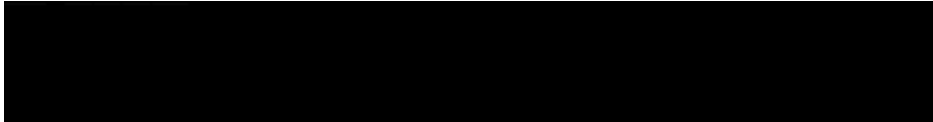





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VARIOUS ARTISTS

Culturama 666, Vol. 2 [DVD]




(Music Video Distributors)

Rating: 8

US release date: 24 January 2006

UK release date: Available as import

by Michael Frauenhofer

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Ever since their inception as a series of relatively low-budget VHS tapes, the *Culturama* video compilations have provided a strong sampling of underground hip-hop videos by artists ranging from the somewhat-established to the almost-completely-unknown. Although somewhere in the switch to DVD the numbering system switched from single-digits to "666" (no explanation offered for the random touch of Satanism), the series, far from selling out or becoming more mainstream as its audience and distribution have grown, has rather improved markedly, if not the already-strong quality, at least the quantity of the videos included. And with videos like this, you'll *want* more -- while the disc clocks in at a solid 90 minutes, it flows nicely from one video to the next and never feels too long. All things considered, *Culturama 666, Vol. 2*, the second DVD in the series, is yet another great collection of dope indie hip-hop and rare, often unseen videos that is definitely worth your time and money.



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The music here is astonishingly consistent -- the Shape Shifters kick things off nicely with a peppy mix of bouncy electro and crazy '80s fashion, along with just about every other insane idea they could come up with (including a dancing robot, silver men in top hats, and an *E.T.* reenactment). The vocal beat on "Talk Dirty" by Opio and Pep Love is absolutely sublime, as is the thick saxophone on the Time Machine track. Nearer to the end, the Visionaries show that laid-back restraint can make even a sped-up vocal sample sound new -- they preach without sounding preachy, and by the song's end any negative feelings have completely melted away. It may not sound like conventional soul, but it's soul music



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The best videos here, though, are the ones that combine the strong music -- and most of it by far *is* strong music -- with equally interesting video presentations, and these occur more often here than on most video compilations. On the unnerving video from High N Mighty, a seemingly normal (initially) suburban uncle performs the song, karaoke-style, at a kiddie birthday party, while the little children and their grandmothers bol their party-hat-wearing heads and smile creepily. The contribution from backpacker fave Busdriver also impresses as expected, his mile-a-minute spray of words over a swirling piano beat mixing well with the ironically childish animation and the sing-songy chorus of "rappers say the darnedest things...". The ending is great as well, in which he poses comically and chants the song title, "avantcore", in the just the right ton to knock intellectual pretension in all forms flat on its ass with a bookish smirk.

Relative newcomer Josh Martinez's contribution, "Nightmare", is one of my personal favorites. It seems to have been filmed with jerky live-action stop-motion, a series of photographs in rapid succession set to music. This could easily become a visual gimmick, but it's used here to full effect: he skateboards through the city without a skateboard, spins his hat around on his head, slides along railings and generally defies the law of physics. When he is sucked, sliding on his stomach and trying to spin away to freedom, through a cold indoor parking garage, all while the sor plays on, it's the perfect metaphor for modern life.

The absolute out-of-left-field beauty of Subtle's "F.K.O." is likewise complemented wonderfully by its video: the rappers flow unconventionally, their abstract lyrics fading in and out of a calming beat unlike any other you've probably ever heard (the most random phrases, like "on their miniature dogs' necks", are emphasized), building up to a chorus that explodes into glorious accordion and acoustic guitar. The animation here is perfect as well, a vaguely nightmarish blur of Escher, *Spirited Away* and *Where the Wild Things Are* that has to be seen to be believed. As for the rest of the DVD, the worst videos (excepting the nigh-unwatchable "contribution", if it can be called that, from Awol-One) aren't even necessarily "bad", just not as innovative as their counterparts.

In a world where the average MTV viewer can't name more than two cornerstones of hip-hop, a world full of the music Mighty Casey so cleverly and all-too-accurately describes on "Black Rapping School" -- "This ain't hip-hop, this is Kool-Aid now / Because we sweeten it up, and we water it down" -- *Culturama 666, Vol. 2* is an excellent reminder that every time a would-be prophet of doom claims that "hip-hop is dead", all it takes is a look beyond the surface to prove them dead wrong. An accompanying CD of all the songs would have been amazing, but the videos alone are still far more than worth the price of admission (more than 20 for less than \$15!), and there's hardly a bad one in the bunch. S for fans of underground hip-hop, or hip-hop in general, or even just intelligent, independent music or experimental film, *Culturama 666* is a great way to spend 90 minutes and discover some talented new artists along the way... because in the end, nothing's better than enjoying the

work of people who truly love what they do.

— 9 February 2006

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