



UR label artwork (above and following pages) by Frankie Feller, Anne Nepe, Charles Esham and Rhonda Warrior

Since 1989, Detroit Techno collective Underground Resistance have been locked in a struggle against the global forces of Capital corroding the social fabric of their city. Breaking cover for a rare interview, founder 'Mad' Mike Banks discusses their methods of electronic warfare and UR's ever-proliferating cells — Drexciya, Punisher, Suburban Knight, DJ Rolando, Universe 2 Universe and more — through which they have taken the fight from Motor City USA to the stars. Words: Mark Fisher. Photography: Daniëlle van Ark

## Agents of disorder



"I believe that if you put your ego in front of the music, then the people trying to listen to the music can't hear it, they just listen to your ego" —'Mad' Mike Banks



Mark "Vintage Future" Taylor and Davida Box of The 3.5 Band



"At one time Detroit was the only place in the world where cars were made in that kind of abundance, but now it's a more global game and they face really stiff competition from great auto makers from all over the world, just like we face competition from great electronic music producers all over the world. So what used to be your territory only, now is shared by many." 'Mad' Mike Banks is describing the current economic and cultural conditions in Detroit. I'm talking to him in The Hague, where Underground Resistance — the private record label, collective and (arguably) cult whose operations he has co-ordinated for nearly two decades now — are appearing as part of the sprawling TodayAr festival that has taken over the city.

Securing the interview was a grueling trial of faith, involving missed emails, late night phone calls, postponements and a rearranged travel itinerary. My insular paranoia intensified by sleep deprivation, I had begun to imagine that I was being subjected to a programme of UR psychological warfare. Is this what anyone who gets to peek behind the curtain to see UR's scorcher sonnets must endure, I wondered? So it's not surprising that, with 'Mad' Mike in front of me at last, I should feel a little like Wilford at the end of Apocalypse Now. I've gone through the shadows and the mist, the rumours and the misinformation, to meet the man without a face. As soon as Banks starts talking, there's no question that my faith has been rewarded. 'Mad' Mike — engineer of collectivity, sonic and political theorist and technocratic televisionary — is an eloquent and moving advocate of a position that the PR-driven cynicism of consumer culture would like to have completely erased long ago. He believes in the power of music to save and transform lives, something he's seen happen many times in the unforgiving environment of Detroit, his and UR's base of operations. As a town where politics and culture have lagged into a cheery, anti-critical conservatism not seen since the 1950s, UR are more crucial than ever: invaluable both for their implacable persistence and their constant mutation. The label has an identity that is at least as strong as legendary independent imprints like Factory and Rough Trade. It has just released UR-077 and shows no signs of going gently into the good night.

On the face of it, The Hague — with its genteel mix of Old European grandeur and serene skyscrapers — might seem an odd place for an encounter with UR to happen, but Detroit Techno has always been about a strange transit between Europe and the USA. The first wave of Detroit Techno — initiated by three schoolfriends, Derrick May, Kevin Saunderson and Juan Atkins — built a futuristic rhythmic sound from synthsop components that had been designed, but quickly discarded and derided, in Europe. UR might have been the leaders of Detroit's second wave, but they have always been evangelical about the importance of the first wave. "I made a little bulletin museum, I got Juan's sequencers, Kevin Saunderson's keyboards," Banks tells me, and Juan Atkins made The Hague trip with UR, fronting a blistering live incarnation of the group Model 500.

Banks's collaborator at the beginning were Robert Hood (aka The Vision, whose nom de plume, a reference to the existentially troubled android from The Avengers, is one of many borrowings from Marvel Comics in the UR universe) and Jeff Mills. As the pioneers of minimal Techno, UR pursued a ruthlessly subtractive sonic strategy. "Punisher" — a typical early track, and yet another

