

This reissue, which comprises the late Dennis Brown's album 'Joseph's Coat Of Many Colours' plus extra tracks which also appeared as 45s on Dennis' DEB imprint during 1977–1979, arose out of conversations with the great deejay Ranking Joe who was working with us on the Blood and Fire sound system tours. We had decided to release Joe's album 'Around The World' which had been produced by Dennis in 1979, but both Joe and we wanted to use some of Dennis' vocal tracks to make that album better value in terms of playing time. And so we commenced negotiations with Dennis himself, who proved easy to deal with. We produced one contract, and Dennis asked for some amendments, which we sent back to him. Tragically, Dennis died from respiratory failure before he could sign this amended contract, and we had to wait a couple of years before we could conclude the deal with Dennis' widow Yvonne.

Dennis had started the DEB label in late 1976, in association with Castro Brown, a Jamaican who ran the Morpheus label during 1975–1976 from his shop premises in Croydon, south of London. As he told Carter van Pelt in what was his last interview:

DEB music – it was a company, not only a label but a company... There was a guy called Castro Brown who was living in England at the time. He was the one who was responsible for taking care of me (when) I first started going to England. A guy who have many ideas. He is a hardcore bredren still. A rebellious bredren. I concentrated only on the music side of things. The other bredren now, he would concentrate on the administrative part of the business. Not that I wasn't trying to understand more on the business side...

In addition to material by Dennis, the label also released music by Gregory Isaacs, The Tamlins and Michael Rose with Black Uhuru:

You see, Michael Rose and myself, we grew up together. And because I was more fortunate before him, I became popular before him cause he used to sing as Michael Rose before the group Black Uhuru form. So right as it had formed... and they were promising then, cause they had certain songs on Jammy's. This is when we first started you know. I was doing the production of things and asked them to come record two songs fe help get the label established. Because I alone couldn't carry it... And of course, the aforementioned album with Ranking Joe (due for release on Blood and Fire shortly): Joe and I was very close. In those days he was just coming. So it was mainly friends I relied on in trying to build this company. It was hard work. Cause we had people like Gregory. We had the Tamlins. We had almost everybody that was happening at the time...

The material here is some of the best music – ranking alongside his celebrated recordings made with producer Winston 'Niney' Holness – that Dennis ever made; on these tracks Dennis is his own man, having fully absorbed the influences – from Delroy Wilson and Alton Ellis – that helped shape his awesome voice. We are honoured to present this material on Blood and Fire to you.

Steve Barrow  
June 2002

It is extremely difficult to objectively evaluate the life and work of Dennis Brown because what he always represented in real terms to the world of reggae was of far greater importance than how the rest of the world saw him. For the best part of thirty years he was the people's choice, 'The Crown Prince Of Reggae', Jamaica's most consistently popular singer. In his own way he was the voice of reggae yet to outsiders he was a competent singer who had achieved a couple of crossover hits during a long career. Dennis Brown's tragic death in 1999 brought forth a series of hastily turned out obituaries that focused on a career supposedly blighted by missed opportunities and alleged inherent weaknesses. They tended to concentrate on what might have been but, for Dennis Brown's entire life, he sang for his public and not for any notions of what might have helped to make him into a 'pop' star or for the demands of an international audience. Of course if he had 'crossed over' then the same critics would have accused him of selling out. In order to be 'authentic' the 'grittier' and 'rougher' an artist sounds then the more 'real' they are perceived to be but a consummate craftsman will continually polish the veneer to a high gloss. To further get his message across they will seduce the listener with the beauty and quality of the sound before the actual message hits home. The international audience seem to prefer their artists to be as far removed as possible from anything that could ever be described as 'easy listening'.

Dennis Brown's work could never be described as 'easy listening' but the crossover audience somehow remained unappreciative of and largely unmoved by his iron fist in a velvet glove approach. When they finally started to take an interest in reggae music it was invariably the more obvious forms such as dub and deejays that they latched on to. The obituaries missed the point completely and demonstrated once again how little is really understood about reggae music by mainstream commentators. The emphasis should have been on the celebration of the life of a man who had given the world some of the greatest music ever and the point made that the deceased is important because of what they have achieved in their lifetime rather than because they are now dead. Instead his memory was insulted by demeaning defamation and meaningless criticism and because he was deemed to have 'failed' in the obituary writers' estimation then he must have been a failure. Dennis Brown was a hero to his public and he always will be. This isn't to say that if his achievement was good enough for the reggae audience then it was good enough. The point is that if it was good enough for them then it should have been good enough for anyone for, as notoriously fickle and hard to please as they can be, Dennis Brown was loved by the reggae music audience like no other singer. He spent practically the whole of his life singing and he never lost sight of the fact that he was dependent on his public. He loved his people and they loved him back.

