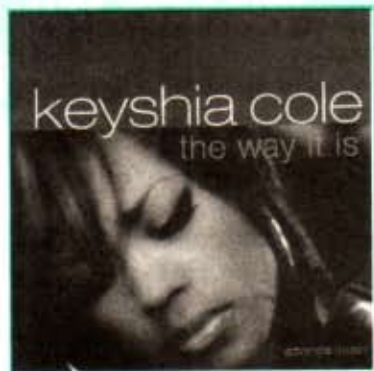


# SPIN CHECK



**Keyshia Cole**  
*The Way It Is*  
 A&M Records

If one were to judge Keyshia Cole by her first single "I Changed My Mind" with Kayne West you might think she's just another R&B singer whining about love gone wrong. And you'd be right. Cole's debut album *The Way It Is* is chock full of songs with titles like "(I just want it) To Be Over" and the hilariously harsh "I Should Have Cheated." But I'm not hatin' on Keyshia. What she lacks in original subject matter she makes up for with her powerful voice and strong lyrics. Ms. Cole effectively takes on Jay-Z's tune "Song Cry" with her own "You've Changed" which she tells from the perspective of a neglected wife who's had enough. "Guess What" featuring Jadakiss even had me singing along to the simple yet catchy "Guess what, n!&\$@ I'm leavin' you." Keyshia co-wrote most of the songs on the album infusing them with her personal combination of sugar, spice, sass and sex appeal. In short and at the risk of sounding cliché Ms. Cole tells it *The Way It Is*. If you're looking for a straight-up, solid R&B album, here it is.



50 Black Beat



**Esthero**  
*Wikked Lil' Grrrls*  
 Reprise Records

"I'm so sick and tired of the \$#!@ on the radio/ and MTV they only play the same thing/ no matter where I go I see Ashanti in the video/ I want something more." So starts the first track "We R In Need Of A Musical ReVoLuTion," on Esthero's latest album. While Esthero does talk smack like a seasoned battle rapper, hip hop is not the only influence that you'll find on *Wikked Lil' Grrrls*. In fact, if I wanted to criticize I'd say Esthero's album lacks continuity as it bounces from hip-hop to trip-hop to R&B and neo-soul. You'll even catch a little Middle Eastern flavor and some spoken word thrown in there for good measure. But I don't want to criticize. Instead I'll give this duo (vocalist Esthero and engineer and producer Doc) from Toronto props for kicking off a much needed musical revolution.

Esthero's album lacks continuity as it bounces from hip-hop to trip-hop to R&B and neo-soul.



**Mashonda**  
*"Back of Da Club" (single)*  
 J Records

You may not know the name Mashonda but you most definitely know her voice. Over the past few years, her angelic voice has laced tracks like Jay-Z's "Girl's Best Friend", Cassidy's "Get No Better" and Eve's "I Got A Man." Now this Harlem-bred songstress is ready to bring her vocals from the background to the forefront. Judging from her debut single "Back of the Club" this move is long overdue. The full album *January Joy* features cameos by Kanye West and Jadakiss and it has the potential to put Harlem Soul back on the map. "Back of the Club" which is produced by her hubby of 7 years, Swizz Beatz will surely have you dancing all over the club.

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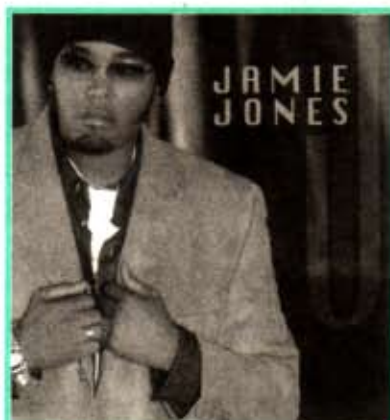