Marvel reference — was perfectly named, since UR's records at this time were punilovely reductive exercises in repetition. The song form was deleted, and the abstraction facilitated by the use of electronic machinery was embraced and accelerated. Even as UR moved to 'normalise' the sound palette of Techno, they maximised its non-sonic fictional and conceptual elements. There can be no act which vindicates Kodwo Eshun's thesis about futuristic rhythmic music as a carrier of 'sonic fiction', more consummately than UR's Underground Resistance. Eshun's claim (in his 1998 book *More Brilliant Than the Sun*) was that, as the sound became more abstract and impersonal, the ostensibly peripheral material that surrounded and packaged it — the sleeves, the titles, the online communiques — bore all the conceptual weight. This opposition was nowhere more starkly apparent than on the early UR records, although the tracks themselves were largely devoid of any verbal content, they were presented as part of a densely consistent mythoscape. The titles "I'm Not 'Yo Chi Man' Chir" from the 1998 EP *Electronic Warfare* is one of the most delicious examples referred to an ongoing science fictional war in which you played a part simply by listening to the records. By contrast both with the passivity imposed upon the listener by 'real' 'Yo Chi' media and the pallid 'interactivity' offered by New Media, UR have always been cool. In Marshall McLuhan's sense: their world induces you and induces participation. The question 'Who is UR?' answers itself. You are UR, as soon as you are involved.

The relationship between politics and the sound was left occult, something for listeners to figure out for themselves. Kodwo Eshun told UR's silent stealth in opposition to the rabble-rousing hyper-visibility of Public Enemy, an act with which they have always been compared. While Chuck D. bellowed that he "would never be quiet" (from "Rightstarator [Message To A Black Man]" 1987), Underground Resistance intimated that they "would never surface." What made UR fascinating politically was their refusal either to 'tell it like it is' or to issue any exhortations or instructions. Banks made an anti-epistemic ethic out of Techno's anonymity, refusing to be photographed or to play the PR game according to the media's personification rules. "I learned not to describe anything and just leave it like water: clear, with no shape and no form," he explains. "I think that's what people really enjoy about UR, they get to paint their own picture. We might just make the canvas for them with the record, and in their mind they paint the picture and that's one of the reasons we sold for so long. We just went forward. There was no reason for you to know what we look like, you just concentrate more on what the sound was."

"Unfortunately, people need a face all the time and for many years I don't give them a face, but now — Internet, cellphone — people take pictures of me, the shit all over the Internet. I figure, well, hopefully the people will still have some honour, and honour my wish not to be seen in front of my music. I believe that if you put your ego in front of the music and place it in front of the speaker, then the people trying to listen to the music can't hear your music, they just listen to your ego."

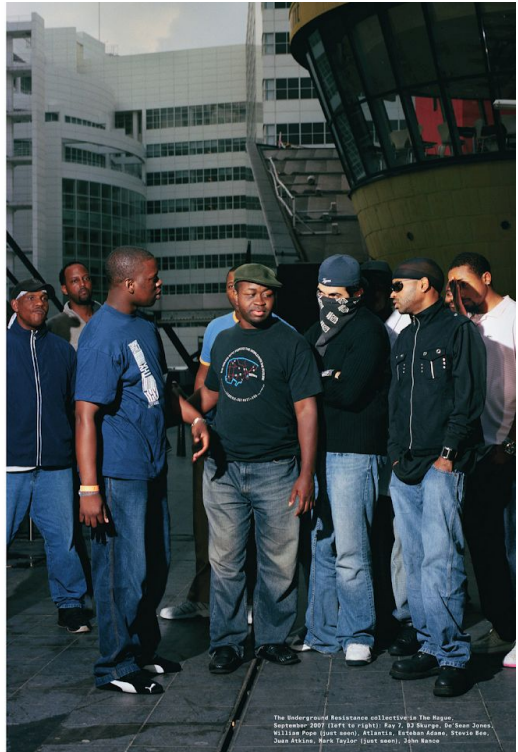
In any case, attributing the music to a personified being is philosophical, as well as ethically wrong. "There's been times," Banks continues, "when I've made music like the 1989's 'Yo Chi Man' Man, when I made that track I can't remember nothing, it was a

two week blur. The spirit was moving through me and when I got through, it was 'Yo Chi Man'. Many times I play in church and as a keyboard player, or guitar player, or bass player. I'm decent at what I do, but there's times when people in church get into it, and the feeling comes, you feel like you're coming, and you can play away beyond your ability. In fact, you know the bass pedal on the organ? I always have trouble with it. I have to look down and play the bass. It's difficult, but when the spirit comes, you don't have to look down, your foot is moving, so at the point you realise that I ain't really playing this organ. It's the same with a track. If the spirit come when you make a track, the question then becomes, 'Is it really you making the track?' So again, it's difficult to take credit for some of this stuff some of the time."

