

DO YOU
BELIEVE IN

MAJEK?

Majek Fashek (his full name, Majekodunmi Fasheke, means "the oracle speaks the truth") was the first emissary from the flourishing Nigerian reggae scene to tour the U.S. His *Prisoner of Conscience* album, containing his two big hits, "Send Down the Rain" and a cover of Bob Marley's "Redemption Song," had been released by Mango, and his reputation as a mystic and rainmaker had preceded him. The predominantly restrained production of the studio recording, however, did little to prepare the delighted L.A. audience for his live show.

What a crew he brought on stage that night at the Music Machine! Some of the bandmembers were dressed in full African regalia, while others wore a mixture of sportswear and African touches. There was a dancing midget playing a *shekere*, two beautiful women dancing and singing backup and a white guy on keyboards. Then there was Majek, attired raggamuffin style in cut-off camouflage fatigues and army boots, dreadlocks tucked into his leather cap, preaching and exhorting the crowd between songs.

The music presented many surprises as well. Far from just the straight-ahead reggae we anticipated, in the middle of many songs the band dropped into a full juju breakdown, complete with talking drums and ecstatic dancing. Other songs began sedately enough, but then sped off into a thrash-punk dimension, only to land back gracefully where they began. And then there was the note-for-note rendition of Jimi Hendrix's "Hey Joe,"

complete with Majek playing the guitar with his teeth! The one thing that we *had* expected that night, but didn't get, was Fashek calling down the rain, breaking California's prolonged drought.

Roger Steffens' conversation with Majek provides some insights into the complex personality behind his music.

INTERVIEW

BY

ROGER

STEFFENS

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MAJEK FASHEK

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Roger: You said you had a revelation not long ago—can you describe that for me?

Majek: The revelation I got is to talk about the power of the mind. You see, the mind is like the wind; it's very hard to control the mind. It wavers like the sea waves. And where one is about to still the mind, like nature is still—that is ultimate freedom. So I'm not talking about political freedom because political freedom will follow the freedom of the mind. That is the highest freedom. So that is what is missing in the human race today, in Africa, in Europe, in America, the same thing. It's no different because we always sort our differences, instead of going into ourselves and knowing ourselves.

Q: You make your messages with reggae instead of a traditional kind of Nigerian, or African, music. Why?

A: Yes, that's correct. Bob Marley was not playing reggae music, he was playing African music. I don't call my music reggae music, I call it African music. Where I come from—Benin City in Nigeria—the way Bob Marley sound is like a cultural sound in Benin. We call it *kpanlogo* music. It's like soul music with a lot of traditional rhythms. You see, *kpanlogo* music was taken from Africa to the Caribbean. Then it was fused and adulterated with rock music and called reggae music or ska music. . . . Selassie I too, he was a great king in Africa, but he was not the Christ, he was not Jah.

Q: Are there any true Rastafarians in Nigeria now, people who accept the divinity of Selassie?

A: There are some people who believe; they follow Bob Marley's teachings. Bob Marley had a lot of followers back home in Africa, many youth. But in this time, I wouldn't judge Rastafarians. I'm not here to condemn, I'm just here to fulfill Rastafari. Selassie I was a great king. But creating Selassie as another Christ is confusion, so the children don't know who to follow again. Me, in particular, I don't accept being called a Rasta. You

should call me a prisoner cause that's what I represent, that's what I believe in, and that is what I am living. I believe that my worst enemy is my best friend, and my best friend is my worst enemy. So we are the children of the world, so I have to conquer myself. Not through Selassie, not through Jesus Christ, because they just show the way, they give us the guidance. So identifying so much with one cause—Mohammedanism, Buddhism, Christianity, Rastafarianism—is politics. That's how I got my own revelation in this time, because we're talking about the unification of all the races. There will not be unification when one is claiming to be African, when there is too much religious fanaticism. The European and American race cannot really identify with the African race because of the religious problems.

Q: Religious as well as the color of the skin: so those are two major stumbling blocks.

A: Yes, the color of the skin. But in this time I don't talk about black or white, because no man is black and no man is white. See, we are the color of the rainbow, you know what I'm talking about?

