



**HEAR MORE OF THE
INTERVIEW NOW!**

Download the free **viewa** app, then hold your smartphone or tablet over this page to hear Bliss N Eso talking about their new album and more.

**RAPPER'S
DELIGHT**
Eso, Bliss and
DJ Izm



WIZARDS *of* OZ

How these clueless, rap-loving
teenage friends became Bliss N Eso,
Australia's premier magic MCs

BY JAMES JENNINGS

BLISS N ESO

THERE WAS A LITTLE TRICK THAT WE'D USE AS teenagers that my mum taught us – we'd write down anything we'd want in life on a bit of paper, fold it up and put it in a freezer to keep those thoughts fresh." After revealing this variation of a common spell used in esoteric practices, it's no great surprise to learn that Max MacKinnon's MC name, Eso, is short for "Esoterikizm". The more animated half of Australian hip-hopppers Bliss N Eso – prone to comedic voices and frequently laugh-out-loud funny – comes off in person much as he does on record: an intense storyteller who seasons everything with a dash of humour. His fur hat with earflaps is currently doing the job of lightening the mood while he talks the serious

business of the journey the long-time friends have taken together over the years. "If I was to grab that paper and read what we'd written down, it would've said [affects simpleton voice], 'Make a song. Have people listen. Do a show where people come.' That would've been it. To have everything else is just a huge bonus."

Bliss N Eso's "everything else" is a laundry list of enviable achievements: two platinum albums (2010's *Running on Air* went to Number One), an ARIA award and sold-out national tours. It's a long way from the pair's humble beginnings as 13-year-old misfits who befriended each other due to a shared love of the then still burgeoning hip-hop scene. "There was no 'hip-hop' section in CD stores," says U.S.-born Bliss (real name Jonathan Notley, 33), his laid-back persona a notable contrast to his hyper rhyme partner. "So when we found each other at high school we were literally the only dudes in the whole damn school who knew what each other was talking about."

By the time the North Sydney-bred Eso met Bliss in 1993 at Sydney's creativity-nurturing Glenaeon Steiner School, Bliss had already lived in the U.S. and Indonesia. A target for bullies for perennially being the "new kid", Bliss found things no different in Australia. "When I think back now, it's amazing – we just stuck at it, even though we got a lot of shit thrown at us," he recalls. "Back then it had that stigma of you being a white boy doing black music . . ."

"Wannabe homie" bullshit," adds Eso, 32. Bliss grins. "The funny thing is now the same people hit us up for tickets to our shows. There's no rubbing it in, but success is the best revenge."

On their just-released fifth album, *Circus in the Sky*, Notley and MacKinnon (joined on tour by Tarik "DJ Izm" Ejja-mai) detail much of their shared history on lead single "Home Is Where the Heart Is" – a nostalgic look at a time, Eso admits, when the pair were as clueless as they come. "We had no idea how the formula was done – we thought it was some kind of magic, how hip-hop was made. 'Do you do the beat first? Do you write

your rhymes first?' So we had to find out the craft of it all by ourselves." In those dark pre-internet days, it was ABC's seminal late-night music video show *rage* that provided a few rare scraps of information.

"We didn't know how to make beats – we had to watch film clips," Eso continues. "There's a clip for Outkast's 'Benz or Beamer', and we could see them in their studio with their beat machine, and we could see the make of it: 'Oh, that's what you use!'"

"We would buy hip-hop CD singles for the instrumentals so we could practice rhyming over beats that we loved," adds Bliss. "We had no way of recording, so we would get two stereos: one would play the beat, the other would have a blank tape

"We stuck at it, even though we got a lot of shit thrown at us – there was the stigma of white guys doing black music."

and we'd hit record and rap." Bliss admits he still owns the practice tape. "That cassette will never see the light of day."

Releasing their first independent EP *The Arrival* in 2000, Bliss maintains the maxim that it takes around seven years to master your craft held true for the aspiring MCs. "It certainly took us at least that, if not longer." The music also proved to be only half of the hip-hop puzzle. "Learning to do all the beats was one struggle, but with the MCing, mate, we were like taps," Eso enthuses. "Just on. We would be free-styling all day, all night. It was mind exercise – the craft of rhyming. All we need-

ed was him [Bliss] to beatbox, and there you had it."

Fast-forward to 2013 and Bliss N Eso's fortunes have improved somewhat – Nas, widely regarded as one of the greatest MCs of all time, recently sought the group out to collaborate on "I am Somebody" from their new LP. "The universe just opens up sometimes and [mimes explosion] FFFF-SHHHHH! – magic happens," beams Eso. "If you told us Nas would be on one of our albums we wouldn't have believed it. How did that happen? I'm still amazed . . ."

"The cool thing was it was his idea to do the collabo," Bliss elaborates. "We were like stunned mullets, like, 'Yeah, OK!' He was on Triple J and announced that he was going to be working with us." "When I heard that on the radio," Eso interjects, "I was like a little girl jumping up and down – 'Did you hear that?! Rewind it! Rewind it!'"

There are also plans to shoot a music clip for the song in New York City. "Just take me through *the hood*, Nas. Take me through *the borough*," Eso says the words as though speaking to Nas like an old mate, eliciting laughter from his partner. "To do a track with an artist you grew up listening to and are a fan of, to go to his city and meet him and hang out and do a film clip . . . That's fuckin' next level shit."