He nods enthusiastically when I say that it's the same with writing. "I've talked to a lot of artists, painters and they say that the point comes when they get it, and they just start doing it. Many times we say 'I did this, I did that', we all slip and say it, but the truth of the matter is, why should you put yourself in front of your music? As human beings, people got a lot of faults — a guy might like girls too young, or be into smoking, gambling, drinking — but your work, or your art, or whatever passes through you, your contribution, it lasts way longer than the human does. Beethoven and Bach, their music has outlived their physical being, as they would have been a fool to put their self in front of it, because as a man you're frail, but your work can stay in humanity forever, like the Egyptians. That shit is so deep, it's still there. People are still putting their hands on work that was done who knows how long ago. There's a number of reasons for the male, but that was one of the bigger reasons."

Instead of pursuing the dull demystification agenda that has blighted so much political pop, UR propagated an elaborate system of (dis)simulation and mythologisation. Part of the reason that Marvel Comics appealed to Banks so much was that each individual issue contributed to the building of a universe, a consistent plane in which invented characters could commingle with entities from mythology and history. Banks appropriated very quickly the potency of what capitalists call 'branding' — semiotic as servers, the trans-substantiation of things by signs — and developed UR as a counter-brand that embraced, rather than decried, the power of the logo. Accordingly, UR have always been semiotically immaculate: their talismans, the best known of which features the skull-with-bullet-teeth Punisher logo piloted from Marvel, are perhaps better recognised than any of their records. "I [Steve airtel] Abdul Haq is a real big part of UR," Banks enthuses. "He's a conceptualist, he's a futurist, he's an artist, and I think a lot of the time he looked at us as a bunch of characters, so different, but maybe united by this one strange idea. Steve Surfer was my guy, because he didn't talk a lot. He just did what he did, he was real smooth. Heaz really created the various characters. With artwork, he really added a great strength to what we were trying to do, a great asset."

Banks also took design and conceptual tips from 'old Progressive rock albums, Rush, Yes, Lenny White



"Somebody in Detroit public schools figured the kids needed to see some real shit, so they have these morgue tours, where the class get to see all the fresh kills. For the kids who have that blingy, bally approach, that shit wakes them up real quick" — 'Mad' Mike Banks

and The Afro Patrols, Jean-Luc Ponty. These were great records, because they took you on a musical journey. (Chuck Conch's) Return To Forever always did that, the *Romantic Warrior*. When I suggest that UR — with their love for cosmic, prog rock and synthpop — as a dream for white peels, Banks responds that if they "listened to music that I guess in other places would be considered geeky music, or dorky, or whatever," so we get to hear Progressive rock to next to Fauci. From seventh grade, of course, he introduced Kraftwerk, which for Detroit was huge, he introduced Prince, George Clinton, all these great eighth artists that used synthesizers for basslines. I thought it was happening all over the country, but of course I wasn't, it was only happening in Detroit. "I think personally, and I never got to say this in the interview that I did (for the *Conch*) could about Mojo [The Cycles Of The Mental Machines, 2007], I think he ended gang warfare in Detroit with one line, a lot of guys will know what I'm talking about. That summer, the gang warfare was at a height and Mojo would get on the radio and ask for peace, pay for peace, and then drop The B52s, man. 'Rock Lobster.' Toothfully, you can't be too much of a tough guy while doing the rock lobster!"

UR realized that there was little point in "negating the reality of social desperation and inequality while blather, when that reality was already depressingly well known." Instead they used fictions to diagram the way in which social reality as it is experienced is a second-order effect of other abstract processes: a war between programmers and fugitives between overground normality and underground groins, between a history given over to atrocity and exploitation and an empty future waiting to be populated.

UR started at the end of the 1980s, at the very moment when the End of History was being proclaimed. They immediately understood that, when the Cold War ended, political struggle would get even colder and cultivated an estranging, alienating distance. As the dyadic spectacle of the ideological war between the US and USSR power

blocs gave way to the full-spectrum-dominance of Capital that could now claim global reach, politics was itself being disappeared: real social antagonisms were gradually being washed out of mainstream culture. In these conditions, the realm of effective action was reduced to a postmodernist's ubiquitous monitors but behind smokecreens, and the militants would be what Robert Hood called "spectral nomads" — figures of movement clandestinely between the mesh of Capital's worldwide web.

