

ESG

South Bronx. 99 Records

Words Andy Thomas

AMERICAN BAND ESG was named after its members' birthstones – emerald, sapphire and gold – by a mother who bought instruments to keep her four girls off the streets. They went on to become one of the most influential groups of New York's post-punk “no wave” scene. The records they released on Ed Bahlman's 99 Records were as raw and urgent as anything on that cultish label. But their minimal yet polyrhythmic sound was somehow apart from the other bands emerging from the New York underground – untainted, pure and primal. “ESG were from a different planet,” Richard McGuire, from 99 label mates Liquid Liquid, told journalist Simon Reynolds. Youthfully soaking up what ESG vocalist and lead guitarist Renee Scroggins would later call the “savage drive” of beats from their South Bronx neighbourhood, ESG produced a naive but acutely funky sound all of their own.

“I don't feel like a disco group, I don't feel like a punk group, I feel like a funk group, maybe like Rick James says, ‘punk funk’,” said Renee, speaking to *Collusion* magazine in 1983 about the hybrid music she and her teenage sisters created in the early 1980s. “I feel we're right here, in between, we've got something for everybody.”

Straddling funk, punk, hip hop, proto-house and mutant disco, ESG's unique place in dance music history was cemented by playing the opening night of Manchester's Hacienda and the closing night of Paradise Garage in New

York. Tracks such as ‘Moody’ and ‘UFO’ sounded like the future to a New York underground ripe with cross pollination, played hard by DJs such as Larry Levan and providing some of the most borrowed breaks in the history of hip hop. After years of sampling, bootlegs and legal wrangling, ESG finally got some official recognition thanks to the Soul Jazz compilation *A South Bronx Story* in 2001. Thirty years on and *The ESG Story*, a documentary by filmmaker Greg Harding, is going to tell their story properly for the first time.

That story begins in the South Bronx projects in the late 1970s; a scene of devastation and danger. The decay had begun when the Cross Bronx Expressway, completed in 1972, displaced workers from their jobs. By then, white flight and further economic strife had created a poisonous concoction. “The area we were growing up in was very rough,” Renee tells me from her home in Atlanta, Georgia. “Full of drugs and gangs in the projects; it was really crazy. Our mom didn't like what she saw outside and knew that I was interested in music. And she promised to get us these instruments. I didn't believe her but one day there it was. Her love of her children was more than her worrying about how she was going to get the money.”

Renee was joined by her sisters Valerie on drums, Deborah on bass and Marie on percussion, and they started rehearsing in their front room. “We began doing cover songs – which were

awful,” says Renee, laughing. “So I said to Valerie, ‘You know if we turn around and start doing our own songs nobody will ever know we are messing up.’ So that's how we started writing.” Their mother, Helen, looked for places for the girls to perform in local talent contests. “She didn't enter us in anything until she thought we had got to the point where we were good enough,” says Renee. “Every Friday after she finished work we would put on a little show for her of songs we had been writing. She'd usually say we needed more practice, but after two or three years she said we were ready.” A spot was eventually found in a talent show in Manhattan, sponsored by CBS Records. “Ed Bahlman was one of the judges,” Renee recalls. “He took my number and called up that night. I thought, ‘Oh my god we've won.’ He said, ‘No, but you girls have something special and I'd like to be your unofficial manager and get you a couple of gigs around Lower Manhattan and see how you do.’”

Bahlman was dating British expat Gina Franklyn, who ran a clothing boutique at 99 MacDougal Street in the West Village. “It was a time in New York when the punk scene had started to get a bit more fun in terms of style. And Gina was really part of that,” explains Vivien Goldman, journalist and punk authority. Franklyn agreed to let Bahlman sell records alongside the post-punk threads. During a buying trip to London she introduced him to Geoff Travis from Rough Trade >



Deborah Scroggins, Renee Scroggins, Marie Scroggins, Tito Lebron and Valerie Scroggins, 1981



Records and a seed was planted for his own record label. Soon 99 Records was releasing music from the many corners of New York's downtown scene, with early releases by Glenn Branca, Y Pants and Bush Tetras. Goldman remembers how the 99 releases became as in demand in London as those from Rough Trade were in New York.

"Honestly those US 45s coming into the Rough Trade shop; people would wait for them. It was like a cargo cult."

With his finger on the pulse of the downtown scene, Bahlman used his contacts and knowledge to secure ESG gigs at many of Manhattan's underground clubs. "I'll never forget

our first professional show as ESG at this club called Popfront at the Mechanics' Hall," says Renee. "That was a totally strange culture shock for us. Here were us girls coming from the Bronx, where the majority of people were black and Hispanic, and we played this punk club with an all-white audience. But they loved us." The girls also appeared at other key venues including Club 57, the Roxy, Mudd Club and Danceteria, supporting bands such as Public Image Ltd (PiL), Gang of Four and The Clash. "Ed exposed us to a whole new culture of music and clubs," says Renee. "It was an amazing time because you would be on a bill

with a rapper, a punk band and the crowd would just take it all in." For Goldman, ESG brought something different to this counter-cultural amalgam. "They were unique. Very little is new under the sun but they had their own place. Just their creativity put them outside what were the expectations for their race, age and class."

