sheer consistency of the album itself remains remarkable, both in terms of the production quality and feel, and the level and style of rapping.

Following the 1995 release of their second album, the slept-on, sultry masterpiece *No Man's Land*, the group separated from Jive. Rather than fade into obscurity, Souls went on to become underground icons, emblematic of what can be achieved and sustained through working with and supporting peers. With fellow members of Bay Area collective Hieroglyphics—Del the Funky Homosapien, Casual, Pep Love, Domino, and DJ Toure—they established their own record label, Hieroglyphics Imperium, in 1997, and continued to create high-quality hip-hop on their own terms. By way of working hard and staying tight with one another, Souls of Mischief are the epitome of independent success and staying true artistically.

Their "one and the same" approach has seen them fluidly work on music and release an array of solo and side projects alongside consistently working and touring together as Souls of Mischief. To date, they have put out five studio albums together: after the aforementioned *93 'til Infinity* and *No Man's Land*, they released *Focus* in 1997; *Trilogy: Conflict, Climax, Resolution* in 2000; and the Prince Paul-produced *Montezuma's Revenge* in 2009.

Most recently, Souls of Mischief collaborated with producer/composer and multi-instrumentalist Adrian Younge on the concept album *There Is Only Now*, narrated by Ali Shaheed Muhammad of A Tribe Called Quest. In more ways than one, the new, fully analog album looks back in time in order to progress and push forward, with the four MCs delving into a realm of introspection and personal experience previously unexplored on two-inch tape.

In the twenty years since the release of their significant debut, the group's members have grown and truly remain as cohesive, intelligent, passionate, and as mischievous as ever.



What music did you all listen to growing up?

A-Plus: There was a little bit of everything playing around my home [when I was] growing up. My parents are immigrants from Jamaica, and they liked everything. So I heard everything from rock to funk, soul, R&B, folk, and classical.

Opio: My father was a musician, so I was exposed to all kinds when I was a kid. I started to develop my own taste in music when I was real young, and I was really into reggae music. Bob Marley was my favorite and the first artist that I started to get into, before I started really getting into hip-hop.

Phesto: Early on, I was listening to pretty much whatever my parents were listening to: Stevie Wonder; Prince; Michael Jackson; Parliament-Funkadelic; and Earth, Wind & Fire. That was before I started listening to the earliest hip-hop, which was basically all the Sugar Hill stuff.

Tajai: My mom has an eclectic record collection. She played gospel, a little bit of jazz, and a lot of late-'70s popular music.

How did you start making music together, the four of you?

A-Plus: Me and Tajai were making music back in the day in the '80s. We were a rap duo, and that was just something we did. We played with G.I. Joes and played with Lego and made hip-hop. Time went on, and then it was me, Tajai, Opio, and Phesto. We went through a few rap names, but once we got to Souls of Mischief, that was where our history of music started, beyond the development stages.

How did the name Souls of Mischief come about?

Tajai: We used to be really mischievous teenagers, and when we were moving forward into our late teens and getting signed, that most encapsulated what we were into. An over-the-edge, over-the-top lyricism was what it represented also. We were teenage guys causing mischief and causing mischief on the mic.

How long were you making music together before you signed to Jive?

A-Plus: Since me and Tajai first started making music? About ten years.

How did signing to Jive happen?

Opio: It starts with Del. Del signed to Electric Records, with Da Lench Mob and Ice Cube, who was [Del's] cousin. We had all been down with Del for a long time, and he put us on the B-side of [his 1991 single] "Mistadobalina." The song was called "Burnt," and it was a down-the-line freestyle with Del, Casual, A-Plus, Tajai, and myself [credited as the Hyroglyphics]. That got the ball rolling, because then Dante Ross and Daddy Reef both had interest in what we were doing as a whole unit. Once that interest was sparked and record companies started taking notice of us, then Jive came into the picture.

What was it like to become labelmates with artists like A Tribe Called Quest and Boogie Down Productions, among many others, at such a young age?

