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Rebels Wit Attitude

by Iain Ellis

a PopMatters book



The Paris Concert [DVD] [Paris Concert, The]

(Inakustic / MVD)
US release date: 25 November 2008

by Terrence Butcher

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Seventy-five cents! Seventy-five cents! Seventy-five cents! These are the starting prices – on Half.com – for *Vivid*, *Time's Up*, and *Stain*, respectively, the first three studio releases from Living Colour. It's a damn shame to me that cut-out prices are the best a vendor can ask for material from one of rockdom's most accomplished bands, a group sadly jettisoned after so-called grunge captured the hearts of Generation X – and some younger – listeners.

Indeed, Black Rock Coalition director Earl Douglas argued in a recent *SPIN* piece that Living Colourfounded in the early '90s partly because grunge lumped the band in with '80s metal acts.

Living Colour? A quick primer for you younguns: Living Colour is a celebrated rock quartet, formed in 1983, whose music fuses metal, funk, jazz, punk, hip-hop, among other styles, into a heady, genre-bending stew. They're best remembered – when thought of at all – for their debut disc, the aforementioned *Vivid*, which went double platinum, spawned the Grammy-winning Top 15 single "Cult Of Personality", and got a production assist from Sir Michael Phillip Jagger himself. Oh, they're also African-American. Did I forget to mention that? Believe me, nobody else has.

Living Colour called it quits back in the mid-'90s, after disappointing business for *Stain*, but reformed, fittingly, at punk Mecca CBGB's, to play a gig, then record new tracks. They've since released several concert DVDs, and the latest is *The Paris Concert*, recorded at the New Morning, in the City Of Lights, during their summer 2007 European jaunt. They chose an eclectic mélange of classic Living Colour tunes, covers, and some notable songs from their most recent studio album – yes, I still use that term – *Colleidoscope*.

I hadn't seen the band in many years, so I was definitely curious about their appearances. Frontman Corey Glover has morphed – I kid you not – into actor Andre Braugher! The resemblance is amazing. Glover's rounded, well-nourished physique and double chin literally scream Braugher. Attention Spike: When you do the Living Colourstory – hint, hint! – sign up Andre. He's always been a fave of mine since his days on NBC's stellar *Homicide*, anyhow.

Also absent are Glover's flowing dreadlocks, replaced by a natural, reddish do, itself mostly covered by a tweed cap. Judging by Glover's



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portly frame, I would also guess that the yellow bodysuit made famous in the "Cult of Personality" vid now belongs to the Salvation Army. And Corey...if you read this, I mean no disrespect.

Living Colour were in stunning form at the show, clearly still excited at performing some 20 years after *Vivid* hit the stores. Original bassist Muzz Skillings bowed out after *Time's Up*, but his replacement, the eminently capable Doug Wimbish, did not disappoint. And, late in the show, drummer Will Calhoun delivers an atmospheric, rangy drum solo that begins sounding vaguely Afro-Cuban, then detours down numerous different paths, the audience following with rapt attention.

The group kicks off their set with the apocalyptic "Type", a prominent single from the ambitious *Time's Up*, and one I've always loved. Near the end of the song, the band slows the tempo down to a crawl, finishing with a reggaeish drawl. I like to think that "Type" – in which Glover rails against narrow thinking and "stereotypes"—also encapsulates the group's struggle to define and present their music on their *own* terms, without interference from folks – friend or foe – who just don't get it.

Uber-guitarist Vernon Reid – a god of the strings if there ever was one – really cuts loose midway through the next tune, "Middle Man", then takes Wimbish and drummer Calhoun on a playfully funky ride through "Funny Vibe", an amusing and pointed attack on racial assumptions from *Vivid*. Calhoun and Wimbish were slated to work together in Mos Def's stillborn Black Jack Johnson Project, and I still yearn to see that come to fruition, but I have no qualms about them continuing with Living Colour. Hey, they can moonlight, can't they?

I do wish the guys spent more time on the Temptations' "Papa Was a Rolling Stone", instead performing only a brief snippet, as they did with their own "Glamour Boys", a snide diss – I once considered slightly homophobic – of hipper-than-thou New York scenesters during the *Bright Lights, Big City* '80s. Wimbish proves his mettle once again with an ethereal, spacey groove to introduce *Colleidoscope's* "Nova", then switches to jackhammer beats on "Either Way". Few would dispute Skillings' talent, but those same few would also salute Wimbish's deft playing.

In the angry "Go Away", Glover shouts the titular refrain, an excellent – if unintended – rebuke to near-sighted A & R goons who sought to compartmentalize the band. In fact, "Type", "Go Away", and "Ignorance Is Bliss" comprise a poetic triumvirate which denounces bigotry, while simultaneously giving the middle finger to industry jerks who celebrated the group's early success, then quickly dismissed them.

I'd not heard "Flying" before, another track from the sadly neglected *Colleidoscope*, but it's clearly a highlight, a stunning tempo-switching epic that might have scored maximum airplay on MTV, if that now-silly network still ran videos, instead of moronic reality "programs" about equally moronic people.

Two vintage Living Colour numbers close out the show: "Love Rears Its Ugly Head", the tastiest slice of metal-funk I've ever heard, and their anthem, the overrated "Cult of Personality", which has the dubious distinction of being their highest-charting American single. Cagily, they slipped the punkish, frenetic screamer "Time's Up" in between the two aforementioned songs, but it's not listed on the DVD box.

As one might expect, the audience is mostly white, and one shouldn't blame that entirely on the Parisian location. Living Colour have always had difficulty attracting black audiences, particularly in the Land of the Free. You can point to any number of causal factors—the British Invasion's unintentional hijacking of rock n' roll from its Afro-American roots, ahistorical young blacks with no interest in music from the Jim Crow years, Black radio's rejection of acts that don't fit an urban contemporary mold—all these are grist for another mill.

The fact remains that blacks are still disassociated from rock in the minds of most listeners, black, white, or otherwise, around the globe. The chart dominance of hip-hop, R&B, and *American Idol* pretenders will do little to change this. It's unlikely that Living Colour will score much chart success in this climate, but they've secured their place in rock history, and that may have to be sufficient. I know one thing...I'm gonna go buy *Colleidoscope*!

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