A certain amount of interest in an artist's private life away from their work is inevitable and we all like to see the 'real' person behind what it is they are celebrated for. But at what level does this become prurience? Unfortunately with the current cult of celebrity with people simply being famous for being famous the only thing it seems the public are interested in are salacious details of the shortcomings and mistakes of their stars. The background details can be interesting and illuminating and can

highlight aspects of an artist's work and outlook but in the end, and this is the most important thing of all, it's their work that has to stand up or fall down on its own merits. Unfortunately for the memory of Dennis Brown the obituary writers seemed only interested in dirt digging and muckraking. They never understood his work in the first place and failed to realise that Dennis Brown's music is essential to an understanding of reggae. His incredible influence and popularity, both as a singer and as a person, have been seriously overlooked and woefully misunderstood.

Reggae writer and producer Chris Lane recounts the story of travelling to Jamaica for the first time in the mid-seventies and meeting up with Dennis Brown in Lee Perry's studio. Whenever they subsequently crossed paths down on Orange Street or North Parade or anywhere else in Kingston Dennis greeted and treated Chris like an old friend. He was one of the in-crowd by association and the goodwill and friendliness that this created for Chris was immeasurable – if he was Dennis Brown's friend then he was our friend too. His trip was a resounding success. Everyone who was fortunate enough to meet Dennis Brown will tell similar stories of his warmth and friendliness. He was genuine. As for his influence too far back to even remember exactly when it was I can recall a Talent Night at The Bouncing Ball Club in Peckham when it seemed that every youth who got up to sing that night had studied every last nuance of Dennis Brown's style and delivery and many years later youth singer Yami Bolo would formalise this when he told Boom Shacka Lacka fanzine: Every youth want to sing like Dennis Brown.

He was a charismatic, gifted and supremely confident live performer and as he ran through selections from his vast repertoire his adoring audience would sing along note for note and I was lucky enough to catch him live in concert in London not long after the majority of the records on this set were made. This was just after his initial flush of crossover popularity when he had established himself as reggae music's biggest star and, both times, it was as if the congregation were there simply to reaffirm their faith. Backed by bands that would have kept the most demanding audience happy even if the main attraction had failed to show his appearance on stage caused the crowd to erupt and the pressure never let up. He was the voice of Jamaica filtered through the works of Curtis Mayfield and Nat 'King' Cole and his songs of love for everyone were indivisible and inseparable from his love songs. He triumphed at them all.

Dennis Brown started singing at the age of ten in Kingston's National Arena at a political conference and he did a number of shows with Byron Lee before making his first record with Derrick Harriott in 1969. 'It's A Crime' sold reasonably well and its moderate success encouraged the thirteen year old to make more records: I did quite a few recordings at this time for other producers. With Matador I did 'Things In Life' and 'Baby Don't Do It', and I did one for GG called 'Don't You Cry' then I went and did two numbers for Prince Buster. After that I went to Randy's. In those days it was more like hustling and myself and The Heptones would go round and sing on records as session singers and we'll all get paid separately.

He did make many more records for a whole range of producers: for Derrick Harriott,

Coxsone Dodd, Lloyd 'Matador' Daley, the Tafari Syndicate, Randy's, Alvin 'GG' Ranglin, Prince Buster, Herman Chin Loy, and Phil Pratt until he settled into long lasting relationships with Niney The Observer and Joe Gibbs. The standard of his recordings was never less than excellent and many are now rightly regarded as reggae classics. In fact no one has made more reggae classics than Dennis Brown or is ever likely to do so. Both as a songwriter and interpreter of other people's songs his mastery was complete:

Right – because you see love songs are nice but when a song really hits you that is factual it makes you think positive. When you hear reality sounds it's a fact. All the time in my songs I try to be on the side of right against wickedness. Really I send a message to youth all over the world to live good.

Towards the latter half of the seventies after an unsurpassed and unsurpassable series of hit records for other producers he embarked on self-productions. He started the D'Augular's Sounds label with a blistering record backed by The Heptones, 'Satisfaction Feeling', which was one of his best ever but nothing too tough happened with that really; that was just a start for me however it pointed the direction he would go in when he established DEB in the winter of 1976/77.