If the End of History meant nothing to UR, it was because they had never belonged to history in the first place. The cover of 1993's *Interstellar Fugitives* displays the legend "est. 1538" tracing their origins back to the founding but de-grounding trauma of slavery, UR belong to the displaced temporality in which the slave is marooned after the violent abduction from the homeland. The astonishing sleeve notes to *Interstellar Fugitives* insert slavery into a cosmic cyberpunk hyperfiction, weaving UR into a literal master narrative about an abstract "R1 virus" that passes through human populations, causing them to reject subjugation in favor of collective euphoria.

Despite its cosmic perspective and its success as a global counter-brand, UR always remained rooted in the concrete life-and-death world of Detroit. Many UR operatives would leave the city to become international DJs — the path followed by Jeff Mills and Robert Hood — but Banks always remained in Detroit. "The thing with UR is by me not DJing," says Banks, "I'm home all the time. So whereas the other guys are always on the road, I'm there. I hear all of the new crap, Freshy shit, Live! I heard Drevoxy and I thought it was some of the weirdest space shit I ever heard and, with the concepts, I was proud to be able to introduce the world to Drevoxy. I was like, 'I see you and I see him and he was really impressive and I'm just glad that I could introduce an artist of that caliber off the label.'"

Staying in Detroit allowed UR to operate as a patentless presence in a city whose public spaces had corroded after the collapse of the car industry and the arrival of neo-liberal Reaganomics. Banks once said that UR are fulfilling something of the function that the car manufacturers in the city used to. How that the former car manufacturers have been "Replaced By Robots," as one of the tracks on this year's *Electronic Warfare 2.0* has it, the UR collective offer some kind of future for a Detroit youth that would otherwise be denied one. If Motown was the pop parallel to Fordism and the Techno scene was the analogue to some of the ravages of post-Fordist Capital. "On this trip, the size and scale of the keyboard players is 22, one of the dancers [like X-Men] never flew on an airplane before," Banks explains. "So with us, man, what UR has been in the city, is a hope, and the young people, it's a great opportunity for them... I introduce a lot of young people to this shit. Mostly I lose them,

I lose them to Europe, to Japan, to DJing, booking agents I lose to me. But it's a good loss, because they get a career in music, maybe they get some pretty view from Europe, but for us at UR we're still there. And I've got four new ones coming with me now, and their eyes are wide open and they're enjoying this trip immensely. It's way more than a performance for us, because all these guys on bank and they tell stories to kids. 'What's Norway like?' 'What's Sweden like?' 'What's Japan like?' Here's this flow of information from guys who have really been there, and now the dope man ain't so powerful. I always challenge some of my friends that sell drugs. They're all like, 'Man, I'm making money. I'm doing this, I'm doing that.' I just hold up my passport, and I tell them, 'Yeah, you're doing this, and you're doing this, but motherfucker when they come after your ass, you can't even get out of the country, shut the fuck up.' And they see those stamps and they're like, 'Damer, I shut them down. So to the kids, I'm much more powerful than some drug dealer, and to the kids these guys talk to, yeah, they might know the local drug dealer but my man right there, he just back from Norway, you ain't even been to Colombia where they make the cocaine. It diminishes their power and gives someone doing something positive more power'."

Refusing absolutely the nihilistic postmodern aesthetic that religious music to being merely a consumer preference, UR insisted that "redneck audio-visual programming" was a weapon, perhaps the most important one, in the pacification of populations and the normalization of the capitalist reality picture. The fact that postmodern relatives would turn *Underground Resistance's* "historic" and "electronic warfare" as just another easy metaphor allowed UR's operations continue in full view of the programmers. But UR, far from being, have never been in any doubt that the total qualities of the sound have direct psychological and social effects, uplifting dancing crowds from the dreary weight of neoliberalism.

UR's electronic warfare is aimed at deprogramming a population addicted and alighted by late capitalism's stimulus bait. But it's increasingly difficult to reach the disenfranchised youth in Detroit, made cynical by both the business of the streets and the gleaming fantasies being hawked by the entertainment industry, which why Banks is positive about the 'morgue tours' organised by some Detroit schools. "The kids are coming up with the blingy, bally party by the pool back called look on life!" he observes. "Nothing wrong with that, but you need a little balance. So somebody in the Detroit public schools must have figured that the kids need to see some real shit, so they have these morgue tours, where the class go down and they get to see all the fresh kills. For the kids who have that blingy, bally approach, that shit wakes them up real quick. I coach high school baseball and it's one of the few things that I notice that they remember, it really affects them. It slows them down and makes them think a little bit. When they come back, they're like, 'Yeah, man, that was deep...' It's the first time you hear them say that word 'deep.' Usually it happens in the street, when you see somebody get fucked, but they're so good at scooping the bodies up that they don't be there long, in the effect that's the same. "Some of the kids make it and some of them don't," he continues, "I lose some of them to the war."