Phesto: It was incredible. It factored into the decision to sign to Jive. I think at the time, they had KRS-One, Steady B, Whodini, and Too Short. Looking at their track record, we felt the artists they had were like-minded, artistically.

With 93 'til Infinity, how did the title song and concept come about?

A-Plus: The song is originally an idea from 1991. I made a track that sounds a lot different to "93 'til Infinity," but nothing ever happened with it. A year later, our lives had changed a whole lot. We had a record deal, and we were in the studio working, and we recycled the idea and called the song "93 'til Infinity." It was a really strong song, so we decided to call the album that.

Opio: For a title like that, it was fitting that we brought something we had thought about in '91 all the way up into '93. There was solidarity there. It was a concept that we had before we ever had the opportunity to get signed.

Phesto: Also, at that time, the meat of the album was already finished, and we wanted to do something that was different from anything else on the album.

A-Plus: I still have my "91 'til Infinity" rap in my folder. I never throw away raps or CDs or tapes, so they're in a box in my storage.

Did the future seem infinite and limitless when you were that age and making that song?

Tajai: I don't think we were thinking about the future.

A-Plus: We were just riding the wave. We were little kids and our dream had come through, so we were like, "We're going to do this forever!" We didn't have that kind of foresight to be looking towards a twenty-year anniversary.

What was the recording process for the 93 'til Infinity album like?

A-Plus: Twelve days. It was our first time in a big studio [Hyde Street Studios in San Francisco], recording on two-inch tape, with an engineer and a second engineer. It was all going for us, and we were so hyped.

Opio: We understood that being in the studio cost a lot of money, so we wanted to demo it first and get everything done.

A-Plus: A lot of the songs were demo'd: "Batting Practice," "Anything Can Happen."

Opio: "Make Your Mind Up," "That's When Ya Lost." Then songs like "Tell Me Who Profits" and "93 'til Infinity," we wrote in the studio.

A-Plus: So we were mindful of the amount of money. And, couple that with our genuine enthusiasm for the moment, we just knocked it out.



How different was the process recording your follow-up, *No Man's Land*?

A-Plus: It had things that were similar to it, but there were some things that were wholly different. I was disenchanted with the process at the time. At one point, the label really was like, "Look, we're changing to a pop label, we understand you aren't a pop group, but..." And they used the example of Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince, who we love, but at the time, they were doing "Boom! Shake the Room," and that really wasn't our M.O.