## Clinton Sparks presents Miri Ben-Ari

**The Pulling Strings Mixtape**  
Hosted by Dame Dash

By now you must know Miri Ben-Ari. I mean, the hip-hop scene isn't exactly bursting with violinists. Wyclef first introduced Ben-Ari as "the hip-hop violinist" at his historic Carnegie Hall concert. She then garnered major attention when she wrote, produced, arranged and performed all strings on *The College Dropout*. Since then she's been bowing up a storm, wowing audiences and putting in work in the studio. Her debut album is coming but for those of you who can't wait make sure you pick up the *The Pulling Strings Mixtape*. It's hosted by Dame Dash and features Kayne West, Jay-Z, Scarface, and Fabolous just to name a few. The mix has a number of hot tracks from her upcoming album and lots of shoutouts from people like Doug E. Fresh and Free from *106 & Park*. Dash says of her violin playing, "it sounds so good, it sounds like it supposed to be on the song already" and that's exactly it. On one hand you know Miri Ben-Ari is bringing something totally original to the game but on the other hand it sounds so good that you wonder how the game got along without her.

Miri Ben-Ari is bringing something so totally original to the game... you wonder how the game got along without her.



## Jamie Jones

**Jamie Jones**  
Genesis Entertainment

Dig way back into your memory bank or maybe into your old stash of cassette singles. Do you remember All-4-One, the foursome that brought you the hits "I Swear" and "I Can Love U Like that"? Well the lead singer of that multi-platinum group, Jamie Jones is releasing his self-titled debut album. Now believe me I really wanted to love this album but I have to say that the best thing that came out of listening to it was that it reminded me of how good he used to be. The best track on it is "Take My Hand" which features the other members of All-4-One. The first single "Rise" features (surprise, surprise) All-4-One. I can't help but wonder what the point of going solo is. I won't say that Jamie Jones is bad but I will say that he fails to "Rise" to the occasion. He may not be able to recreate All-4-One's success but Jamie Jones is definitely talented. He's still got it vocally and all in all he puts out a decent R&B album.

I won't say that Jamie Jones is bad but I will say that he fails to "Rise" to the occasion.



## The Herbaliser

**Take London**  
Ninja Tune

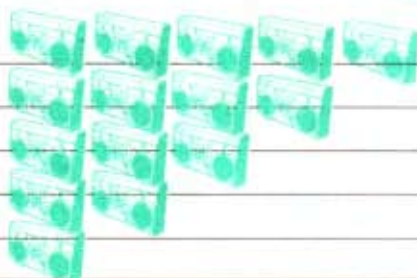
Five albums deep and chances are you've never heard of The Herbaliser. That's okay, because now you know who they are and must pick up each and every one of their releases, starting with *Take London*. As some of the most established and long time members of the Ninja Tune label, the tag team of Jake Wherry and Ollie Teeba also produced some of the label's most hip-hop oriented albums and this one is no exception.

The Herbaliser works in the sense that you never know whether you just want to nod your head along to some slammin' hip-hop verses or dance to the heavy instrumental funk scattered throughout the album. On the hip-hop side of things, Jean Grae spits her usual venom over a funky, horn-driven beat on the album's first single, the crew cut "Generals," in which she also introduces her new clique of the same name. Jean laces the album on three other tracks and the United Kingdom's favorite rapper, Roots Manuva, drops his unique lyrical flow. If the plan was to *Take London* by storm, The Herbaliser have surely succeeded.

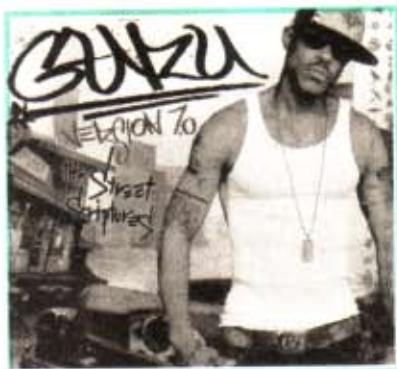


### Ratings:

- Cop Immediately (5 Stereos)
- Sub-Woofers Worthy (4 Stereos)
- Solid Effort (3 Stereos)
- Play With Caution (2 Stereos)
- Permanently Mute (1 Stereo)



# SPIN CHECK



## Guru

**Version 7.0: Street Scriptures**  
7 Grand Records

After his many releases with Gang Starr and his plethora of solo releases (Jazzmatazz, Baldhead Slick) it's quite surprising that Guru still has so much to say – without sounding completely played out. As his first release with his very own 7 Grand Records, Guru made sure that he was going to leave a tight first impression with his fans.

