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Music Review: Lee "Scratch" Perry - Revelation

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There's reggae music and then there's reggae music. You see, there's the safe reggae music that's produced for mass consumption you hear on the radio and then there's the other 90% of the music which most of us don't hear in North America. If you live in London, England, or another community with a large Jamaican immigrant population, you stand a chance of hearing more than most. However, by and large, what most of us hear is a watered down version of something a lot more intense than what is normally allowed to be played on mainstream radio.

While Bob Marley, Jimmy Cliff, Dennis Brown, and to a lesser extent Peter Tosh, gained a certain amount of name recognition in North America, they only represented the tip of the iceberg as far as the amount and variety of music being made. Even those named above had difficulties receiving air time on mainstream stations, mainly because of lyrics advocating marijuana use, but also because of the strong social/political and religious messages contained in their songs. It's no coincidence that reggae's upsurge in popularity coincided with punk in both North America and England as both contained strong anti-establishment messages advocating change and questioning authority. So if reggae bands weren't running afoul of America's "Just Say No" campaign, the black nationalist content or [Rastafarian](#) messages in their songs prevented them from being palatable to mainstream radio.



Now if it was difficult to hear regular reggae music on the radio, the chances of hearing any of its offshoots was next to impossible. While in North America the idea of somebody traveling around with turntables and a sound system and performing is a relatively new idea, the practice dates back to at least the early 1960s in Jamaica. In fact many of the studios which produced the first local Jamaican bands had their roots in these sound systems. While live bands began to supplant recorded music and the sound systems, there were also those who started to incorporate both elements and they were the genesis for what would become known as "dub" reggae. Dubbing is short form for a recording technique known as overdubbing which simply means taking a pre-existing piece of recorded music and either recording or performing new elements over top of it or creating new mixes utilizing the existing tracks and effects to create different versions of an existing song.

If a performer were to create a dub reggae version of a song it would usually mean, in very simplistic terms,

exaggerating the already heavy rhythm and bringing the bass up in the mix while capturing key phrases of the lyrics and stressing them with various effects and repeating them against the new heavier beat. However, some producers/performers took this a step further and began creating original works by laying down tracks, overdubbing them countless times and then writing lyrics that could be sung/chanted/recited over top of the music they had created. One of the style's originators, [Lee "Scratch" Perry](#), has been around reggae since its earliest beginnings working as a producer and musician. Don't worry if you've not heard of him, or if his name is a vague rumour at best, because once you listen to his newest creation, *Revelation*, a [State Of Emergency](#) production on the [Mega Wave Music](#) label, distributed by [MVD Entertainment](#), you'll understand why. This isn't the reggae that's safe for radio play by any stretch of the imagination. A good deal of its content would not only rock a few boats, it would also rattle more than a few cages.

First of all Perry's Rastafarianism isn't just for show or something he takes on and off when it's convenient for others, and his songs reflect that belief. The song from which the disc takes its title, "Revelation Revolution And Evolution," for example, stresses the Rastafarian belief in the Book of Revelations. They offer it as proof of the late Emperor of Ethiopia Hailie Selassie's status as the reincarnation of Jesus Christ, whose teachings they believe have been corrupted by Christianity and the West. The cover art and the artwork on the booklet included with the CD are a strange mix of Christian art depicting scenes from Revelations and the crucifixion, pictures of Perry and his wife, and a flow chart depicting the various aspects of the truths revealed in Revelations. So it shouldn't be too much of a surprise that songs like "Books Of Moses," "Holy Angels," "Let There Be Light," and "An Eye For An Eye" put a Rastafarian spin on Judeo-Christian beliefs. However it also pretty much guarantees you won't be hearing them on a radio near you anytime soon.

Of course if the religious content didn't cause a few twinges among radio programmers, the lyrics to the song "Freaky Michael" would ensure Perry's relegation to the non-play zone. For in the song he questions why a certain person named Michael felt like he had to remake his physical image so extremely. At one point Perry exclaims, "I like my big nose," leaving you to come to your own conclusions about his opinion of the radical plastic surgeries Michael put himself through.

Unfortunately Perry's vocal skills haven't withstood the test of time as well as his songwriting ability. For while there's no denying he still possesses great production chops, as he has created great mixes against which to recite his lyrics, including seamlessly weaving in a searing Keith Richards guitar solo and other guest contributions, the voice is now rather weak and scratchy resulting in the power of his words being somewhat diminished. Even though he's riding high enough in the mix so there's never any trouble discerning his voice, it still feels like you're close to having to strain to listen to him. However, no matter how rough or thin his voice is, what Lee "Scratch" Perry has to say is still far more interesting and provocative than just about anything you'll ever hear anywhere else. Whether you agree with him or not you'll have to admit it makes for a lot more entertaining and challenging listening than 90% of what normally comes across the airwaves.

Like everything else, once reggae makes it to mainstream radio its content and quality have been reduced to the lowest common denominator so that it's guaranteed to be as innocuous as possible. It's a far cry from the music born on the streets of Kingston, Jamaica that exhorted its listeners to celebrate Jah by smoking marijuana and called for the liberation of Black people throughout Babylon (white Christian society). With both Peter Tosh and Bob Marley long gone there are very few of the voices from the original generation of reggae pioneers still out there spreading the word, but one of them is Lee "Scratch" Perry. As *Revelation*,

being released August 10, 2010, proves, his flesh might be a little weaker, but his spirit is still strong. This is definitely reggae you'll not hear on your radios anytime in the near future, but it's reggae that's definitely worth listening to.

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