



I was in a prove-it-to-me mood while waiting for Morgan Heritage to take the stage during Roots and Culture Day of last year's annual Bob Marley festivities in Long Beach, CA. Though full disclosure would probably not have been a wise idea at the time, I can admit now that I was not altogether familiar with the group. I knew they were some of singer Denroy Morgan's many offspring. I had seen their young faces staring from the cover of their *Don't Haffi Dread* (VP), wearing the sort of sullen expressions usually favored by thug-mug rappers and gangsta wannabes. I had heard and was fond of that album's very good title track, but didn't know if it was typical of their sound. Nor did the fact that it was indeed Roots and Culture Day necessarily mean that those descriptive words were applicable to them. Still, there was cause for optimism. The prominently placed religious symbols (Ethiopian cross, Star of David, menorah) that had been set on the stage along with burning sticks of incense conveyed a kind of bold purposefulness, and the volume of ganja smoke around me seemed to be increasing (usually a good sign).

It didn't take me long to realize that the roots-and-culture mantle fit this group to a tam. From the very first song, front man Peter Morgan ruled the arena with his assured vocals, serious reasonings and piercing gaze. Sharing the front of the stage were the pillar-like presences of sister Una and brother Roy "Gramps" Morgan, both playing keyboards and corroborating Peter's spirited testimonials with full-bodied harmony vocals. A bit less visible but no less crucial were guitarist Nakhmya "Lukes" Morgan, with lead and rhythm expertise suggestive of Chinna Smith, and Memmalatel "Mr. Mojo" Morgan, his hands a busy blur as he provided hand drumming and additional percussion over the bass-and-

drums foundation (expertly laid down by a couple of the non-Morgans up there). And the sound that pulsated forth was reggae—real, heartical, up-in-the-hills roots reggae, no doubt. I went from semi-clueless to committed fan in no time at all.

Several months after that I eagerly purchased the group's *Live in Europe 2000* (VP) disc, which not only assured me that the performance I had seen was no fluke, but provided some insight on Morgan Heritage's inherent attitudes regarding music and life in general. The recording features a spoken interlude by daddy Denroy Morgan in which the reggae patriarch spells out the need for spiritual consciousness and the rejection



MORGAN HERITAGE

WE ARE FAMILY

BY TOM ORR

PHOTOS BY SUNNY PAYSON

The musical Morgan family, from left: Lukes (guitar), Mr. Mojo (vocals, percussion), "Gramps" (Roy, keyboards, vocals), patriarch Denroy, Peter (lead vocals) and Una (vocals, keyboards). Front and center, Shy-Poo and Laza Morgan of LMS. Below, proud papa Denroy Morgan.

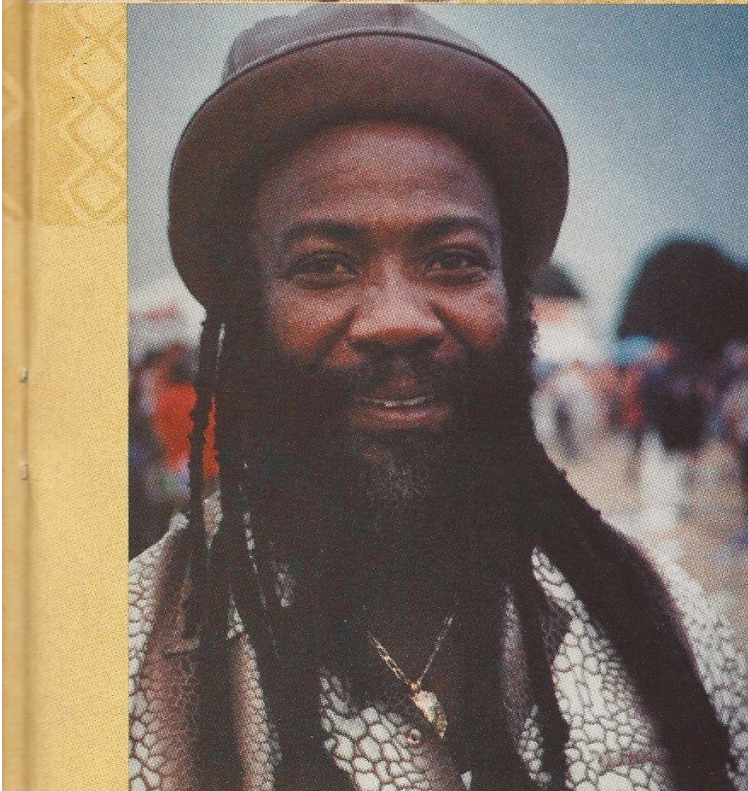
of divisive points of view. It's a perspective Morgan Heritage has embraced from the start.