Underground Resistance (left to right): Dr. Sean Jones, Jonathan Sloan, William Pines, Roy F., Estaban Adams



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Some of my baseball players, they're young, they're full of testosterone, they want to play themselves, so some of them join the Marine Corps. I lose some of them to that, I lose some of them to the street, some of them start selling drugs. That drug life is so appealing to them, because of the money. Some of them carry on with baseball, it's a dream. You lose two thirds of them on the trip, I'm thinking about not continuing coaching, because you lose so many of them."

*Interstellar Fugitives* — which features something like songs, albeit delivered in an Afrocentric Kraftwerkian cataton — marked a turn away from the minimal techno that had been UR's trademark, they now called their sound "high tech funk." But the techno UR did didn't sound very funky at all. With its automated radio transmissions and ominous electronic textures, it imagines the Detroit collective about the Soviet space station circling the Earth. "Afrograms" — whose title alone could launch a thousand theses — repositioned the UR as a mediator for an encounter between Europe and Africa, while "Mirage" was more explicit than ever before in articulating UR's grotesque gospel: "Everything you see is everything you hear! It might be a mirage!"

The 2006 sequel, *Interstellar Fugitives 2: Destruction Of Order*, diversifies the UR sound even further without diluting the brand. With their floaty synths and ethnographic samples, tracks by Deacon and Perception and DMS sound almost ambient. Elsewhere on the LP the sound is as harsh as ever. New comrades proliferate: Unknown Soldiers, Initiators, Aquanauts. The latter's aptly additive "Crackles" updates and infuses the scenario of Phuture's Acid classic "Your Only Friend" — cocaine as a despoiled catalyst that will take over your life — by envisaging crack as a city-renewing monster. Meanwhile, old hands continue to turn out killer tracks — longtime UR associate The Suburban Knight (latest name: James Pennington) has by now perfected a lush, capitated and opulent sound that is part (aerobic) funk, part (aerobic) funk, part (aerobic) funk.

The lead track on *Electronic Warfare 2.0* is the brooding "Kill Your Radio Station." UR's latest assault on midwest audio programming, which codifies their desire to "be up on the DJ and drag him out back/Get him in the corner/Over that head with a sack 'over acid Acid cocaine. As ever, music is a matter of life or death for UR. "Kill my radio station-Before it kills me!" The show in The Hague confirmed what *Interstellar Fugitives 2* and *Electronic Warfare 2.0* already amply established: that UR are very far from being a Techno heritage act, that their time is now. UR have always been fastidious about detail — imagine a corporation that is actually serious about quality control in the way that certain capitalist companies only pretend to be — and the night presents a seamless showcase of the UR continuum, featuring the precision-drilling DJing of Rotor Gones, and introducing Billewatt (aka John Williams), whose act, complete with live harmonica, is a fabulously eccentric, eclectic take on Funk. But at the burning core of the three shows is the awesome energy of the UR in-techno jazz outfit once called Galaxy 2 Galaxy, now re-named Universe 2 Universe. The name change was prompted by the introduction of new personnel into the group. "Galaxy 2 Galaxy was one of my tech jazz," Banks explains, "and now with the addition of a whole lot of new members of the band, Dr. Sean Jones and John Dixon [joining existing members Banks, DJ Surge

(DJing, keyboards), Raphael Meriwethers (percussion, drums), William Pines (bass) and Estaban Adams (keyboards)], I decided that Galaxy was what it was and the Universe is what it is right now. And their 19 years old and 23 years old perspectives are different, young and bring really new energy, so I think the band has moved on."

Live music is not a new venture for Underground Resistance. Early on, Banks and Mills had played together. The way Jeff Dineen, Banks remembers, "he's so good as a DJ, he can actually make it an instrument. Jeff would say, 'Mills, run some shit on me, I need some more of this.' I'd be like, 'I'll be in it. Or he would play drum beats and then I'll play 303 and basslines, and he controlled my sequence with a 909. It was crazy what we were doing back in the early 80s. There was pressure. 'We'll come and see and my daughter, you want to do that, and Jeff eventually got me up off my ass, and he said, 'Come on, man, let's do this.' We'll play in Germany at the Trezor club."

