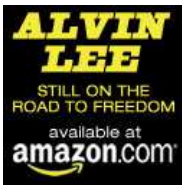




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Lee "Scratch" Perry Master Piece

Lee "Scratch" Perry
Master Piece (Born Free Records)

The Orb Featuring Lee "Scratch" Perry
The Orbserver In The Star House (The End Records)

The Quick Take

While Lee "Scratch" Perry feels like more of a visitor than a headliner on *Master Piece*, the production is brilliant. Loungers, meet Scratch; Scratch disciples, have yourself some lounge.

The Orb prove to be the perfect hosts for Mr. Perry with *The Orbserver In The Star House* – one of the best Scratch-related projects in years.

Prelude – The Debate Ends

Lee "Scratch" Perry, 76 years old this year – genius or a madman with good rhythm and rhyming skills? Even if you believe the latter, you can't deny his contributions to the birth of reggae and dub. History was made within the walls of Perry's Black Ark Studio in the 1970s. He built it with his own hands in his backyard – and gutted it by fire when he felt that its magic had been overcome by evil (an entry you don't often see on an insurance claim).

Even the most dedicated of Scratch fans would have to admit that his work over the years has seen its highs and lows – but it would be hard to name an artist whose recording career has spanned over 4 decades who hasn't stumbled at times. The difference with Lee Perry is, he has always seemed to be oblivious to it all: life on Planet Scratch has its own agenda, whether it be a recording session, a live performance, or the spray-painting of sneakers.

And you can't fault a man for having a good sense of humor. Or fashion.

As far as I'm concerned, the answer to the genius/madman debate can be found in the opening minutes of *The Upsetter*, a 2011 documentary of Scratch's life, produced and directed by Ethan Higbee and Adam Bhala Lough. The pair do a great job of splicing present-day Perry interviews with some marvelous vintage footage – and that is where you'll find the moment I'm referring to.

The *Upsetter* opens with a black-and-white clip from a broadcast originally aired on British television in the 1970s. "I'd like you to meet a genius," says Jamaican actor Carl Bradshaw. Mr. Bradshaw is all business as he reels off some of Scratch's already-impressive musical accomplishments; he takes his hat off as he speaks, his gaze fixed squarely into the eye of the camera.

Bradshaw wraps up his introduction with, "The man I am talking about is none other than Lee 'Scratch' Perry – better known in Jamaica as ... 'The Upsetter.'"



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Whether the Bradshaw intro was originally used with the scene that follows or not, it makes for a perfect setup. Now we go to full color, with the camera deep inside the shadows of what I assume is Perry's Black Ark studio – looking out at a yard full of lush growth bathed in bright Jamaican sunlight. Scratch walks across the open doorway, swinging his left arm over his head. He's stripped to the waist, as is another figure outside – a taller man with long Rasta dreads, who appears to be working on something at a table.

Scratch flails the arm again, the force of its rotation seeming to spin him in a tight circle. "Rolling!" he bellows, twirling again. The camera begins to slowly approach him.

The Rastaman barely glances in Scratch's direction before turning back to his work. This appears to be just another day at the Ark.

"His name is flashing lightning!" snaps Scratch, the left arm making spastic motions as he begins to spin repeatedly.

"Positive vibration miracle dresser!"

The left hand looks as if he's cleaning a spot on a window; then more arm whipping and body twirls.

"Magic emperor Rastafari!"

The camera emerges out into the full sunlight. The Rasta in the foreground seems to be painting something – a sign, perhaps? We can now see that his worktable is actually a low wall, covered in Scratch's handwriting. (Pretty much every surface around the Ark was covered in Scratch's handwriting.) Perry continues to whirl and flail.

"His Imperial Majesty Emperor Haile Selassie the First!"

More mid-air left hand mojo, followed by full-arm *snaps* and body spins.

"Lords of Lords, Kings of Kings, the Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah!"

The camera is now abreast of where the fellow is working with his paintbrush. He is intent on what he is doing, oblivious to the increasing tempo of the whirling dervish in Bermuda shorts.

"Elect of God, Light of the World, Earth's Rightful Ruler!"

Both arms get into the act now, shooting up into the sky to punctuate every syllable.

"Man with one hundred and five four thousand hands!"

Scratch is wearing a white cloth skullcap and oversized sunglasses that begin to work their way down the bridge of his nose with each wild pirouette.

