

LITTLE ROY

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It's been forty years since his debut hit Bongo Nyah had Bob Marley smiling from ear to ear in acknowledgement. Kingston had a wealth of roots reggae talent in the seventies and Little Roy's story encompasses some of the greatest names from that era including the Wailers, Dennis Brown, Studio One's Coxsone Dodd and Lee Perry. He learnt his craft among celebrated company and has held fast to Rasta beliefs and principles ever since, both as a man and in the music he makes. Little Roy's now revered as a founding father of Jamaican roots reggae, and yet he never got the exposure and recognition he deserved earlier – a factor some attribute to his membership of the Twelve Tribes Of Israel. As happened with Fred Locks, the recordings he made for the Twelve Tribes have rarely been heard outside of the organisation. This lack of profile caused him to be overlooked by record labels like Island and Virgin, who succeeded in promoting Jamaican acts to white rock audiences.

Little Roy's latest material is ablaze with authenticity. Just like those of Marley or Burning Spear, his songs have a timeless quality, and carry messages that resonate with people of all nations.

On this album, he's breathing new life into songs that simply weren't done enough justice in the past. Marley and Spear did much the same thing after signing to Island. Both revisited songs they felt deserved another hearing and that's exactly what Little Roy's done here. Captured in the best form of his career, he's singing over rhythms laid at Stingray's studio in London – home to a wonderfully warm, analogue sound, and some of the best reggae music heard from anywhere in recent years. No wonder Heat bears all the hallmarks of a master-class, with Mafia & Fluxy on drums and bass, Stephen "Marley" Wright and Tony "Ruff Cutt" Philips on guitars and former Aswad and UB40 sideman Patrick "Buttons" Tengue leading the horn section. There's an all-star choir of backing singers on it too, including Winston Francis, A. J. Franklin and the Pioneers' George Dekker.

Here at last, is an affirmation of the same style of reggae that introduced Rastafari to the world and protested against poverty, oppression and inequality. Little Roy's songs hold a mirror to the way we're living, both as individuals and with each other except there's no anger in them, unlike

those of some younger artists. His lyrics are intended to strengthen our resolve in leading better lives, and to promote love, peace and harmony. They're suffused with understanding, not despair, and they're addressed to each of us, rather than one set of people alone. Such qualities, whilst understated, have informed Little Roy's music since the beginning. The spirit within his songs is timeless and so there's never any danger of him going out of style, or his work sounding dated.

For proof of this, witness how many other artists sing over his songs. John Holt, George Nooks, an all-star Penthouse line-up and most recently, Damian Marley & Nas (on their Distant Relatives album) have all covered Tribal War, which Little Roy wrote in the mid-seventies during a time of political upheaval in Jamaica. Another of his best-known songs, Prophecy, has also been covered many times - most notably by Freddie McGregor (who also voiced a cut of Jah Can Count On I) and Sly & Robbie, who renamed the Prophecy rhythm "Taxi" and recorded a slew of versions on it; first back in the very early eighties, and then twenty years later for Buju Banton's last major hit, Driver A. Little Roy hasn't always been properly credited for these songs, and yet remains philosophical. He knows that "nothing happens before the time," and is also aware how the stone that the builder refuses, can become the head cornerstone."

Real name Earl Lowe, he's the youngest of nine children and grew up in Whitfield Town, in Kingston, Jamaica. Music has been his whole life, and his involvement with it began early. A former child prodigy, he voiced his debut Cool It for Studio One in 1965, aged twelve. He'd gone to the audition with two friends - not to sing, but just to keep them company. Jackie Mittoo was holding the auditions at Studio One that day and after declining Earl's friends, asked him if he had any songs. An older brother wrote Cool It, but it was Earl who got made it popular after Mittoo asked him to record it the next day, and it became his first-ever release. Two years later, Prince Buster renamed him "Little Roy" for the singles It's You I Love and Reggae Got Soul but it wasn't until teaming up with Lloyd Daley's Matador label that his real worth began to manifest.

Bongo Nyah, backed by the Hippy Boys, became the first commercial hit to promote Rasta after it topped the Jamaican charts in 1969. Hardest Fighter, Without My Love and Keep On Trying then kept the momentum going, even as Bongo Nyah continued to be widely covered by other artists. Rasta was on the rise by this time, and would soon come to define reggae for a new generation of listeners.

