

One-rhythm albums - wherein many artists each sing or deejay over the same rhythm track - have long been a staple of Jamaican popular music, most visible in the seemingly unending series issued by several companies and specifically designed to cater to the current dancehall scene. The phenomenon - deriving from the dancehall deejay, who would play a rhythm over and over until the patrons got tired of it or lyric inspiration dried up - first appeared in the mid-1970s, when producer Rupie Edwards put together a 12-track album based on a cut of "My Conversation", one of fellow-producer Bunny Lee's biggest hits in its original rocksteady form for Slim Smith and the Uniques. Edwards' album featured various versions - vocal, deejay and instrumental - on the same rhythm track, each one slightly different to the others, according to the date when they were mixed by the legendary King Tubby or his assistant at the time, Prince Phillip. Over the next thirty years, this early effort was followed by a slowly growing trickle of albums, notable amongst them Winston Riley's sets showcasing the "Stalag" rhythm, before increasing rapidly in the digital age to today's near flood level in the last 10 years.

When Cedric Myton of the Congos proposed this album to us at Blood and Fire, we were immediately and enthusiastically positive; the song "Fisherman" on the "Heart Of The Congos" album is one of the highlights of that genuinely classic set, and like Cedric we agreed that it would lend itself to a whole series of new versions; our previous experience in the one-rhythm album market had been to release 20 versions of the Abyssinians' roots anthem "Satta Massa Gana" [Tree Of Satta /BAFCD 045]; the reception given to that set had encouraged us to seek out other classic tracks from the 1970s. Unlike "Satta Massa Gana" however, "Fisherman" had only previously surfaced in two different versions, the original vocal by the group and its corresponding dub

version. So, Cedric and Roy began contacting artists, drawing from the ever-present pool of veterans and newcomers in Kingston. In the spring of 2005 the sessions began; over the next few months, a steady stream of singers and deejays passed through the Leggo studio on Orange Street, Kingston. When the voicing sessions were completed, the tapes were sent to Blood and Fire and thence to the celebrated Rhythm & Sound studio in Berlin for the final edits and mixdown. One song - "Carthage" by Paul St Hilaire - was voiced at False Tuned studio in Berlin; two additional tracks ["Make Poverty History" by Country Culture and "Fisherman Melody" by Mr Raggamonica] - were overdubbed at Planet City Studio in Blackburn, Lancashire.

Respect is due to the Rhythm & Sound team of Mark Ernestus and Moritz van Oswald for their painstakingly brilliant technical achievement in turning the raw material as we received it from Jamaica into a seamless whole. Hundreds of studio hours were spent fine tuning and creating subtly different edits of the rhythm track to best complement the various performances. The finished results speak for themselves.

The two CDs have been programmed so that the first disc features the veteran artists, whilst the second - with the exception of the Gregory Isaacs cut - showcases the newer talents. The running order is bookended with the original vocal and dub cuts at the beginning and end.

Of the veterans, most of the vocalists elect to sing on themes of universal love and praise for the Almighty, whilst the deejays tend to talk about the actual activity of fishing in Jamaica. Among the latter, Big Youth is outstanding, exhorting his flock in typical fashion that if "You gi' a man a fish, you feed him fi a day, but you teach him how to fish

an' he could feed a nation...”, but all the performances are similarly committed.

Dillinger utilises the familiar ‘row fisherman row’ motif, combining it with a series of roughly connected couplets featuring familiar phrases from the proverbial lexicon, but shuffled into a fresh order. Thus, “Rain a fall, breeze a blow - an’ a lot a fish pot out a doors”, returns to one of the original themes of the Congos song, that of the “hungry belly pickney deh a shore”. U Roy remarks that “if a fish would keep his mouth shut, he would a never get caught by a hook”, before detailing his preference in fish dishes in fine style, while a decidedly revitalised Prince Jazzbo benefits from new backing vocals by the Congos as he inveighs against the corruption of “Sodom and Gomorrow”.

Max Romeo extends the rowing image of the original song into a heartfelt plaint of praise to the Almighty, who will pull the singer through the storm. Tony Tuff continues in similar vein, this time casting the Almighty as Master Builder and reminding the listener not to remember him only when they run out of gold and silver, whilst his former colleague in the African Brothers vocal trio, Sugar Minott, ascribes various roles to the Creator, including that of taxi-driver, pilot, watchman of the city and ultimately, captain of the ship. Horace Andy calls passionately for unity in the city, while Mykal Rose deals in similar fashion with the need to share the love in these perilous times. As the only instrumentalist on the first disc, master saxophonist Dean Fraser delivers a beautiful set of variations on the original vocal melody; Freddie McGregor uses Dean’s overdubbed horns on his selection, a sombre warning lyric, and beautifully sung.

Luciano opens the second disc; the Messenger remains on-message, in spite of being one of the most active - some might even say overexposed

- singers of the new roots tendency he helped bring into being. However, he rarely sounds less than enthusiastic and his repatriation-themed lyric, which could sound throwaway in lesser hands, fits well on the vintage Black Ark one drop.

Lutan Fyah [real name Anthony Martin] has been steadily building a name for himself since 1999, when he first recorded at Buju Banton's Gargamel studio, although he also recorded for other producers at this time. Before that, whilst still a pupil at St Andrew Technical High School, he impressed in a wholly different field, that of football. He was a talented mid-fielder and played for Constant Spring and De La Vega clubs. However, he decided that his future lay in the music business, and to date has contributed to albums by Turbulence and Luciano, as well as singles for Exterminator, Lustre King, Higher Ground, Mac D and others. To date he has recorded two CDs under his own name, "Time And Place" [Lustre King, 2005] and for the German producer Andreas 'Brotherman' Christopherson's Minor 7 Flat 5 label, "Dem No Know Demself" [2004]. His impassioned offering here is typical of the newer generation of Bobo chanters and he looks assured of a decent international career in the future.