"Man with one hundred and five four thousand plans!"

Scratch's movements become almost karate-like as the camera draws in close. There is a cluster of items strung on the chain around his neck; they clank and clunk as he spins.

"Do re mi fa so la ti do!"

His pace slows slightly. The camera follows as he twirls/strides to the back end of the clearing where sits a large sign or poster on a collapsible easel. It is covered in layers of Scratch hieroglyphics.

"Music Papa!"

He spins, adjusting the sunglasses mid-swing. The left arm leads once again.

"Words Mama!"

A moment of relatively calm spinning, then –

"Ishishi wonderland have a Jah the lion most high ishishi wonderland!"

If it wasn't for the subtitles offered by the makers of the movie, you would have no idea what is machine-gunning out of Scratch's mouth; he punctuates each line with a revolution.

"Words with the all the Ethiopian book!"

Back to both arms thrusting out – the actions of a besieged man fighting off a swarm of somethings. A flat-out high-speed flurry of words:

“Genesis to Jah Revelation Open Jah live the Lion of Judah!”

And Scratch freezes mid-spin, square-on to the camera and *screams* – a tongue out, bug-eyed, shoulders-hunched-and-shaking-all-over scream – letting the sound fade in his throat as he completes one more arm-flapping revolution.

“Master of ceremony!” he bellows, facing the camera with his left hand gnarled as if holding a microphone. Then – and this is the pay off – he puts the hand behind his head rather prissily and, looking and sounding for all the world like the worst cheeseball Palm Springs maître d you can imagine, says:

“Hi – good evening!”

It’s a weird, unsettling, and unexpected moment; a relief, actually – there was no apparent way to land the monster safely up to that point. Scratch totally defuses the tension (that he alone has created) with absurdity – although he’s still looking as serious as can be.

Insanity?

Nope – brilliance, boys and girls. Seek it out and watch it for yourself, as therein lies the key to Lee Scratch Perry: it doesn’t matter how far out there – out *there* – you go as long as you know the way back.

And I’m convinced of Scratch has spent a lifetime enjoying the journey on his own terms.

Now, on to the music.

The Reviews

The basic tracks on *Master Piece* first surfaced in the spring of 2010 as *The Unfinished Master Piece* – a 5-track EP of what was basically touted as a work-in-progress-but-still-worth-previewing at the time. North London’s The Next Room laid down the instrumental foundation for the sampler; Born Free Records captured Perry’s vocals and handled the overall mix. The project’s hook: Scratch against a sonic canvas of lounge dub – the result sounding at times like a weirdly-twisted Barry White.

The *Unfinished* EP contained four basic tunes: “Soul Man”, “Medusa Dub”, “Forgiveness”, and “Mr. Upsetter” (offered up in two different mixes). The new 10-track *Master Piece* album starts the same components as its base, offering up multiple variations (“Mr. Upsetter” is revisited most often: four different mix styles, as well as being used in the title track/sound collage “Master Piece”). The result is an ironic twist on the Perry legacy: just as his groundbreaking Black Ark recordings of others back in the 1970s were as much about the producer as they were the artist, *Master Piece* ends up being a showcase for the work of The Next Room and Born Free as they shape and re-shape dollops of Scratch.

The album-opening “Soul Man” enters on the shoulders of a massive piano, wisps of a female chorus woven between bits of Perry (“Lion coming up/Zion coming up”) and synth. Groggy-sounding bass and sparse drums eventually join in the party, filling out the pulse rather than propelling it. We be in the lounge, for sure.

The title track could just as easily have kicked things off as an overture, as it really is a sampler of things to come (with abrupt stop/starts among its three portions). It begins with a section of the track that might be easiest for longtime Scratch followers to get their heads around: “Medusa Dub”. The rhythms churn and whirl on the full “Medusa” for nearly twelve minutes while Perry breezes in and out; here it crash lands at 2:24 right into the lap of “Mr. Upsetter” before making room for “Forgiveness”.

