

Heart Of The Congos

Cedric Myton, whose unique falsetto is such a feature of this album, was born 1947 in St Catherine, Jamaica, and began his career as a member of the Tartans vocal group.

We were living in Cockburn Pen - Kingston 11 area - and then we form the Tartans with Devon Russell, Prince Lincoln Thompson, Lindbergh Lewis and myself as lead vocalist'.

These were the days when rocksteady ran dance hall, and the Tartans scored with DANCE ALL NIGHT (1967) for Federal, and COMING ON STRONG, cut at WIRL studio for Ken Lock's Caltone label in 1968. They also made FAR BEYOND THE SUN for Duke Reid's Treasure Isle imprint. Hits notwithstanding, the group were unable to carry on as a foursome; Cedric went on to make records with Devon Russell after reggae hit the town, including titles like WHAT A SIN THING and SHORT UP DRESS.

Along the line there was a split, then I and Lincoln form the Royal Rasses. I move up to Old Harbour - in the little old seaport town. At that time we were still the Royal Rasses, and we did KINGSTON 11 and HUMANITY... that was a period of time, that traditional, spiritual, churchical order. After that I formed the Congos. Even before I met Roy, I use to write my songs...'

Roydel Johnson, whose distinctive tenor shares lead vocal chores on the album was also born in 1947, in the north-western parish of Hanover. As a boy there he attended Kendal School, where Lee Perry was also a pupil. Roy grew up in a musical family - both his parents sang in church - and by the early seventies he had become a member of the Rasta groups Ras Michael and the Sons Of Negus, and the lesser known Brother Joe and the Rightful Brothers. He was a member of that group when they cut GO TO ZION around 1973. By mid-decade he had met up with Cedric, and the Congos were born. Cedric continues:

After working with Roy as the Congos, then we met Watty. He do some background vocals and we recruit Watty in the group. One of the first songs that we wrote was SOLID FOUNDATION,(then) CHILDREN CRYING, and SODOM AND GOMORROW. FISHERMAN ROW is really a traditional song from way back. When we did that song in Lee Perry's studio, like the _rst day we did it, I said to the musicians that we could do it better. The next day we did the song with Geoffrey Chung on bass and Paul from Twelve Tribes band on drums and get a different vibration. ARK OF THE COVENANT was one of the last songs we wrote in that period.'

THE BACKING SINGERS

The bass voice heard singing the praises of Quaju Peg the collie man on FISHERMAN is that of Watty 'King' Burnett, who had made several records for Lee Perry, including WAR and RAINY NIGHT IN PORTLAND. Also heard throughout are the Meditations - Ansel Cridland, Winston Watson and Danny Clarke - who also sang backup for Bob Marley around this time, most notably on tracks like RASTAMAN LIVE UP, BLACKMAN REDEMPTION and PUNKY REGGAE PARTY. They made several records under their own name at the Black Ark during 1976-77, including the excellent RUNNING FROM JAMAICA, THINK SO and HOUSES OF PARLIAMENT. Heptones Earl Morgan and Barry Llewellyn add their distinctive harmonies to LA LA BAM-BAM, as does Gregory Isaacs - he also cut MR COP at Black Ark. Candy McKenzie, of the vocal group Full Experience, sings backup on CHILDREN CRYING, and cut a 12" version of BREAKFAST IN BED for Scratch in 1977.

THE MUSICIANS

The Upsetters at this time included some of Jamaica's best players; as well as great drummers like Sly and Mikey Boo, Scratch used the talents of the brilliant bass player Boris Gardiner. In the eighties Boris scored a number one UK hit with the love ballad I WANT TO WAKE UP WITH YOU. Also present was the late Winston Wright, who contributes a compelling bassline to CONGOMAN, as well as the organ duties for which he is rather better known; Winston had written the huge hit THE LIQUIDATOR in 1969, and was a leading session musician for Leslie Kong, Bunny Lee, Harry J and others. The intricate lead guitar is played by the masterful Ernest Ranglin, who began his career as a 15-year-old in 1947 with the band of the late tenor saxophonist Val 'Cipriano' Bennett. He is simply one of the world's best guitarists, as anyone familiar with his work with, for example, Monty Alexander will testify.