As with Rough Trade, Bahlman was starting to forge a relationship with another influential UK independent label with growing links to New York. While New Order's trips to clubs such as the Funhouse were creating a new dance floor direction for Factory Records, label mates A Certain Ratio

(ACR) were also feeling the funk of New York. The austere Manchester funk outfit had been booked into East Orange studios in New Jersey by Tony Wilson. ESG were to support ACR at Hurrah in what was a pivotal moment in the girls' career. Wilson was in the audience that night. "I had no idea who he was," says Renee. "But he was watching our sound check and afterwards he came up and said, 'Hey, I really like what you are doing. How would you like to make a record?' I didn't take him seriously because we had been bugging Ed for two years about releasing us."

With ACR finishing the *To Each* LP three days early, ESG were offered their last three days studio time. The studio sessions introduced the teenage sisters to Factory Records' genius producer Martin Hannett. "It's so funny because everyone talks about him and I've seen the movie *24 Hour Party People*, but this was not the guy that I met," says Renee. "The guy that I met was calm; he was respectful. I had no idea who he was, that he was this big important producer because he was just a cool guy. He took me in and showed me around the mixing boards and after we'd record something he'd ask if I liked it."

The three tracks that Hannett produced in his inimitable haunting style, 'Moody', 'UFO' and 'You're No Good', would become ESG's signature tracks, great slabs of ominous funk that

sound as raw and alien today. Often labelled as minimal, the group's sound actually owed as much to the polyrhythmic complexity of Latin music. "Our neighbourhood was predominately black and Hispanic and growing up we would hear all this music coming from the parks," says Renee. "The congas, cowbells and timbales would be playing all night. So that gave us our Latin influence. I think

'THEY DIDN'T JUST TAKE IT DOWNTOWN, THEY TOOK IT EVERYWHERE'

it just soaked in and became almost subliminal because when you went to sleep you heard this all night. At first you wanted it to stop because you had to go to sleep but soon it was one of the things that was luring you to sleep."

The group's rhythmic, heavy sound, which was augmented by neighbourhood friend Tito Libran on congas, had another source. "Growing up my other major influence was James Brown," Renee explains. "He really inspired my style of writing, because he

would 'take it the bridge'. And when he did, this musical breakdown was let loose and I was like, 'Man, why can't a song always just be a breakdown?'" By honing in on the breaks, ESG mirrored the early block party DJs such as Kool Herc, who were extending the percussion section of tracks such as James Brown's 'Funky Drummer'. Drummer Valerie Scroggins recently told *Tom Tom Magazine*: "The sound comes from being in the street and being around other kids in the parks and stuff like that. It was just something in me. I started beatin' on pots and pans and on my thighs and legs at school." But what made their sound unique? "Because we never had any training we didn't realise you're not supposed to mix things," explains Renee. "Like there is only supposed to be one tempo. So I think the fact that we had no knowledge that these things were not supposed to go together had a lot to do with how we sounded. Otherwise we might have sounded like everyone else. We never thought, 'This is jazz' or 'This is funk'. We just used to throw it all together."

Released on Factory (and a few months later on 99), their first EP created a buzz amongst influential journalists, including Adrian Thrills at the *NME*. "Any group who are touted as a cross between Public Image Ltd and Tamla Motown deserve to be heard," he wrote in April 1981. >

The release would strengthen the links between New York and Manchester, with ESG invited to play at the opening night of the Hacienda. “They had brought us over specifically for that gig,” says Renee. “But it was really, really funny because the club wasn’t even ready. There was sawdust everywhere.”

The idea for the Hacienda was conceived during visits to Paradise Garage by Tony Wilson and New Order manager Rob Gretton, which became just one of the New York clubs to embrace ESG. While ‘Moody’ was a favourite at clubs in both New York and Chicago (with Chip E sampling the tune for his early 1985 house cut ‘Like This’), DJ Larry Levan would also spin their lesser-known 1987 mutant disco cut ‘Standing In Line’ (also given heavy rotation by Tony Humphries at Newark’s Club Zanzibar). Produced by Renee and self-released on the Emerald, Sapphire & Gold label, it was one of the tracks the girls would play on the final two nights at the club. “Paradise Garage was fabulous,” says Renee. “Of all the clubs we played, that had the most fantastic sound system I ever heard. It could really hold bass, drums and congas, that heavy funk sound.”