As mentioned, “Mr. Upsetter” is offered up in four different versions, all built around Scratch asking, “Do you want to know me?” and then answering his own question: “Yes, I do.” Here we have a “pop mix” (featuring moments of soft fingerpicked guitar

and synth strings); a “funky mix” (full of stuttering techno rhythms); a “dancehall fusion mix” (flavored with an almost-Afro-Latin groove); and a version that doesn’t bear any definition of mix in its title (but eventually welcomes in a traditional-sounding skanked rhythm). A male DJ toasts and raps in varying amounts from version to version, paying tribute to “Mr. Upsetter ... the dub star” who “took them on a journey/gave us yearning/wanting to learn more about these crazy beats/you had both tracks/made it sound so sweet to eat.” Do the various takes on “Mr. Upsetter” actually explain who the man is? Yes. No. Maybe. At least at that moment? For sure – absolutely.

In the end, *Master Piece* is a bit of fun that serves two purposes: it introduces Perry devotees to the work of The Next Room and Born Free and it might inspire younger listeners to dig in search of this music’s roots – perhaps some *Roast Fish Collie Weed & Corn Bread* or some other vintage Black Ark tastiness. Scratch has enough presence to justify his name being on the cover; the reality is, he feels like a guest at someone else’s party – but it’s a good time nonetheless.

Oddly enough, Lee Perry *is* a guest on The Orb’s new album, but this feels like as much of a focused Scratch effort as anything of the last few years. (Down the road, we’re looking at an early 2013 release from Rolling Lion Studio which has much promise: Rolling Lion’s Dan Boyle gathered up vintage gear to replicate Perry’s Black Ark setup and put the man himself back behind the board for the first time in years. Stay tuned ...)

The Orb proved they play well with others on 2010’s *Metallic Spheres* – David Gilmore might’ve been a visitor to Orbland, but the album was Gilmore’s best post-Floyd headphones-recommended work to date. For the *The Orbserver In The Star House* The Orb not only invites Perry in, they make him comfy and set him loose. The result is 11 tracks of free-form stream-of-Scratchness that – just when you think it’s lost its path – comes full circle, tail in its mouth. 76 years old or not, you can hear Perry getting gathered up and propelled by the riddims generated by The Orb. And – oh! – what riddims.

Alex Paterson is once again at the helm of The Orb – the one constant since the collective’s formation in 1988. Paterson and producer Thomas Fehlmann (a past collaborator with The Orb) without question *get* Lee Perry – at no time does the music feel anything less than a totally in-the-pocket performance by all. Tom Thiel concentrated his engineering skills on recording Scratch’s vocals; final polishing was done by Toby Freund with mastering handled by Stefan Betke. The key to all this is – even though the handiest way to describe The Orb’s catalog is “techno” or “electronic” or “ambient house” with the principals behind it being engineers – the vibe on this album is warm and organic as hell.

Sitting in on massive, walloping bass for several tracks is Martin “Youth” Glover. His sound isn’t so much about volume as it is presence ... felt as much as it is heard. There’s a cool moment about midway through “Man In The Moon” when Youth’s bass wraps around Perry’s words – big gobs of warm tonal jelly. “Golden Clouds” (built around Scratch’s memories of what the skies were like when he was young) glides in on the wings of an acoustic guitar before stepping off onto the well-muscled back of Youth’s bass. And “Ashes” is one-minute-and-twenty-five-seconds’ worth of lo-fi background buoyed up by voluminous bass balloons.

“Police And Thieves” is a revisit to the Black Ark days: while Junior Marvin’s 1976 original was delivered in a soulful falsetto, here Perry doles it out as a “message from Jah” in a gravelly sing-song voice. (He is pretty much responsible for the melody until the 2:30 mark, when melodica-flavored vapors drift overhead.) “Drink up your water,” advises Scratch in “Thirsty” as a dry-as-a-bone rhythm pops and snaps beneath his feet. And what’s that groove on “Hold Me Upsetter”? Not really a Latin thing ... not disco ... it matters not. If you find yourself dwelling in the land of The Orb, those sorts of things aren’t worth worrying about. Groove on.

The Orbserver In The Star House should be considered a victory

by all hands: Scratch gets to be Scratch; The Orb is as Orb as The Orb gets. It's easy to get into, feeling both familiar and groundbreaking. Simply put, it works – big time.

As the "Master of ceremony" said all those years ago:

"Hi – good evening!"

Comments

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Aggronautix

September 7, 2012, 07:33:59

Man, this is an awesome review. Well done! And don't forget about the Lee Scratch Perry limited edition collectible figure:
<http://aggronautix.com/products.cfm?productid=52>

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