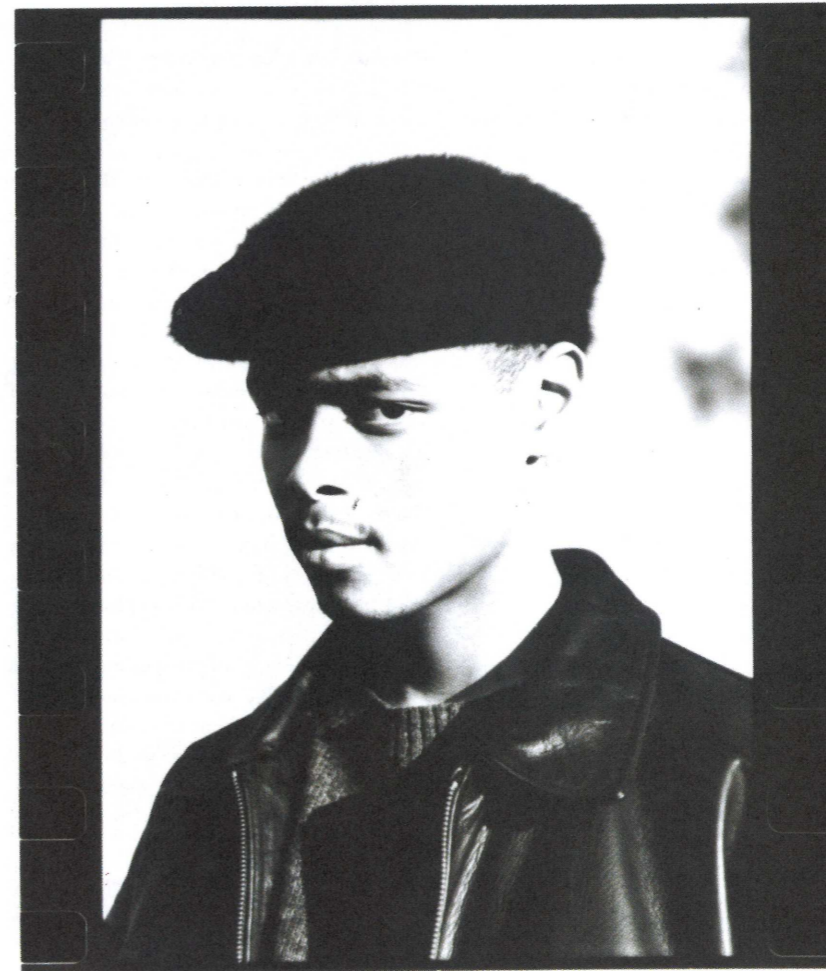
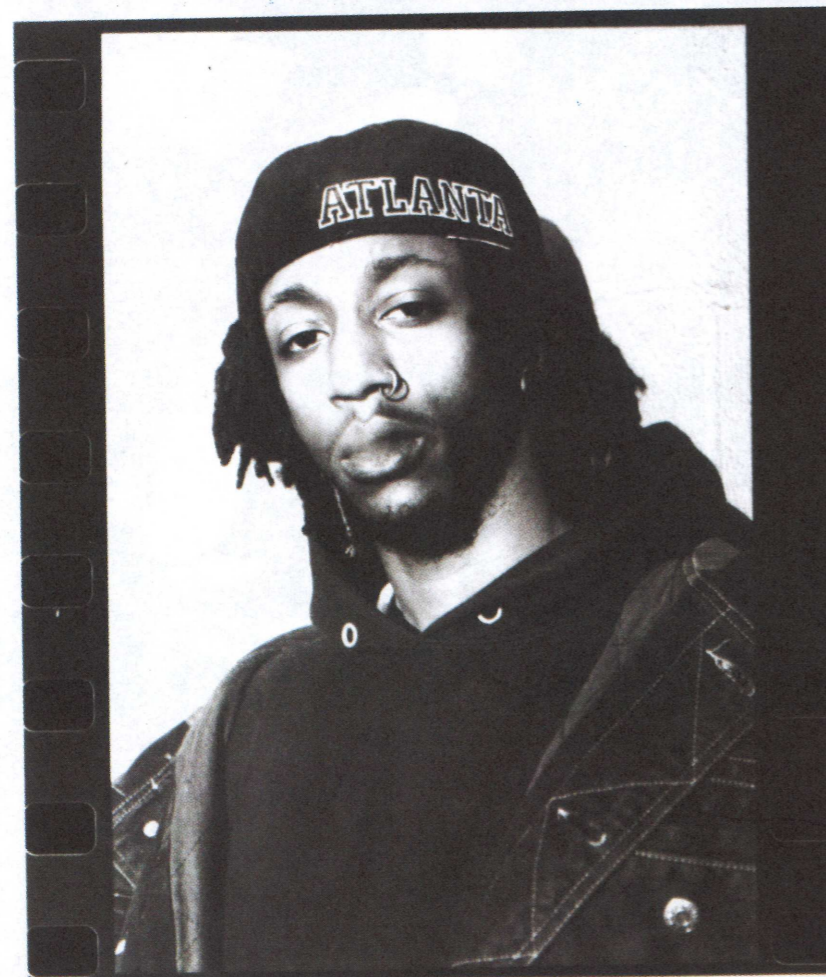
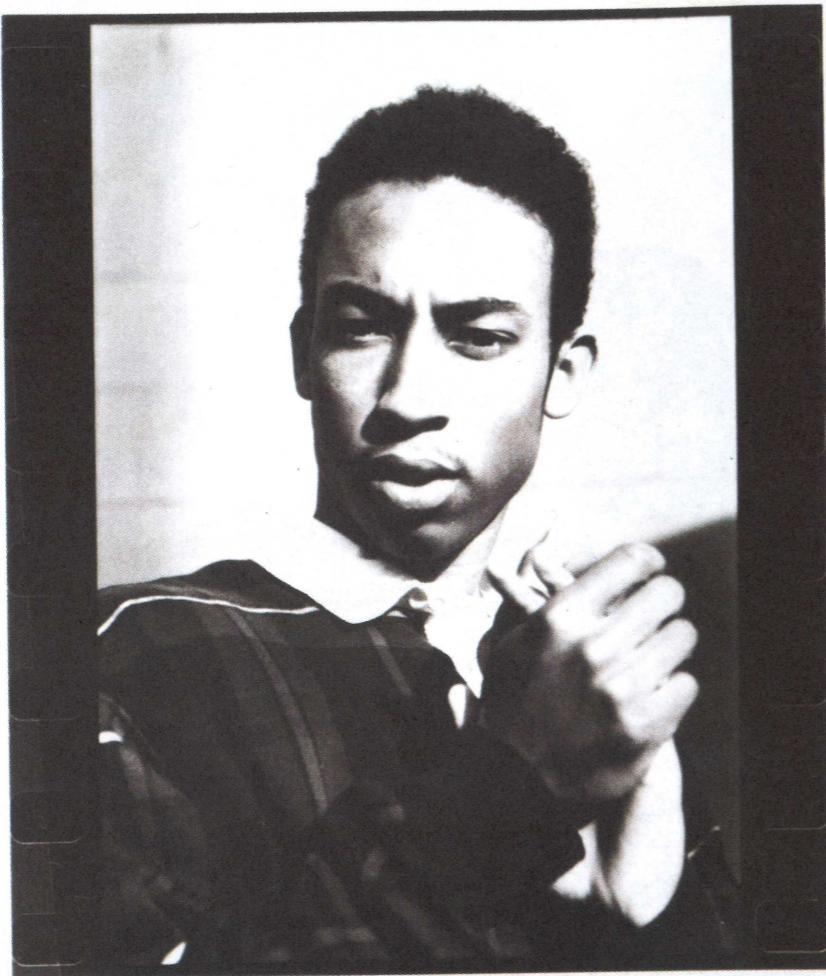
Tajai: If you look at what Jive had on their roster and what they have now, they went from a really underground indie label to a major pop brand. Whenever it was, "Why don't you get these guys to remix this?" or "Hey, why don't you make another one of these?," it was the writing was on the wall for both sides.

