

Play that funky music

Maki Nibayashi and Matt Wilce catch up with Verbal, one third of Japan's hottest hip hop group m-flo.

Currently riding high in the charts with the single "come again," m-flo epitomize the fresh sound that's transforming J-pop. Starting out as three kids jamming after school, m-flo—Taku, Lisa and Verbal—have come into their own with a skillful blend of rap, hip hop and soul. Verbal recently took time out to talk about his music, new-found fame and future mission.

Where did you guys meet?

Taku and I both went to St Mary's International school since we were in fifth grade. Basically we started off as classmates, but we grew closer when we started doing music together. And I've known Lisa since Junior High.

So how did you get started, and what kind of music influenced you?

Taku and I would have dance parties, and he'd throw a show and people would play the guitar and sing. It all started when he just asked me to jump in and throw a rap into a song he was doing. Lisa was always known to have a really nice voice, but it wasn't until high school that we actually got to know each other. Back then Taku liked Living Color, who had started mixing rock and rap together. When Public Enemy did a song with Anthrax we thought it was cool and started doing stuff like that. I only liked rap, so it was just like a weird combination, but people liked what we did. Lisa was already working as a solo artist and trying to make it into the big time, but she would always jump in during our performances. She's good at that sort of thing—freestyle. We'd hang out and create stuff at Taku's house because he has all this equipment, and he would let us listen to a track, I'd write some rap for it and Lisa would throw in a melody. That's how we all connect.

What was your big break?

When we were in high school, Taku and I entered this TV contest where you compete against another pack of dancers and musicians. If you won, you got this suede jacket, and there was also the possibility that a record company might sign you up. So we were on that show, and we always knew we wanted to do music. We'd fight about it, talk about it, and make it. We weren't really ambitious, and Taku just asked me if I could write a rap for a song. We did it and released 1000 records and that sold right away. We figured there might be a possibility to do more and we asked Lisa if she would join us and help out. We didn't come in thinking that we were going to take over the music industry. I haven't really felt the reality of being part of the music industry yet. I'm just having fun. But I don't really know what our break was, it just kind of happened.

Do you still work the same way—working from improvisations between the three of you?

Yeah. It's like there's a point where we all collide, but really the three of us are pretty different—our taste in music as well as personality and the way we function. I'm pretty logical and methodical: I write lyrics and if they tell me the deadline, I'll keep to it, or if they give me something to write about, I'll do it. Lisa likes to go with the flow, she likes to listen to the song first then think about it. Taku can work both ways, but he just likes to jam and do sessions. We have good discussions about what we create, and of course we argue sometimes, but it all works out in the end. When it does come out, it's nothing like what we expected.

How would you describe your music?

I don't know. I'm putting down rap stuff so I would lean more towards hip hop. But all of us pull it in a certain direction, like a skin on a tee-pee being stretched out. It sounds like a cliché, but it's really an m-flo kind of sound. It's not hip hop because we do all sorts of stuff and it's not really R&B because on some songs we only rap and it's more like an underground sound.

How about the name m-flo?

It was originally meteorite flow, but for the Japanese that's pretty long so they asked us to shorten it to m-flo and it stuck. There's no deep meaning to it. I guess we wanna have impact like a meteorite.

Aren't you still at school?

Right now, I'm studying theology at Gordon Cromwell grad school because I want to get into an urban ministry kind of thing—I used to work at a juvenile detention center. I first got into it because I saw *Boys 'N the Hood* and thought that it was cool. Then I realized that these kids were really smart. They just need someone to show them another door, another direction. They can use their heads for something better than stealing cars and other stuff. I wanted to help and got interested in being involved in a ministry for young kids in the city.

So what are your goals for the future?

I'm just thankful that I can do music. I'm having a great time meeting people I would never have thought possible, being able to express myself through music. My future goal is to get into a ministry for young kids in inner cities, but I guess that's my long-term goal. For short-term goals, I want to work with as many people as possible, see where I can take this music. Even now, it's come to the point that I can't really believe it actually happened. If everything stopped today, I wouldn't regret it because it's much more than I expected.

So you said you got to work with people you admired, like who?

I'm Korean, so I follow Korean music. There's a group called Solid who broke up and one of the guys went solo, Jo Han Kim. We produced a song for him, and that was really wild because I've had their CDs since 1992. Also, on the re-mix CD that we released, we worked with Tei Towa and Konishi Yasuharu from Pizzicato Five. That was really cool. It's like a dream come true.

Catch m-flo at Yellow on Feb 11 at Yellow or their next concert will be at Zepp Tokyo, June 2. @