I started to realise that I could be doing all these records for myself but then I didn't understand producing too well, like mixing and what to ask for, so Niney and Gregory Isaacs helped me to get experience of these things, but it's only lately that I really start to get into production.

Although he always gave his best for other producers he would still manage to better this in his self-productions when he was free of all constraints and strictures. It would be easy shorthand to say that Dennis Brown saved all his greatest songs and performances for his own productions but it would not be strictly true. His work for other producers was never a compromise and even his not so well known recordings such as 'The Look Of Love' for New York producer Brad Osbourne are as exciting and as valid as his most popular and well known records such as 'Money In My Pocket'. He never gave less than 100% and he never needed to hold back because he always had talent in abundance and songs to spare. Soon after he completed work on this set he embarked on a series of recordings for Sly & Robbie's Taxi label that included 'Revolution' and 'Have You Ever Been In Love Before' and that were every bit as good as the material he was using for his self-productions.

This is not just another Dennis Brown album (apparently the total released so far is already well into three figures as his work has been licensed and sub-licensed, chopped, changed and even re-titled to a bewildering degree) but hopefully part of an intelligent and systematic reissue programme of his catalogue so that it can be properly appreciated. His work needs to be presented properly in order to give the uninitiated easy access and enable them to appreciate and enjoy his work without being confused and misled by the bewildering amount of what is on offer. It is of paramount importance to make his name and his output as relevant to the rest of the world as it was to the reggae audience. There is already a danger of his becoming yet another reggae music tragedy too easily written off and too easily forgotten and his memory should never have been so easily sullied. His work had nothing to do with

gimmicks or hype but musical talent and a personality that shone through in everything that he did. Dennis Brown was the voice of reggae and his voice still cries out to be heard.

### **Emmanuel God Is With Us**

...and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us.  
Matthew  
Chapter One  
Verse Twenty Three

‘Emmanuel’ I produced myself. I knew exactly the sort of sound I wanted there and then and the flavour I wanted I managed to get. I could have done it by dubbing brass or synthesizer but what I wanted was just a chanting sound like a lot of people from all nations singing in harmony, like a multitude y’know. Freedom sounds chanting and giving God praise. The song really say: ‘The Lord God is with us. He gave us the moon and the stars and this blessed day. No sorrow, no regret, no heartbreak. Oh Jacob hear we call his name. My people don’t be dismayed.’

It is not overstating the case to say that all Dennis Brown wanted to achieve with this song came to fruition, a very real act of faith, and one of his most moving songs ever.

### **Promised Land**

One of Dennis Brown’s most beautiful upbeat love songs also known as ‘Lately Girl’ and not to be confused with the record of the same name that he made with Aswad a few years later that concentrated on rather more spiritual concerns. The repeated horns refrain is wonderful and Don D Junior later handed in a full instrumental cut ‘Dunisha’.

### **Well Without Water**

A return to the theme that there will be no hiding place for the wicked man on the Day of Judgement. The mixing of the smoke without fire and well without water metaphors is both very clever and very effective.

### **Open Your Eyes**

An understated plea for understanding that could be taken either as a very personal love song or as a more universally applicable lament.

### **The Creator**

The Creator Created Creation. What part of this don’t you understand? A clear and unequivocal hymn to the Almighty in thanks and praise for all that he has done. Continuing the same theme as the earlier ‘Created By The Father’ and leaving nothing more to say on the subject.

## **Troubled World**

How sad to say this is still as true today as it always has been. Dennis Brown rarely seemed to vent his feelings of frustration and even when he did it was in a song like this. An extended discomix, originally released on a DEB 12", lets the rhythm shine on an uncluttered dub workout.

## **The Half**

Originally recorded for Phil Pratt and then deejayed by U Roy on a rare self produced outing on Del-Ma as 'The Other Half' and later updated by Dennis Brown for a DEB 12" release. It could just as easily be taken as the title for this set. The dub is an object lesson in restrained mixing techniques.

## **Oh What A Day**

Looking forward to the coming of the Creator and the emphasis really is on looking forward for the righteous have nothing to fear. Chinna's guitar work is particularly impressive.

## **Together Brothers**

aka Stop The Fussing And Fighting

A laid back cut of 'Real Rock' and, while it's been said before, it can bear repeating that a call for peace actually means something in the strife torn ghettos of Kingston where violence is an everyday reality. This song uses the same recut of the classic 'Real Rock' utilised by Linval Thompson on his 'Can't Stop Natty Dread' (BAFCD 032) and by U-Brown for his production of 'Bits Of Paper' (BAFCD 020).