Born, raised and educated in Brooklyn, NY and Springfield, MA, the Morgan children's Jamaican Rasta identity was nurtured and flourished amidst the culture of melting-pot America, where Denroy had scored a considerable crossover hit with 1981's "I'll Do Anything For You" after residing in the States since the '60s. The near-rural environment of Springfield enabled the Morgans to live, on something of a microcosmic level, as they would in the countryside of Jamaica—a communal, spiritual, Africanized way of life. Not surprisingly, music played a sizable role in their upbringing. Weekends in Brooklyn were largely devoted to musical training, learning not only the reggae stylings of the type laid down by Denroy and his band, but absorbing American rock and pop sounds as well. It was during this formative time that the Morgan youth also rubbed elbows with such noteworthy members of the Twelve Tribes of Israel sect as Dennis Brown, Freddie McGregor and Judy Mowatt, what with their father being a follower of that branch of Rastafari and raising his kids to be the same. The Twelve Tribes ideology, with its Christian-leaning syncretism, would in time become the spiritual anchor for the music of Morgan Heritage.

That some of Denroy Morgan's children (he fathered 29 by at least one account) would form a musical collective of their own was nothing if not a fait accompli. It would, however, be some time before they could truly make music on their own terms, in accordance with what their upbringing inspired them to envision.

Despite their youth, Morgan Heritage were a polished enough band to perform at 1992's Sunsplash in Jamaica, and to be approached by a contract-seeking representative of MCA afterward. Being signed to MCA proved disillusioning; the label wanted to take the group's sound as far from a Jamaican roots sensibility as possible while still retaining a minimal reggae identity. A kind of Jamaican Jackson Five was apparently what they had in mind. After one unsatisfying release for MCA, 1994's *Miracles*, Morgan Heritage parted ways with the label. The following year they moved to St. Thomas parish in Jamaica to immerse themselves full-on in their home culture while reassessing. This literal return to their roots ("like a breath of new air," says Una) soon carried over into the music they would create. The Bobby Digital-produced *Protect Us Jah* (VP) was released in 1997, with its imploring title track in particular showing that they were heading in the right direction. The follow-up, *One Calling* (VP), produced by King Jammy,

Continued on page 32





Morgan Heritage in performance on the Warped Tour in August at Randall's Island, New York City.

PHOTOS BY RAHAV SEGEV

Continued from page 31

further solidified things. By this point, the group's growing commitment to the ways of Rastafari made tracks like "Trodding to Zion" seem as much personal manifestos as songs.

While *Protect Us Jah* and *One Calling* were both largely comprised of the bona fide roots reggae to which Morgan Heritage now seemed dedicated (apart from a few gooey love songs), they both have the feel of a group still finding its voice but already with an innate sense of how to write songs possessing both lyrical depth and melodic bounce. With the release of *Don't Haffi Dread* in 1999 (a return to Bobby Digital producing), Morgan Heritage's standing with the worldwide reggae massive was cemented. On the live disc that followed, the group handily nailed nearly everything great about live reggae—the songs were polished but passionate, hypnotic and skank-inducing.