Q: Yes! All men are ultimately African anyway, all people come from Africa initially.

A: Good—consciousness. But I cannot tell a European man "you come from Africa," they cannot believe me. So the best thing is, one must realize his conscious state of mind, which is being one with nature. See when you are one with nature, you are one with everything. Like me, I'm one with the

world, and I'm the world and the world is me. So I am one with you and everything.

Q: When did you first hear reggae?

A: When I was in primary school—Jimmy Cliff singing "Sitting in Limbo." Then I got to know Bob Marley. But actually the first music I ever sang was [East] Indian music—that was my first love. It was very spiritual. When I was in school, I never loved reggae music. At school gatherings I would sing songs like "Love in Tokyo," and things like that. [Sings in Hindi "the first song I ever sing in my life."] So I use talking drum because of that feel.

Q: The story that we know best about you is kind of a tale of magic, because of the drought in Nigeria. You wrote a song called "Send Down the Rain," and you broke the drought. That story has already assumed the proportions of myth, so I'd like to hear it from your own lips. First of all, why did you write the song?

A: There was a day I was back home in Lagos, sitting in the back of my house and the clouds were really dark, so I got the inspiration.

Q: But you were thinking about the drought in the central part of the country?

A: No, it was just a reflection of my suffering, the tribulations I&I was passing through. That song, I was talking about "I'm a living man, I got a lot of work to do, send down the rain. This morning I've been sowing my seed, waiting for the rain to drop on what I love." My own definition of that song, although it affected the drought—when I sang that song, God opened the heavens—the rain that fell was a rain of blessing to me. It was spiritual rain.

Q: So you were asking for a shower of blessings?

A: Yes. "I'm a hungry man, I don't want to be angry, so Lord send down the rain." So actually God answered my prayer.

Q: Where was the first place it rained when you sang the song in front of an audience?

A: Back in Lagos.

We had many artists who were going to play. I was supposed to close the show but there was another artist who didn't want me to close the show. There was kind of a personality clash. So the manager came to me and said, "Majek, who's going to play first?" I said, "Man, anything you want me to do—if you want me to go play now, I go play." They were trying to hold back, because they wanted me to close, but they finally said I should go play. So I said, "No problem," and I went on stage to play. So I played the first song, second song, third song. As I played "Send Down the Rain," the rain started to fall, heavy rain came! And that was the end of the show; nobody could follow that! [laughter] So that brother didn't play again. He said I had brought some "juju"—I used voodoo! But it's not my power, it's just the power of Jah Almighty.

Q: Now there was a place in central Nigeria where there was also a drought, and when you sang there, the rain also fell?

A: Yes, everywhere! Everywhere was flooded. Is like a miracle, man! I could not believe what happened. The people started to call me "Rainmaker" and "Rainprophet," and there were cartoons about the flood and they said, "Majek, please don't send the rain to our house!" And after that work, Mandela came out. So they attributed that to me because I had sung "Free Mandela" also, so they said, "Hey, the Visionary!" So you see, they always read prophetic meaning into my music.

Q: Tell me some of the towns where you sang and broke the drought.

A: In the north. Kaduna... there was so much rain there. And it's very hard to break the north. I had the south, the east, the west. But the north is Muslims, they don't follow reggae music. But they follow me. And I have my kings behind me, like the king of Benin [City]. He's a powerful king, one of the greatest we have in Nigeria. He invited me to play for him. He came with his white robe and all of his queens. He told me: "Majek, today we are going to fight! I'm going to bring all my traditional oracles to hold back the rain!"

Q: So who won?

A: But I won, man! There were showers of rain! [laughter] After I

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recorded "Send Down the Rain," when I started to do live shows, my show was like a spiritual show, an awareness show. It was not just mere entertainment. So the government was able to see my show. There was a television producers awards show and the vice president was there and saw me perform. And they thought they could use me to elevate Nigerians around the nation politically. So they employ me to play in 22 cities. So the piper pay you to play the tune, but when I go onstage I played what I wanted to play! I went to all the states. And every state I went to, the governor of that state was there waiting for me. It was great, like a serious message. And my people accepted the prisoner of conscience message—the '90s message of this generation, which is the Aquarian Age, the Age of Water. Water is unlimited, water has no enemy, everybody drinks water, so water is one. So we enter the age of water and you can see the release of Mandela as part of the conscious state of black and white coming together as one. This era we're entering now, it's beyond religion.