## **A Cup Of Tea**

A fish for you and a fish for me

A break of bread and a cup of tea

Share what you have – it's as simple as that. The messages do not need to be original or different to have relevance and perhaps by constant repetition they will finally reach their intended target.

## **Slave Driver**

An interpretation of the Bob Marley classic where it feels like the tables really have been turned. Dennis Brown's version was aimed at the roots reggae audience and sounded like the threat had become a reality. And it was still play-listed on London's Capital Radio!

## **Three Meals A Day**

Talking 'bout detention, detention

Reggae artists have always shared a natural affinity with the suffering of their brothers incarcerated in some of the most notorious prisons in the world. The mind

numbing boredom and the monotonous regularity of the penal regime are graphically described.

### **Man Next Door**

Also known as ‘A Quiet Place’ and recorded by both The Paragons and Horace Andy, deejayed by I Roy and destroyed by King Tubby as ‘A Noise Place’ the plea remains the same. All we all want is some peace – both literally and metaphorically.

### **Want To Be No General**

Dennis Brown used to explain on stage by way of introduction what this song meant and perhaps the title is a little confusing but it’s all about having no desire to be a part of the rude boy rat race with its inevitable consequences ‘from the morgue to the cemetery’. Instead of outright condemnation of the ‘top rankings who all get spankings’ he shows an understanding of how easily these things can happen to disaffected youths and spells out that he wants no part of it warning what will happen to those that do get involved. The drumming – especially the syndrum – never let up. Coupled here with Ranking Dread’s stupendous take on the same theme; he was one of the most original deejays ever. His career is long overdue for some sort of reassessment because his style could be quite mesmerising and his verbal dexterity translated well from Coxson Outernational live and direct in London, England onto vinyl. The original DEB UK 12” was in split stereo/two track and afforded hours of amusement for creating your very own special mixes.

### **Home Sweet Home**

Loosely based around the melody of ‘Africa We Want To Go’ with Israel and Africa conjoining into one as the Promised Land.

### **Emmanuel God Is With Us version**

Finishing off with the spine tingling, haunting dub of ‘Emanuel God Is With Us’ with the voices echoing and reverberating: Freedom sounds chanting and giving God praise.

### **Sources**

In His Own Way – An Interview With Dennis Brown  
Dave Hendley (Blues & Soul No. 246)  
Dennis Brown Parts One & Two  
Dave Hendley (Blues & Soul Nos. 222 & 223)  
Dennis Brown  
Chris Lane (Blues & Soul No. 142)

### **Website**

Dennis Brown’s last interview (with Carter van Pelt) can be found on his ‘400 Years’ website under this url <http://incolor.inetnebr.com/cvanpelt/deb.html>

## **Recommended Further Listening**

Visions Of Dennis Brown, Joe Gibbs  
Wolf And Leopards - Dennis Brown, DEB/Weed Beat  
Some Like It Hot - Dennis Brown, Heartbeat  
Brown Sugar - Dennis Brown, Taxi  
Super Reggae And Soul Hits - Dennis Brown, Crystal  
Love Has Found Its Way - Dennis Brown, A&M

## **Musicians**

Drums - Sly Dunbar, Leroy 'Horsemouth' Wallace, Carlton 'Santa' Davis  
Bass - Earl 'Bagga' Walker, Errol 'Flabba' Holt, Lloyd Parkes  
Guitar - Winston 'Bo-Pee' Bowen, Dennis Brown, Bingy Bunny  
Lead Guitar - Earl 'Chinna' Smith  
Keyboards - Winston Wright, Franklyn 'Bubbler' Waul, Gladstone 'Gladdy'  
Anderson, Keith Sterling  
Percussion - Barnabas, Sticky, Skully, Flick Wilson  
Horns - Bobby Ellis, Headley 'Deadly Headley' Bennett, Nambo Robinson  
Backing Vocals - Leroy Sibbles, Junior Delgado, Dennis Brown

## **Credits**

Recording Engineers - Maxy, Sylvan Morris  
Recorded Channel One Studio, Harry J Studio, Joe Gibbs Studio, Kingston  
Digital Restoration - Tony Webster at CEDAR Audio, Cambridge  
Edited and mastered - Kevin Metcalfe at The Soundmasters, London  
Reissue co-ordination - Steve Barrow  
Booklet Notes - Noel Hawks  
Cover Photography - Beth Lesser  
Other Photographs - Courtesy Yvonne Brown  
Mural of Dennis (tray inlay) - Photograph by Nicky Birch  
Design - Martina Keller at Intro, London

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