

Holy Hell! Supa Dupa Fly Turns 20

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In its time, Missy Elliott's *Supa Dupa Fly* was a karate chop to the charts. Nowadays, the music sounds a little less futuristic than it did when it came out, but—oddly—it gains power once you know what the '96 graduating class of DeVante Swing's Swing Mob would be capable of across the next decade of pop. This is the sound of kids awed by their own talent, plotting world domination in real time; it reeks of weed smoke wafting across soundboards.

In 1997, Missy Elliott and Timbaland were in their mid-twenties and riding high off their respective songwriting and production work on Aaliyah's *One in a Million*. Tim had done Ginuwine's "Pony" and, if the reprisal of its infamous belching robot noise on "Friendly Skies" was any indication, was rightfully proud of it. Elektra offered Missy her own imprint, with choice of artists to produce, if she agreed to make a solo album. Famously shy, Missy was reluctant at first but eventually acquiesced—as long as she could smuggle some of her artsy friends aboard.



Missy reps her crew constantly, shouting Timbaland out at every possible moment (“we so tight you get our styles tangled”) and singing a duet with Aaliyah on a heartwarming song (“Best Friend”) about how much the two love each other. She gives ample space to guests and in fact doesn’t come in for three minutes, as if she’s downing shots backstage to muster up her courage while a clownish Busta Rhymes and a James Joyce-referencing Lil’ Kim hold the crowd over. She’s hardly a screen-gobbling presence, rapping and singing in a stoned coo that’s at no pains to exert itself. She’d reemerge harder and hungrier on next year’s *Da Real World*, which sounds curiously robotic compared to its predecessor.

Missy’s always been lovable, never more than here. She likes pot, her friends, good beats, and good sex. She doesn’t like beat-biters, fake friends, or guys who tell you they love you while keeping four other girls on the side. About half the songs here contain some kind of admonishment to these unsavory groups. This is the sound of Missy staking out her own ground, personally and professionally. Aware of her potential as an industry titan, she’s drunk on her own talent, singing about what a good rapper she is and rapping about what a good singer she is.

Tim produces the whole thing. It wasn’t yet clear he was capable of an “Are You That Somebody?” or a “Cry Me a River,” but his gifts were as obvious as his unwillingness to kowtow to trends. In contrast to the sample-biting smashes from Bad Boy that cast a pall over the R&B and rap charts at the time, Tim’s work was built from scratch: crisp, sprightly, full of tiny moving parts. “Futuristic” is a common adjective in tandem with Tim’s beats, but his approach has a lot in common with classic funk: wormy basslines, in-the-pocket grooves, and a few weird sounds to test the limits of what can wiggle its way into a charting song.

This latter lesson in particular must have rubbed off in the pop world. Could it be coincidence that the Neptunes were mercenary non-entities until 1998 and then were magically able to cook up “Superthug” for Noreaga? What *Supa Dupa Fly* heralded wasn’t just the arrival of two young talents but pop’s friendliest era for auteurs since the Marvin Gaye days, when a producer’s name could act as a seal of quality. From then until a hard chart shift towards club-friendly Eurotrash around 2008, the charts were the most reliable breeding ground for out-there ideas and were often, if not usually, more interesting than the underground.

It’s a time that’s much missed. Missy Elliott went on to make even better music than what’s here, mostly with Tim (“Work It,” “Get Ur Freak On,” “Pass That Dutch” and “Gossip Folks”), but dipped out in 2005, citing a lack of inspiration. The tracks for a promised *Block Party* album were appealing, but her most recent work hasn’t been

particularly worthwhile. Timbaland stopped bringing in the bucks around 2007 and is still capable of wonders but relies largely on protégés; his style has lost a lot of its sheen. While both were frequent fliers on mid-'00s critic lists, they're not really remembered as artists today but rather as pop curiosities, novelties even.

Pop is in a bad way in 2017, poisoned by cloying indie affectations and meddling, mercenary Swedes. Even trap's fallen into formula. Turn on pop radio right now and wonder what's worth defending about it. Shawn Mendes? Charlie Puth? Truth is popmism arrived about twenty years too late. The music made by former members of the Swing Mob, and those in thrall to them, between 1996 and 2007 is some of the most creative music ever to chart. A vinyl reissue of this album earlier this year went all but unheralded. This thing deserves a box set.