

NO DEPRESSION

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- The Peacemaker's Chauffeur By Jason Wilson



Review by Douglas Heselgrave September 15, 2011

When I first heard Bob Marley in 1977 at fifteen years of age, the way I thought of music changed almost instantly. Until then, I thought that music that expressed the need for social change and self-reliance belonged solely to artists like Bob Dylan, Phil Ochs and Richie Havens. An acoustic guitar – and little else in the way of accompaniment – was de rigeur. 'Dance music' such as reggae had always existed in my mind as little more than a novelty or at best a soundtrack to a summer party. But, once I heard the newly minted 'Exodus' album at my friend's brother's apartment, I was hooked. As a burgeoning reggae fan, I couldn't have come on board at a better time. In the next few years, I became exposed to the music of Peter Tosh, Bunny Wailer, Burning Spear, Culture, Wailing Souls, Augustus Pablo, Toots and the Maytals the list goes on. I was lucky enough to see Bob Marley live on the Survival tour and in the following years, it was not uncommon to be able to attend shows by Tosh, Dennis Brown, Culture, Third World, Burning Spear and Gregory Isaacs all in a single summer.

Those were heady days, and if you're of my generation and of my musical inclination, you may have begun to despair about the state of reggae in recent years. Caribbean friends assure me that there is a lot of great music still being produced, and I'm sure that they're right. But, for me, reggae peaked in the early eighties with Sly and Robbie's original Black Uhuru lineup. I don't mean to suggest it's all been downhill from there – I've enjoyed a lot of Lee 'Scratch' Perry's recent music. Burning Spear is still a force of nature, though I wish he still toured regularly, and I've enjoyed a lot of latter day dub and reggae inspired lounge by outfits like Washington, D.C.'s Thievery Corporation. Still, to my ears, a lot of the reggae I hear – like the blues before it – has become cliché ridden and redundant. If ever a genre of music was in need of a shakeup, it's reggae.

But, as the Good Book says, change sometimes comes at the strangest times in the most unlikely of places. Who would have thought that my favourite reggae album of the summer would come from a white Canadian keyboard player who spends much of his time playing celtic and folk music with Scotland's Dick Gaughan? But, the more I listen to Jason Wilson's excellent recent double CD, 'The Peacemaker's Chauffeur', the more I am convinced that he's onto something that may just help broaden the spectrum of how people consider reggae music.

Jason Wilson is a Toronto native who grew up hearing reggae music in the predominantly West Indian section of town where his family lived. So, it wasn't much of a stretch when the young keyboardist gravitated to playing reggae as a young man with the critically acclaimed local outfit, Tabbaruk. Between 1989 and 2004, they recorded eight albums worth of music, releasing six CDs including the Juno nominated 'Jonah' in 2000. In between sessions, Wilson apprenticed with the late reggae keyboard originator, Jackie Mittoo with whom he did several recordings and whose last work is featured on 'The Peacemaker's Chauffeur'. He also had the opportunity to record with such name acts as Sly and Robbie as well as UB40. In his spare time (!) Wilson also managed to earn a PHD in history and pen an award winning book about hockey entitled 'Lord Stanley: the man behind the cup' in 2006.

Somehow all of Wilson's diverse interests – passion for history, hockey and celtic folk music – percolate together to form a perfectly enjoyable reggae concept album entitled 'The Peacemaker's Chauffeur' that Wilson first released in a limited way in 2008. When I met Wilson this summer, he gave me a copy to listen to at the Calgary Folk Festival (where he was supporting both legendary Jamaican guitarist, Ernest Ranglin and Scottish folk singer, Dick Gaughan) and I have to admit to a little skepticism. When I heard him play with Gaughan, he had just the right approach and every keyboard flourish elevated the Scottish guitarist's songs. He rocked the festival with Ranglin both times I heard him play, but I still worried about if and how he'd be able to blend his musical influences on a solo record.

A quick look at the album credits showed that top flight musicians from both genres – Dave Swarbick and David Francey from the folk side and Jackie Mittoo, Ernest Ranglin and Aswad's Brinsley Forde representing the reggae camp – contributed to the project, but I'd heard cross genre recordings before that had been nothing short of disastrous. I needn't have worried. 'The Peacemaker's Chauffeur' is a good and sometimes great recording that deserves to be heard. Loosely held together by the themes of war and peace, Wilson articulately explores the effects of war on common people over the course of fifteen original tracks and two carefully chosen covers (Elton John's 'Madman across the Water' and the traditional 'Matty Groves')

As one would expect, the playing is stellar throughout most of this double CD. There are very few missteps and when – as on the classically inspired 'Flowers of the Forest' – the music doesn't seem to jive with the album as a whole, Wilson can be forgiven as listened to in isolation, the performances remain uniformly excellent. For the more traditional reggae fan, 'The Warrior', 'Madman across the Water' and 'The importance of being Ernest' (a tribute to Ranglin) should prove more satisfying. Finally, Jason Wilson should be given huge credit for taking the risks he did with 'The Peacemaker's Chauffeur.' He's got the chops to play whatever he wants and rather than make a predictable crowd pleaser, he's gone out on a limb in search of something different. A very worthwhile release that deserves a listen.