The local music industry was based upon exploitation but Little Roy had attended high school (St. Andrew Technical), knew his own mind and wasn't about to let himself be used in this way. He was working for the Almighty and the good of the people, and like Sam Cooke and Curtis Mayfield, wished to retain control of his creative output. Leaving Matador, he and the Jackson brothers, Melvin (also known as "Munchie") and Maurice, based themselves at an address in Washington Gardens they called the "Packing House." This was in 1971, the year they formed the Tafari Syndicate and released their debut release Mr. T, sang by Little Roy. The Packing House was a popular hang-out spot, and mainly used for rehearsals. Brethren like Gregory Isaacs, Leroy Sibbles and Dennis Brown regularly passed through, and all recorded for Tafari. Little Roy gems like Hurt Not The Earth, Rat Trap and the wonderful Natty Yard date from this period, which is well documented on Pressure Sounds' Little Roy & Friends' Packing House compilation.

Before long, the Syndicate's Earth and Tafari labels will issue some of Little Roy's best-ever songs, including Prophecy, Blackbird and Tribal War, which they recorded at Black Ark with Dennis Brown playing bass. Back in the seventies, Little Roy also sang in a trio with a friend called Ewan and Anthony "Rocky" Ellis, of I Am The Ruler fame. All three were Twelve Tribes' members, and would play shows for them in-between making the occasional record as Little Ian Rock. The jewel in Little Ian Rock's oeuvre was Jah Can Count On I, which Little Roy's now transformed into a mighty steppers' anthem that'll be played in roots dances for years to come. Hearing him renew his Rasta vows all these years is a humbling experience. "Say what you want to say, do what you want to do, it's my religion, my decision," he sings on My Religion - another song dating from the same period, and that was first recorded for an album called Twelve Voices, produced by the Twelve Tribes. By the time it appeared (and it was only circulated within the organisation), they and Little Roy had parted company and so he was refused a copy, despite having paid for the recording.

As the seventies drew to a close, he then voiced a couple of 12" singles for Herman Chin Loy before heading for Channel One, where he updated his sound to marvelous effect on the album Columbus Ship. Released by Copasetic in 1981, just as Marley's passing heralded the new dancehall era, Columbus Ship awakened a lot more people to Little Roy's talent. Here was a singer with serious roots credentials and yet he'd all but disappear from sight for the rest of the decade until resurfacing with Live On (another key album) and then relocating to London, since when he's kept up a slow, but

steady stream of releases that have steadfastly remained true to his original vision. Being a Little Roy fan requires patience and yet when he delivers a masterpiece like Heat, all else is swiftly forgotten.

The opening track Falla Falla is both rebuke and rallying call. "Tell me wha' yuh a dread for?" he asks those who dress and talk like Rastas, but have a different agenda within their hearts. Truthfulness is central to any righteous person's outlook, and Little Roy reminds us of this on False Teachers, which is addressed to those in positions of influence. "Don't leave your heart and soul behind," he warns them. "We've been through tribulation for a long time. Yesterday we shared the pain, today nothing gained."

Falla Falla is voiced on a cut of Johnny Osbourne's Warrior rhythm that'll light up any reggae dance and return Little Roy to where he belongs – i.e., at the centre of today's roots resurgence. This is why he's also re-voiced Pyaka and Fallen Angels. Both songs were already popular in Europe and yet these new versions lift them to an altogether higher level, making them of instant appeal. Lest we forget, it was the irresistible blend of conscious lyrics and danceable rhythms that helped fuel reggae's popularity in the first place and nothing's changed. The best roots music is still a celebration of mind, body and spirit – take More From A Little for instance, which like Mama and False Teachers, first appeared on his Lion Roots album of the same name. The difference is, these new versions really couldn't be more definitive. Now voiced over the Koutchie rhythm, More From A Little offers heartfelt defense of the underprivileged. The rich man is always looking to squeeze the poor and Little Roy has lent his voice to the sufferers' plight on many occasions in the past – most notably on tracks like Rat Trap, Piece Of The Earth, Rich Man Laugh and Membership Card. The latter first appeared on his first Pharos album, Children Of The Most High, except it's now been raised in stature to that of a solid gold roots classic.

Heat too, first had an airing on Children Of The Most High. It's one of two tracks included here that mourn the senseless violence that continues to affect so many innocent people, and has entire communities living in fear. The weeping lead guitar lends Wailers' style atmosphere to this track, but then Little Roy's music (and also his vocal style) always did share similarities with Marley's – not in any derivative sense, but in terms of spirit, feel and inspiration. Their expression could never be anything but Jamaican, and yet both understand human nature is the same the world over, and that people of all nations have the capacity for good and evil (but that good shall prevail.)

The most Jamaican sounding track here is Mama, which tells the story of a small-time Rasta community, and how life there was turned upside-down after an informer alerted police to the herb fields. In true Rasta fashion, it's voiced with sadness, not recriminations. Then again, Little Roy's songs aren't peopled by abstract ideas, but real, human lives and experiences, many of which we all share, no matter our race or background. We're all caught up in the same trap, just as he explains in the words of Take It Easy – a song that just sprang to life in the studio, and a message that stays with us, long after this essential album draws to a close.

John Masouri