He's teamed up with producer/DJ Solar to jumpstart his label and handle music duties on their label's first releases. For those of you who had any doubts as to whether Solar would be a suitable producer for Guru (especially after being spoiled with Premiere after so many classic cuts), you can finally put your worries away. The production is pure street magic across the board. That New York/East Coast sound is intact without sounding dated and Guru sounds completely rejuvenated (which is no surprise, since he's admitted to completely cleaning up his life). Along for the rides are the more youthful likes of Talib Kweli and Jean Grae – as if Guru just wasn't enough. Not that we ever thought for a second that Guru couldn't continue his prestigious legacy, but *Street Scriptures* is an album hip-hop heads old and new should definitely cop.

The production is pure street magic across the board.



## Various Artists

**The Very Best of Death Row**  
Death Row Records

It's no secret that Death Row Records was the number one supplier of West Coast G-funk-styled gangsta rap throughout the '90s. Death Row was responsible for the success of Snoop, Dre, Warren G and, of course, 'Pac. Whether you love or hate gangsta rap, there's no denying the timeless quality of many of these artists' earliest singles, which makes this "very best of" collection an absolute must have for heads who need their quick classic gangsta rap fix.

Included here are 2Pac's hits "Against All Odds," "California Love;" and "Ambitionz Az A Ridah." Dre chimes in with the staples of his post-NWA solo career with "Nuthin' But A G Thang" and "Let Me Ride." And while both "Lodi Dodi" and "Murder Was the Case" are both absent the Snoop classics "Gin and Juice" and "Who Am I (What's My Name)" are both here. Thrown into the mix are Warren G's "Regulate," Lady of Rage's "Afro Puffs" and a few filler tracks by Tha Dogg Pound. Maybe Death Row didn't have as many smash singles as they'd like to think, but Suge Knight is one scary dude and we'll say that this is still a fine collection to toss on at your next gangsta party.

Whether you love or hate gangsta rap, there's no denying the timeless quality of many of these artists'.



## Prince Paul

**People Searching for Peace of Mind through... It's Instrumental**  
Female Fun Records

As a former member of the groundbreaking "hip-hop band" Stetsasonic; the man behind the boards of De La Soul's first three albums and cuts for Big Daddy Kane, Third Bass, MC Lyte and Boogie Down Productions; founding member of the Gravediggaz; and cohort with The Automator on Handsome Boy Modeling School; hip-hop fans owe Paul plenty of thanks. He also dropped a few exceptional solo albums, including the epic thus-far-untouched hip-hopera that is *A Prince Among Thieves*. Needless to say, even at his worst, Prince Paul still shines as one of the game's most legendary producers.

Now, this isn't to say that *It's Instrumental* is Paul at his worst. In fact, if you're looking for some background music to groove too, Paul probably does it the best. However, don't expect much in the way of beats and rhymes on this release. The album consists primarily of his excellent instrumental production: horns, samples, jazz, funk and everything else fans of Paul would expect from their Prince. Alas, Paul is the skit king and has always scattered these sort of filler tracks all over his albums and projects. This particular release has an ongoing *Law & Order*-themed story (The Mental Victims Unit) as well as his favorite Italian-stereotype characters popping up over a few of the tunes. While they are quite funny, you'll wind up programming the skits out when you want to just zone out to his superb music. Paul Huston is still a Prince at what he does and this album will just further his long-running reign.

Paul's music is the way of beats and rhymes on this release.