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"M.E."

X:144 and SPS combine for unique, eclectic album

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X:144 and SPS
4 out of 5 Stars

Two turntables and a microphone, what a boring cliché.

Hearing Beck deadpan this line over and over doesn't really inspire one to run out and get one, does it? Luckily, X:144 and SPS couldn't have cared less about Beck on their debut together, "M.E."

It turns out that two turntables and a microphone do these two guys just fine.

The extraordinary balance between X:144's deftly nasal delivery and the turntablist tendencies of Berlin-bred SPS, makes this one of hip-hop's most interesting debuts this year.

It's almost like the album Beck wished he could've made a decade ago.

X:144 is battle-tested, having won DMC's South Eastern and Regional Championships, along with Orlando Music Awards' best hip-hop solo and producer of the year awards.

X:144's observational lyrics may sound intimidating at times, but lines like "Some work to live / some live to work / let's work to give" as the chorus to "Last Voice" are life-affirming both for himself and his listeners.

SPS is also a proven battler, having won both the 2004 and 2005 DMC South East Regionals.

He's no Cut Chemist on the decks, but that's just as well when you've got a guy as strong on the mic as X:144.

SPS likes veering all over the place.

From the Caribbean crunk of "Lose Control" to the Gnarls Barkley-esque funk of the seven-minute epic "If the Shoes Fits..." to the grime of "What If?," he weaves 70s funk in and out of these tracks.

One of the best examples is "Almost" late on the album, a Spanish flamenco guitar and a female-led chorus soulfully balancing X:144's sparse words.

And he can't let his Berlin breakbeat background get away too quickly. After all, this was a kid that came out of a local youth center at 16.

By and large though, SPS is able to restrain himself when X:144 looks like he's about to explode with another stream of lines.

It's the subtlety of his twitching beats on tracks like "The Call Out" that do nothing to distract you away from X:144 but still gets you to listen to the beats.

These guys seem like they have an elevated understanding of one another. That balance between emcee and DJ can be elusive, but there's clearly no problem here.

There's this clip of a phone conversation at the end of "If the Shoe Fits..." where some guy is talking about recognizing X:144 from his day-job at Costco. With his mic and SPS's turntables, it was only a matter of time before he quit. "M.E." is their best example yet of why it was a good idea.

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