Similarly, his friend Al Pancho - born Owen Ricardo Brown in St. Mary, 1974 - has also recorded his debut album for Minor 7 Flat 5, 2003's "Righteous Man". Success was a long time coming for Pancho, who this writer first met at an audition at Bunny Lee's studio in 1991, when he was looking to begin his career and emulate the success of such as Buju Banton and Pan Head.

Country Culture [real name Anthony Alexander Martin] is based in Manchester, England and coincidentally was born in Manchester, Jamaica. He has long been a featured

artist on prominent Manchester-based sound systems, and has toured in Europe with the Blood and Fire crew. His offering here manages to neatly subvert the recent slogan “Make Poverty History” so that ‘poor people’ get the ‘victory’. Country Culture's song was recorded in Blackburn, Lancashire, along with the melodica instrumental “Fisherman Melody” by Mr Raggamonica, the East London-based multi-instrumentalist who has also been featured with Blood and Fire sound system in recent years.

Paul St Hilaire, born in Grand Bay, Dominica, and formerly known as ‘Tikiman’, began his recording career in 1993 in Martinique, releasing the album “Angels of Music” with his band Golden Squad. In 1996, he re-located to Berlin, Germany, and began working with the Living Spirits band. Shortly after, he linked up with Moritz von Oswald and Mark Ernestus and their Rhythm & Sound outfit, releasing a series of singles via their Basic Channel, Main Street Records and Burial Mix imprints. In 2000 he set up his own label, False Tuned, which also operates within the Basic Channel group of labels. Paul's track on this set is surely the first time the ancient African city of Carthage - the “black man's town” - has ever been celebrated in a reggae song.

Gregory Isaacs actually sang backing vocals on the original sessions for the ‘Heart Of The Congos’ album back in 1976-1977; here he contributes an idiosyncratic lyric using the crown and anchor dice game as metaphor, his vocal delivery still recognisable in spite of the passage of time.

Ricky Chaplin, [born Wilfred Chambers], younger brother of the famous Charlie, started out in the mid-1980s deejaying sets like People's Choice. He has continued recording consistently, with occasional success, for a host of labels, including Exterminator / Vena, Dennis Star and Vineyard; he also made an appearance

on Sky High's well-received tribute album to Marcus Garvey in 1989. Latterly, he has recorded an album ["Freedom", 2000] and enjoyed a local Caribbean success in 2004 with the gospel-styled "Guiding Rock" alongside ska veteran Lascelles Perkins' son Bardon.

Of the remaining artists, Lucan I [born Dave Smith] shows a strong Luciano influence on his track, whilst Winston McCanuff's son MacLaw [real name Ishmael McCanuff], advises the listener to focus on Jah and ignore the gossips and whisperers.

Early One is a self-employed fisherman and deejay; he was born Alan Titt in Hunts Bay, West Kingston. He started recording for a Canadian-based company called 'Struggle Face' in the late 1990s, but has mainly worked live, holding the mic on sound systems like Caveman Hi-Fi, H2 Sound System, Stonelove and many more during the last few years. His track is an extraordinarily vivid piece detailing the sheer hardship of making a living as a fisherman in present day Jamaica, with references to the wealth of local fish [if you can find them], the demeanour of certain fisherman when the catch is poor and the discomfort of night-time fishing out on San Pedro bank. And of course, the fish are 'big, big, big'.....

So, the vibes of the original "Fisherman" manage to inspire a brand new series of responses more than a quarter century after Lee Perry first recorded the Congos in the famed Black Ark studio. The sentiments of the original song narrated the situation the Congos - Cedric, Roy and Watty - found themselves in during the mid -1970s. They sang of the life they were living, a poor man's life in a little seaport town, with hungry children waiting for the fisherman's catch. They also paid respect to the artisanal fishermen of Jamaica, who set out every day to earn a living and feed their people.

The sentiments remain as true now as they were in the mid-1970s. At that time, the fishermen of Jamaica supplied a quarter of all fish eaten on the island, although that figure isn't as high today due to overfishing. So Big Youth's lyric quoted above – "You gi' a man a fish, you feed him fi a day, but you teach him how to fish an' he could feed a nation" - takes on further meaning: in a world where natural resources are shrinking daily, the message of support for the fisherman needs to be heard more than ever.  
Steve Barrow / February 2006

Original Congos vocal and rhythm produced by:  
Lee Perry at Black Ark studio, Kingston, Jamaica 1977.  
Tracks 2-14, 17-18, 20-23 Produced by: Roydel Johnson & Cedric Myton  
and voiced at Leggo Studio, Orange Street, Kingston, Jamaica.  
Engineers: Bravo, Perry Hendricks.  
Except :  
Track 6 voiced at Lion's Den Studio, Kingston, Jamaica. Engineers: Bravo, Father Slate  
Track 12 voiced at Harry J Studio, Kingston, Jamaica. Engineer: Steven Stuart  
Track 7 voiced at Big Ship Studio, Kingston, Jamaica. Engineer: Steven McGregor  
Track 15 voiced at False Tuned Studio, Berlin, Germany. Additional Production by: Paul St Hilaire  
Tracks 16, 19 voiced at Planet City Studio, Blackburn, Lancashire, UK  
Additional Production by Steve Barrow & Dom Sotgiu. Engineers: Nathan D'Amour, Joe Fossard  
Edits and Mixdown by Mark Ernestus and Moritz von Oswald at Rhythm & Sound, Berlin, Germany  
Mastered by Moritz von Oswald at Dubplates & Mastering, Berlin, Germany  
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