ABOUT THIS ALBUM

HEART OF THE CONGOS is together with Bob Marley and the Wailers' NATTY DREAD, Burning Spear's MARCUS GARVEY, and the Mighty Diamonds' THE RIGHT TIME, a defining statement of Jamaican vocal group artistry in the 70's. By virtue of its thematic coherence, superb musicianship, beautiful vocals, it is exemplary roots music of the highest order. It is also the most perfectly-realised album to come from Lee Perry's Black Ark during the 6 years that the studio was in operation. By the time Lee Perry came to record the Congos, everything was right. The ambience of the studio, characterised by an instantly-recognisable drum sound and the producer's use of outboard equipment like the Echoplex reverb unit and Mutron phaser, recorded on 4-track Teac and all mixed and mutated through a Soundcraft board, soaks every

groove of HEART OF THE CONGOS. His method of dumping tracks onto one track to free them for further overdubbing introduced an effect of degradation that became an essential component of the mix, for which funky seems to clean a word. Technicalities notwithstanding, the album overflows with a tangible presence so powerful that it virtually transcends the category of music.

This reissue attempts to be the definitive version of this classic; longer than any of the previous _ve issues, it also includes scarce alternative mixes of several tracks on the bonus CD, all digitally remastered to provide the optimum sound quality. Since this album was made, the main protagonists have pursued their separate courses; Cedric Myton made three albums with the group for French CBS; he currently lives just outside New York with his family. Roy Johnson records and tours as Congo Ashanti Roy from his Jamaican base; he made music with Adrian Sherwood's On-U collective and releases solo albums, the most recent of which teamed him with roots vocalist Annette Brissett for Chinna Smith's High Times label in Jamaica. If anything, Scratch has broadened his scope; he is now one of the world's leading performance artists, occasionally including the recording of music in his oeuvre. He currently resides in Switzerland with his wife Mireille, touring and recording. His so-called 'madness' is now simply a strategem, in the words of Jamaican deejay I.Roy, designed to "...keep away all the gainers and karaokists. Scratch can't mad; 'im 'ave too much IQ!"

The work he did at Black Ark, in which elemental energies really seemed to work through him in a new kind of musical alchemy, will forever remain the central part of his canon. From that marvellous body of work here is the true philosopher's stone... HEART OF THE CONGOS
Steve Barrow OCTOBER 1995

SOURCES

Interview with Roy Johnson by Ray Hurford, published in SMALL AXE No. 13, 1982, London
Return of the Super Ape: The life and times of Lee 'Scratch' Perry published in GRAND ROYAL MAGAZINE, issue 2, 1995, USA

Interview with Cedric Myton and Watty Burnett by Cyril Saunders, published in BLACK ECHOES, 1982, London

Various interviews with Cedric Myton (NY), I. Roy (Jamaica), and Max Romeo (Jamaica) done in March 1994, June 1995 and August/September 1995 by Steve Barrow

TECHNICAL NOTE

This album has been digitally remastered from the original Black Ark quarter inch master tapes with the exception of AT THE FEAST, BRING THE MACKABACK and NOAH SUGAR PAN, which were transferred from vinyl and processed using Cedar® hardware and software to remove unwanted crackle and clicks. Time has not been kind to the Black Ark tapes and considerable effort and expertise on the part of mastering engineer Kevin Metcalfe was needed to get the final sound as good as could be expected within the limitations of working from an eighteen-year old tape originally recorded on a Teac 4-track. For example, there are a number of tape drop-outs on the opening track FISHERMAN, resulting in momentary losses of high frequency. Unfortunately, even today's state-of-the-art technology can't deal with that one! So there it is. I was also concerned about some extremely unpleasant tape hiss on a couple of tracks, but despite several visits to Abbey Road studios (the experts in sound restoration techniques) engineer Andy Walter and I were forced to conclude that removing the hiss also removed some of the magic of the music, and that's something you just can't do with an album of this power and beauty. In the end we took the tapes back to the Town House and had Kevin master those tracks again, EQing them slightly differently to remove the worst aspects of tape hiss. In the end I think we got the best result we could and I hope the slight technical imperfections won't spoil your enjoyment of a bona _de masterpiece.

Bob Harding

O mother Margret bawl: Kongo

Yari, yari, Kongo

Nkita, nkita, Kongo

Yari, yari, Kongo

Oku twawutshilwa kwawu kwenda - Kongo

Yari, yari, Kongo

O yenda mona, mona eKongo

Yari, yari, eKongo

Yeh, Mother Margret bawl: Kongo

Yari, yari, Kongo...

Yeh, Mother Margret bawl: Kongo

Alas, alas, Kongo

Spirits, spirits of Kongo

Alas, alas, Kongo

Oh where we were born, there let us go - Kongo

Alas, alas, Kongo

Oh, go to see, go to see Kongo

Alas, alas, Kongo

Yeh, Mother Margret bawl: Kongo

Alas, alas, Kongo...

Taken from:

A SOCIAL HISTORY OF INDENTURED AFRICAN IMMIGRATION INTO JAMAICA 1841-1865,

by Monica Schuler

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