After the second EP for 99, ‘ESG Says Dance to the Beat of Moody’, the group released their first album, *Come Away with ESG*. The cut-and-paste collage on the front cover of a Panasonic boom box and adidas shell-toe shoes was reflective of the downtown scene at clubs such as the Roxy. Recorded live in the small Radio City Music Hall and produced by Bahlman, the sound is perhaps more refined than on the first EP, but just as agitated – especially on ‘Dance’ and ‘Parking Lot Blues’. At their most sparse, ‘Tiny Sticks’ brings to mind the words of Liquid Liquid’s Richard McGuire. “The songs were held together by nothing. A couple of clacking sticks and a simple bassline.”

With ESG’s place in New York’s disco underground assured, the group would soon become even more influential to a hip hop culture in search of the ultimate break. It was in fact through the *Ultimate Breaks and Beats* LPs that many hip hop producers were drawn to the stark alien sound of



Marie Scroggins,
Renee Scroggins,
Tito Lebron,
Valerie Scroggins
and Deborah
Scroggins, 1981

‘UFO’. “I had just seen *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* and at the end the aliens are communicating to the humans through music,” Renee explains. “And I was, like, ‘I wonder what it would be like if this spaceship landed in the middle of projects.’ So that’s the sound of the chaos.”

The first two samples of ‘UFO’ were on Big Daddy Kane’s ‘Ain’t No Half Steppin’ in 1988, followed shortly after by Public Enemy’s ‘Night of the Living Baseheads’. Sampling remains a raw

issue for Renee. “We were playing in the Peppermint Lounge, which used to show these films on the wall. And this guy showed us this film of Afrika Bambaataa and there was ‘UFO’. I guess the guy thought I would be excited but I was upset. And after that I would hear it everywhere. At the time there were no sample laws, nothing to protect your rights. We didn’t make a dime while they were making all this major money. We were still living in the projects trying to hustle to get by.”

have claimed was intimidation by Sugar Hill. “That is presumably what sent Ed over the edge,” says Goldman. “What the hell scared him so much?”

With 99 gone, ESG released their 1987 mini LP *ESG II* on their own Emerald, Sapphire & Gold label. Then came the even more low key release ‘Party Music’ on Popular Records in 1988. This was followed by an EP on the small Pow Wow imprint in 1991, including the rebuke to old boyfriends ‘Erase You’. Two years later an equally stern message was sent to the hip hop fraternity in ‘Sample Credits Don’t Pay Our Bills’ on Nega Fulô Records.

It would be another 10 years before ESG would start to receive due credit. *A South Bronx Story*, released on Soul Jazz Records, brought their music to a new audience who had lived through a decade of club music and were keen to understand some of this music’s background. One of those was filmmaker Harding. “A friend where I worked played me that and, for a good year solid, I pretty much couldn’t listen to anything else. That LP just blew me away and I couldn’t believe I hadn’t heard them before. And as the years went by I couldn’t believe other people hadn’t heard of them. So once I found out more I was, like, ‘Man, their story has to be told.’”

The release of *A South Bronx Story* also inspired the band, returning to the studio in 2001 with producer Pete Reilly to release an LP dedicated to their mother who passed away in November of that year. *Step Off* found the group stripping their already stark sound down to the basics to stunning effect, aided by the youthful guitar and bass of daughters Christelle and Nicole.

The ESG sound continues to influence musicians such as New York’s LCD Sound System. “The empty space is just as important as the notes played and the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. That was a huge influence on LCD,” said LCD drummer Pat Mahoney, speaking to *Daily Note*, the Red Bull Music Academy’s 2013 newsletter. Goldman thinks ESG’s influence is even more far-reaching. “Not only did they transcend expectations by just getting on the 6 train [the subway line that links the

Bronx to downtown] to open up their own world, they made a lasting impact on pop. They didn’t just take it downtown, they took it everywhere. But they were operating completely outside the conventions.”

Despite last year’s self released *Closure* LP suggesting it could be the end of ESG, a new LP is on the way to accompany Harding’s film. “The fact they have decided to keep going is great,” says Harding. “When I contacted Renee about doing the film they were talking about *Closure* being their last album and final tour. But I feel like they are a band that is so passionate about their music they just can’t stop. And anything I can do to

‘THE SONGS WERE HELD TOGETHER BY NOTHING. A COUPLE OF CLACKING STICKS AND A SIMPLE BASSLINE’

help get their name spread even further is great. They are a lot more important than a lot of people realise as far as the history of music is concerned.”

More European gigs to promote the new LP and documentary will hopefully follow up a recent trip to Brazil to perform in Rio. “ESG has always been able to cross over and be accepted by all races and all cultures,” concludes Renee. “That’s what I love and believe in; music as an international language. When we can’t say anything else we can understand each other through music.” ■

The ESG Story will be screened at the *CBGB Music and Film Festival* in October theesgstory.com cbgb.com