But the arrival of Cornelius Atlantic's Harris for his second stint as the label manager and logistics operative changed Banks's previous aims. Harris, who also acts as UR's onstage MC, is as amiable and gregarious as Banks is shy and cautious. "Cornelius came into our world," Banks says. "I was like, 'Shit, I'm glad that's over, because now I can make some records' because they were tearing my gut out."

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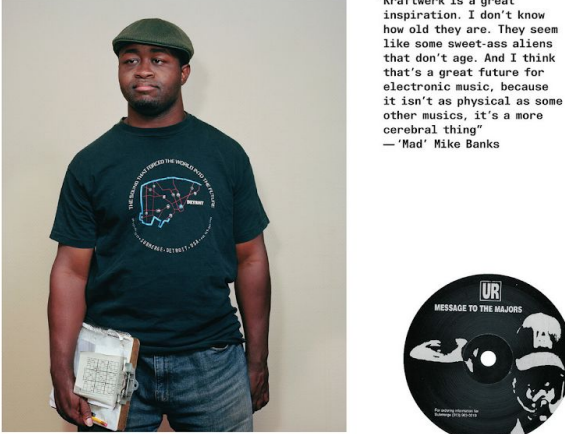
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UR's politics have never been merely pastoral or aspirational, because they have engaged in the tough, practical business of building and maintaining collectively. "Sometimes when you get writer's block when you get fat, you can't pay the bills, you don't know where you're gonna go..." Banks says, talking off "Illegal money was way better than this music business." I just didn't have the time to do it. The first time you got was going to jail. But sometimes it gets so bad, you can't do it. The people you love, for my sister and my daughter, you want to do shit, but you don't have anything, and sometimes I go down the wall in the basement, and I look at all names from different parts of the world where people have signed it, and that keeps me going. That, or John Williams, Billewatt, he comes by with his new track, and I look at these guys with different eyes. I might come from the basement, and they've got this big smile and this CD of their new shit, just like Drevoxy did, just like Rob Hood did, just like Rolando, and I think I get energy from it."

"That's kind of how we make records. It isn't a plan, it's just whenever someone finds the time in their life to focus and they do it, and they bring it. They have a lot of respect for my art. They say, 'Mike, what do you think, how the EOT is it playing?' What do you think, can a DJ get with that? and I think, 'Yeah, we can do with that on the label, it's the qualifications, let's go.' For the brief period of time I get depressed with it, there's always somebody coming along to pick me up, whether it's somebody visiting from overseas, or one of my friends, locally, who says, 'Hey man, stay up, you deserve it. Or it could be guys on my baseball team, some of the kids, 'Wes, Coach Banks, when you going back out of town?' Because I get tired sometimes, but a lot of inspiration comes from the people, and the environment. I'm just blessed, man, the people come from all over the world. People will travel, many miles to give you some love, and all the people who take the journey to our store. I really take my hat off to them, because they're quite adventurous, they beat back a lot of stereotypes, and they come right on into the core of Detroit. They ring the doorbell any time of night, crazy motherfucker, and next thing you know, we're in the basement listening to Techno for three or four hours, man. That's the best shit. Can't beat that."

"Believe me," Banks continues, "all the money I've made playing live or selling records, it went to paying bills for what's in that building. When the people come to the building, they're standing in their own records they bought, and it's the weird thing, they know it. They're like, 'Damn, I helped build this place, didn't I?' and I'm like, 'Yeah, you did.' What can I tell them? Every time I make some goes into records and into that building and trying to keep it going. Believe me, man, it's a fucking struggle. We don't get any help. People try to get us grants, but we don't get them. So every month is a struggle, but we were kind of happy we squashed it out and keep going. We're still making, cutting edge shit, man. It's wild shit, man. It's not a love that ghetto perspective on space and time and the future, because it's warped like a motherfucker, and as long as they're making it, it's put it out." *Electronic Warfare 2.0* is out now on *Underground Resistance*. [www.submerge.com](http://www.submerge.com)

UR's onstage MC Atlanta aka Cornelius Harris



"Kraftwerk is a great inspiration. I don't know how old they are. They seem like some sweet-ass aliens that don't age. And I think that's a great future for electronic music, because it isn't as physical as some other musics, it's a more cerebral thing" — 'Mad' Mike Banks

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