Q: So the government obviously wanted to align itself with you because of the consciousness of your music.

A: Yes.

Q: And Island Records has licensed your album for release in England and America.

A: [I don't want people to think that] I'm coming to take Bob Marley's place because nobody can take the place of a Bob Marley. The prophets of God are from the same lineage and they are speaking the same truth, which is God, but in different languages. So Bob Marley was able to interpret it for the '80s with his own language—how he got his own revelation. Remember Moses, who was the one who led the Israelites out of Egypt, then the matter was given to Joshua, just like that. But nobody could take Moses' place. Moses is Moses.

Q: Moses kept the children of Israel wandering in the desert for 40 years because he had to wait for that whole generation of slaves to die, because he couldn't bring people with a slavish mentality to the Promised Land. He had to make

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MAJEK FASHEK AND UPRISING POSTER: "BOB MARLEY . . . WAS PLAYING AFRICAN MUSIC."



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NEWS & REVIEWS

JACKIE MITTOO

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have survived myriad reworkings. Such is the case of Mittoo's "Full Up" instrumental, which begat the Mighty Diamonds "Pass the Kouchie," then Musical Youth's "Pass the Dutchie" and countless versions since. Mittoo's "Drum Song" was versioned with a stirring vocal by Devon Russell, then used variously for other labels by Ken Boothe, Ronnie Davis ("Jah Jah Jehovah"), Tapper Zukie, Prince Far I, the Morwells and others. In this way Mittoo's effect on reggae becomes incalculable since many artists using rhythms that he created have no idea where these rhythms originally came from.

In 1971, the outspoken and engaging Mittoo moved to Canada and began another chapter in his outstanding career. He toured the U.S. several times in the 1980s with Sugar Minott, a revamped Skatalites and others. Recently he was

again working in Montreal, Canada, with Lynn Taitt and Roland Alphonso, two more giants from the early days of Jamaican music. Mittoo will be sorely missed by all who knew him, but the music he helped create lives today on literally thousands of recordings.

Mittoo's solo albums include (but are not limited to): *Jackie Mittoo* (Studio One tracks released on U.A. and Liberty in the U.S.); *Jackie Mittoo in London* (Coxsone); *Evening Time* (Coxsone); *Keep On Dancing* (Coxsone); *Jackie Mittoo Showcase* (Studio One); *Macka Fat* (Studio One); *Keyboard King* (Third World); *The Mystro* (Or: In Cold Blood) (Third World); *Hot Blood* (Third World); *Champion of the Arena* (Jackpot); *Presents Romantic Reggae* (Total Sounds); *Wild Jockey* (Wackie's).

—Chuck Foster

MAJEK FASHEK

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people's consciousness change during that 40-year period.

A: Yes, you see what I'm saying. It's a serious situation. Because where me a come from is repatriation, Marcus Garvey. I see a situation where...the Jamaicans are waiting for an African to come. That's why I can't be what they are doing now.... So we're working on a repatriation program, a massive movement.

Q: To bring people from the Caribbean forward to Africa?

A: [From] America, all of them. Like you too! Because you are one of the people too. That's why I was telling you we have to fulfill the book. See this book is not for me alone. You are already fulfilling it. That's what Bob Marley was saying: "How long shall they kill our prophet while we stand aside and look. Some say it's just a part of

it but we must fulfill the book!" We have to fulfill the book—you, your children, the conscious ones. So we're lucky to be the conscious ones in this time.

Q: What is it you hope to achieve with your music?

A: I really want to achieve an original root African music with reggae influence. I already have talking drums, and I want to add more percussion. I've seen the extension of reggae music. I've introduced talking drums, maracas and some monotonic, hypnotic riddim to it. My band is 10 pieces, and I plan to include a horn section soon.

Q: One final question: What does your name mean?

A: MajeK means magical to me. It means don't let it hurt me, just give me love all the time. Fashek means the oracle does not lie; the oracle always speaks the truth. ★