Phesto: They still wanted to put out "Cab Fare" too.

A-Plus: Bob James decided to clear [the sample] for the second album, which we were against, because we didn't want it to even go on the first album. But Paramount, who had to do with the show *Taxi*, were the ones who ended up vetoing the whole idea. Souls of Mischief were happy about that, but it didn't make the label happy, because then their pop hit was gone.

When you separated from Jive and began working on Hieroglyphics Imperium, did being independent allow you more freedom artistically?

A-Plus: Absolutely. We established the label, we own it equally, we agree what goes out, and we were the execs at that point. The flip side of that is, you don't have the same amount of capital to work with as a major label, and you don't have the same connections in the music business.



Is working together and as friends something that came naturally?

Opio: I think because we started from being friends first, transitioning from friends into doing music, that for Souls of Mischief and Hieroglyphics, it's much more than just a business arrangement; we have a deeper level of understanding of what our mission is and what we're trying to do. We also realized that there's power in numbers, that when you pool your resources together, you're able to do bigger and better things than you can just do by yourself.

You tour a lot as a group. Is travel something that you always wanted to pursue with your music? How do you think that it impacts or affects your music?

A-Plus: All of us experienced travel far away as youngsters, and when you put that experience in a kid very young, it becomes something that they will naturally want to gravitate towards. So those seeds were planted before we ever knew we were going to be in Souls of Mischief. And to have fans all over the world? That's just amazing.

Phesto: Your experiences come out in your music, no matter what you do. So our experiences overseas have some place in us in writing, and our perspective on the world has a lot to do with our travels. I know people that live in East Oakland and have never been to West Oakland. So we understand how valuable it is for us, especially at such an early age, to have experienced the world.

Opio: And we were very fortunate to go on our first tour with A Tribe Called Quest and De La Soul. The experience of going on tour with those guys still carries on to this day.

A-Plus: I can imagine us going out with a whole different act, and our whole career being different. They laced us with so much game and took us under their wing.



What would you say that they taught you?

A-Plus: They were classy, you know? They had hip-hop class.

Opio: They were strong performers, made incredible music, and they were genuine people. They helped to allow us to see the worth of what we were doing, because more than anything, we wanted respect from the likes of A Tribe Called Quest and De La Soul. They took time to tell us how much they thought we were talented and wished us all the best, and could see that we would do this for years to come. We saw their professionalism and how much they love to perform. We sat and watched every single show, so I never saw them go out there and not give it their all. It was like the young Padawans studying the Jedi.

What would you say inspired you then? And what inspires you now? Has it changed or stayed the same?

A-Plus: We were all into hip-hop from the late '70s; that's one of the things we had in common. The first opportunity that we heard hip-hop, we were just fully in love with it. I decided I wanted to be an MC in 1982 when I heard "The Message." That was the exact defining moment.

Phesto: I remember just having this love of music and getting intrigued by music of all forms. I took to hip-hop because of

everything about it. Rappers were like superheroes to me. I didn't really think that I could do that until I got older and I met these guys. Now I have a thirst for knowledge of music, even more so than I did back then. It's really this infinite, ever-changing thing that you can never know too much about.

Opio: I remember, time would stop and I would just be transported into another world when I experienced music and listened to it on the radio as a kid. There was a period in the early '80s where I was going to all the concerts. Huge concerts, sold out every time, with huge props and stage sets. I remember LL Cool J had a huge radio behind him, and he came out of the tape deck. That time was hugely inspirational for me. My appreciation and love for music has grown exponentially from what it was then. My understanding of music now, because it has increased, helps to inspire me more. I can go back to music that I listened to from the past and listen to it again with new ears.

Which Souls of Mischief album would you cite as being the most pleasurable to create?

Tajai: The [new] one, [*There Is Only Now*].

A-Plus: I'd have to say the first one, but the [new] one is a very close second for me. We've been in the lab with Adrian Youngue working on a new Souls of Mischief album, and it's something else.

Opio: Adrian Youngue does all original compositions, highly stylized and catered to the people that he's working with. He's a huge Souls of Mischief fan and was part of the whole culture and era that we came up in. It's really in tune with the energy that Souls of Mischief has. I hate to make comparisons, but his production style does have a '93 'til Infinity vibe.

Phesto: It's a concept record and has a whole story line to it, from beginning to end. You have to listen to it whole.

A-Plus: The main topic of the album concept is based around a true-life event that Souls of Mischief went through. It was a life-changing, borderline traumatic, experience right after releasing our first record. Usually, we go fully fictional to make a point, like on '93 'til Infinity for "Anything Can Happen" or "What a Way to Go Out," so it is something that we've never done before.

Opio: The way that Souls of Mischief approach records is not necessarily always looking inward, but, with this record, there is a lot of introspection. We're replacing some of the freedoms that you take lyrically with some of our own personal experience. I think being introspective and exploring more of our personal experience, more probably than in any other record we've done before, adds to the artistic value of the record. ●

Souls of Mischief, 2013. (left to right) A-Plus, Tajai, Opio, and Phesto. Photo by the Artform Studio.

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