As noteworthy as the group's accomplishments on their own behalf were up to this point, they have also sought to spotlight others and in turn promote unity in the reggae ranks. They have coordinated two volumes thus far of the *Morgan Heritage Family and Friends* series, which include works by longtimers including Toots Hibbert along with such contemporary hitmakers as Luciano and Capleton. Up-and-coming Jamaican artists like Prince Theo are heard on the collections as well.

I spoke with the Morgans in May, following their performance as part of a reggae lineup at L.A.'s Greek Theater that also included Don Carlos, Sanchez and Barrington Levy. Their onstage vibes were even stronger now, with the familial spirit evident in the increased emphasis on the vocals of Una and Gramps. Mr. Mojo also did some chatting at the microphone this time, at one point joined by the energetic Laza of LMS, a younger trio of Morgan siblings whose music is heavily hip-hop infused. The set list leaned toward selections from Morgan Heritage's latest studio set *More Teachings* (VP), an accom-

plished work of modern roots reggae.

More Teachings is very evocative of Ethiopia, not only in the lyrical content of some of the songs, but in the artwork and photo imagery that accompany the printed lyrics and credits. After a brief opening excerpt from a speech by Selassie I, the disc hits hard with "Ready or Not" which urges "Soldiers of Jah/put on your Gideon suit." Elsewhere on the album, tracks such as "Meskal Square" and "Kebra and the Fetha" speak of Ethiopia's historical significance and place in the fulfillment of prophecy. The group has yet to visit Ethiopia, though they have been to Africa's west coast. Still, Peter states that they are "constantly tuned in to the throne room of His Imperial Majesty" and thus absorb the "knowledge, history and spirit of Ethiopia" that finds its way into their music.

Those religious symbols that the group displays on stage pique my curiosity, and Peter's explanation for them is clear and concise. "The cross is the Jerusalem cross, the orthodox cross symbolizing the birth, life, death and resurrection of Christ our savior. That is our identity as Christians. The menorah is the light given to Moses to lead the children of Israel out of bondage. That is our history as Israelites. The Star of David is the star of His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I the first, handed down to him by King David through his lineage, descended from the line of Solomon by way of the Queen of Sheba, which rightfully makes him a son of David and symbolizes the uniting of Christians and Jews." But despite such adherence to the Twelve Tribes viewpoint (in which Selassie is the modern-day Christ), Morgan Heritage assert that they are universal Rastas under one God and Creator. They do not emphasize the differences that might set them apart from such other Rasta sects as the Nyahbinghi or Bobo Ashantis, in keeping with the message of unity expressed in the reggae that they bring to the world.

So how has the world reacted? Very favor-

ably, I learn. The good vibes are obvious on their live disc, which was recorded in Brussels. When I ask if the reception they have received in any country has been especially surprising, a big smile lights Una's face. "Austria!" she exclaims, then goes on to describe her surprise that the birthplace of Hitler does in fact have a sizable and committed reggae following. And as to the way the group sees their place in the world, taking into account their part-American upbringing, Una assures me that Jamaica was always regarded as home. "We are not a product of our environment, but a product of our home," she states definitively, adding, "we were very lucky to have the Jamaican Rastafarian culture in our home." The rest of the group concurs, and it was that sort of cultural self-awareness that allowed their inbred reggae talents to develop and for each member to stake out what their eventual role in Morgan Heritage would be. "We each gravitated to our own liking," says Peter.

I mention the familial, harmonious nature that they convey while performing, then inquire as to whether they are always of one mind regarding group decisions. "Definitely," responds Mr. Mojo with emphasis. "We always strive for the best, so majority vote rules. The voice of the people is the voice of Jah, therefore it must come down to one, always."

As to the group's future, Peter states unequivocally that Morgan Heritage will remain committed to traditional reggae. "LMS gonno represent the hip-hop dancehall thing," he says. "Morgan Heritage is about roots and culture." As long as they are of one mind regarding that, I think as I bid the siblings goodbye, everything will be fine. Fans such as yours truly will be at the ready to listen and follow each time Morgan Heritage imparts another musical lesson from the throne room. Those who have yet to tune in are advised to do so. And don't forget your Gideon suit. ★