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The Upsetter: The Life and Music of Lee Scratch Perry by Ethan Higbee and Adam Bhala Lough (MVD Visual)

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This documentary about Lee “Scratch” Perry is a tremendous boon to reggae fans, and also a source of frustration. It’s great in that it offers up a rarely seen glimpse into the reggae’s golden era (roughly 1967-1980), and the life of one of its giants, Lee “Scratch” Perry who wrote, performed, or produced many of the genre’s best songs in his famed Black Ark Studios. There’s rare footage galore, which is enough to get fervent fans salivating at the mouth since there’s so little visual documentation from reggae from before the days of camcorders. The footage of Perry recording and clowning around in the studio is worth the price of admission. However, on the flipside, most of the story is told by Perry himself (with additional narration by Benicio Del Toro – a left-field choice to say the least), and in addition to being a musical genius, Perry is also completely batshit insane. There are subtitles whenever he speaks, but it’s still almost impossible to follow the convoluted maze of words and dense religious and spiritual imagery he uses, and listening to him ramble for 90 minutes can be draining. Plus he comes across as so whacked out that it makes you wonder how much of what he says is truth, and how much is an invention of Scratch’s weed and rum-addled brain (lesson learned: if you want to be taken serious when you speak, you probably shouldn’t wear a plate of fruit as a hat and dye your beard bright red). I wish the directors had sought out input from the artists that Perry worked with (a list that includes The Clash, Junior Murvin, Paul McCartney, and Bob Marley among literally hundreds of others). It would have gone a long way to make The Upsetter a more coherent and historically informative film. DVD bonus features: Two useless recent clips of Perry clowning around, which are less than two minutes combined.

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