TWO WEEKS LATER, BLISS IS standing in his modest two-bedroom apartment on Sydney's north shore. A mountain of sneaker boxes fill a corner ("I have a bit of a problem with sneakers") and dozens of baseball hats hang from a pair of racks – clear signals this is the dwelling of a hip-hop lifer. He motions to a large framed picture taking pride of place in his living room: a skilful drawing of Eso posing by some train tracks. "This was my major work for the HSC – it got into Art Express," Bliss says proudly. "It's gonna be included in the artwork for the new album." It's clear the pair share a deep bond. "Being in a band is like having a second family, and like any family you have your ups and downs, you fight, you love each other. It's like we're brothers."

A bedroom office doubles as "Bliss N Eso HQ", with a home studio set-up ("Where we do pre-production – it's a minimal set-up, but it's all you need"), multiple boxes containing digital tapes of footage of the group over the years ("I was adamant we always had a camera there, getting it all"), two gold record plaques, the group's ARIA award and a gallery of tour posters. Their just announced "House of Dreams" national tour has seen the large Sydney and Brisbane shows already sell out. Surely the group have made enough money to splash out on some gold bling and sports cars?

"Bro, I'm in a two-bedroom apartment here, you know what I mean? People spin

Sub-editor JAMES JENNINGS profiled Empire of the Sun in RS 740.



WILD STYLE
Bliss N Eso - aka
Jonathan Notley and
Max MacKinnon -
onstage in 2012.



Bliss's HSC portrait of
Eso will be featured in
the artwork of their
new album.

out if they haven't met me before and they visit - 'Fuck, you live here? Where's the Ferrari?' It's like, 'Yeah, dude - sometimes I catch the bus, too.'

Not living a lavish lifestyle, he believes, is paramount to the group's well-being. "My biggest fear is that once you get caught up in all that bullshit, that's when the ego takes over and you stop working hard and improving your craft. To me that's fundamental to why some bands keep getting better and some bands just fade away. But we aren't rich, none of us own our own houses. In terms of being 'set-up', we've got a long way to go."

After an update on the Nas music video ("He's given us a date of June 25, so right now we're working with people on the ground there to organise locations, but getting permits in NYC is a nightmare"), Bliss debuts the rough cut for the "Home Is Where the Heart Is" clip: a nostalgic look back at the group's long history, replete with archive footage. Like Bliss N Eso themselves, it's a combination of goofiness (Eso dancing and rapping along to "Turtle Power" from the Ninja Turtles movie), unashamed sentiment (Eso proposing to his girlfriend on-stage, in front of thousands of cheering punters) and earnest dedication to the art of creating hip-hop. "It's great," he grins when it ends. "A real sweet reminder of how far we've come."

Seated next to each other again a few days later at the offices of their Sydney record company, the pair slip into their roles of "the calm one" and "the hyper one" as Eso details, with intense focus, the bigger picture. "We have a deep message, and we

TALES FROM THE ROAD

Bliss N Eso's most memorable moments with their fans

THEY DO

"There have been some crazy stories of how the music has affected people," says Bliss. "It's a trip. We've had fans get up on stage to do marriage proposals."

FINDING BLISS IN SWITZERLAND

"In Canada this dude said he found our music by being lost in a farmland area in Switzerland," says Eso. "He found a house where people were smoking ganj and playing Bliss N Eso. After that he was hooked."

PHASE TWO: CONQUER AMERICA

"In the US we'd always get a few locals at shows who knew the lyrics, which blew us away," says Bliss. Adds Eso: "To them it was like, 'This is phase two: It went into the shits, money fucked it and another country had to bring it back for us to reopen our eyes to how beautiful it was!'"

REUNITED AND IT FEELS SO GOOD

"A lady came up to me crying, saying she'd split with her husband," recalls Eso. "They caught up and started talking about the song 'Eye of the Storm' and she said talking about how much they loved it was what got them back together."

A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH

"We've heard life and death stuff - people who were on a suicidal path but our music helped them out to people asking for instrumentals of our songs to walk down the aisle to at their wedding," says Bliss. "It's mind-blowing."

want to impact the whole fuckin' world. So we haven't even started to get out there."

"It feels like the beginning, the tip of the iceberg," agrees Bliss. "Australia's a small market, and there's so many people out there to connect with." When pressed on what their particular message is, Eso talks with an even greater measure of passion. "We don't like to judge people and we don't cater for a particular audience. I think positivity and the power of the mind and the change you can make with music is right up there in terms of messages for us. It's still quite an unseen magical force, and we don't quite know exactly what it is either when we get together and start making music. It's definitely spiritual."

"We're all about going for what you want in life - your dreams, your ambitions," adds Bliss. "Not getting scared, not taking shit from people, just staying true to yourself and staying true to your path. And positive energy is at the core of our music."

Eso kicks up the hype-o-meter even further when pressed on what other ideas are bubbling away in Bliss N Eso's mystical lab of limitless plans. "We've got this awesome idea for a trilogy of live DVDs. *Bliss & Eso: The Experience* with all of the fuckin' buckets of footage we have from the last 10 years!" he gushes. "Plus we've got ideas to put on fucking theatre shows. Different scenes with the fog and the rowing boats, but with all different MCs telling a story, and it's kind of Biblical, and you can buy the soundtrack to the show..." Eso breaks from his infectious enthusiasm and takes a rare pause for breath. "We're very excited about what's gonna happen next. We wanna paint the world... pink." Bliss cracks up. Once the laughter subsides, Eso sees the opportunity to slip in one last mystical message. "We just want to bowl the world over with a bit of magic."

FROM TOP: DEVON CHRISTOPHER ADAMS; DRAWING BY JONATHAN "BLISS" NOTLEY