

Dooley, Jim – “Natty Never Get Weary Yet: The Story of Culture”, *The BEAT*, Volume 22, No. 5, 2003, pp. 30-35.

Reggae music is a genre full of interesting individuals, but Culture’s lead singer Joseph Hill has to be considered one of its most complex and engaging performers. At times Hill speaks in metaphors, and at other times he can be completely straightforward. Hill is not only one of the true veterans of reggae music; he is one of its most bold performers and unique personalities. Much of Hill’s individuality can be heard in the group’s vibrant new album titled *World Peace* (Heartbeat Records). On the recording, Hill revisits themes he has sung about throughout his lengthy career, but at the same time the album breaks new artistic ground. In spite of having been in the recording business for over thirty years, Hill seems as determined as ever to spread his unique message. When he first sang ‘Natty Never Get Weary’ in the late 1970s, who knew the song title would still apply to him in the year 2003?

When asked to consider the sound on the recently issued *World Peace*, Hill has a one-word answer, “demanding!” A long time believer that reggae music has deteriorated in the digital era, Hill adds, “You have to use musicians because, the dead instrument by itself is quite lonely, and I don’t love the lonely sound because music was meant to be man’s company.” As Culture’s lead singer and chief songwriter, Hill insists that reggae music requires both strong lyrical and musical qualities. The musical sophistication of the new album is evident in the playing of such veterans as the Firehouse Crew, Dwight Pinkney, Glen and Robert Brownie, as well as the rousing brass contribution of Dean Fraser, ‘Nambo’ Robinson and David Madden. Perhaps the magic of this album, and many others from Culture’s extensive back-catalog, is that the recording manages to sound simultaneously traditional and modern. While Hill desires to remain faithful to his roots, he is also keenly aware that times, and styles, are forever changing – and to entirely ignore the present is to be forever stuck in the past.

At the same time, Culture’s front man demonstrates a keen awareness of various styles of music. New songs such as ‘Sweet Freedom’ and ‘Walking in Jah Light’ have a gospel quality about them – if not in actual content, at least in terms of overall feel. Like countless reggae singers, as a youth Hill sang in the church choir and it seems likely that that experience continues to show through in both his lyrics and singing style. Hill is also clearly attuned to traditional nyahbinghi songs. On the 1978’s *Baldhead Bridge* (Joe Gibbs) album, listeners can find a stunning version of ‘Song Long’ (a song originally popularized by Count Ossie and the Mystic Revelation of Rastafari), titled ‘So Long Babylon A Fool I (and I)’. In addition, two extended nyahbinghi songs can be heard on the *Trod On* (Heartbeat) CD. For *World Peace*, the group has recorded fresh and captivating versions of ‘Holy Mt. Zion’ and ‘Never Get Weary Yet’. When commenting of the relevance of those songs to the Rastafarian community, Hill simply states, “They are the hard blood, sweat and tears to a generation.”

It seems particularly fitting that one subject that should be of interest to ever active Joseph Hill is idleness. Songs from the past such as ‘Mr. Sluggard’ and ‘Cumbolo’ – a patois word that signifies what Hill refers to as a group of ‘bad friends’- explore this subject in some detail. The former song, from the 1996 *One Stone* (RAS) album, has a chorus that asks: “Tell me where you get you bread Mr. Sluggard?” This general theme is given an additional twist on a song from the new album titled ‘Long Day Bud A Bawl’. Over a catchy Firehouse Crew rhythm Hill sings, “Long day bud a bawl – You mean you na plant no food,” later adding, “When you sight people things, You just want take out your gun.” Elaborating on the subject matter of the song, Hill states, “The fact is that there are some things which are in high demand, which takes a lot of effort to come about ... and at the same time, the people who have the high demand on it do not contribute in helping to put it together ... all they are doing is to contribute to laziness rather than effort.”

It seems likely that the title track of *World Peace* was inspired by what was, at the time of recording, a pending war in Iraq. In particular, Hill sings of the children who are the victims of such conflicts. The singer reminds us of these costs when he chants, “Everyday the children are crying, Mamas and fathers are dying, Nuff man gone to war and na return.” Reflecting on the lyrics from the song, Joseph adds, “See, if people would respect people, then it would be rather easy for peace to come about – it seems as if people are having no respect for each other anymore, and because of that they make it tiresome to come about.”

In terms of Joseph Hill’s long career, perhaps the most significant song on *World Peace* is the one named ‘Selection Train’. In a way, its appearance brings Hill’s career full circle. The song was originally recorded in the early 1970s, by a group called the Soul Defenders while they worked at Coxson Dodd’s legendary Studio One. What many reggae enthusiasts don’t realize is that Hill was the percussion, and part time lead vocalist, of the Soul Defenders. The group featured such significant players as guitarist Jah Privy, bassist Festus Walker, and singer/keyboardist Vin Morgan – who continues to work at Studio One to this day. Four full years before the formation of Culture, Hill recorded his first vocal tracks for Dodd, which included ‘Behold’, ‘Behold the Land’ and ‘Take Me Girl’. Other singers who frequently worked with the group include Freddie McKay and Nana McLean. A wonderful sampling of the appealing work the Soul Defenders did for Coxson can be found on the CD titled *Soul Defenders at Studio One* (Heartbeat). Working as a collective, and based in the Linstead area of St. Catherine, the Soul Defenders backed most of the artists that were working for Dodd in the early 1970s, including Freddie McKay, Burning Spear (a singer that had an obvious influence on Hill), Dennis Brown, Freddie McGregor and Cedric Brooks.

Reflecting on his time with the Soul Defenders, Hill recalls, “It’s like in the late 60s as you know we all were young, young lads moving about. You could well say the days of our discovery, because each child grew from stage to stage. I’m no different from any other child.” When asked about the role Coxson had in the history of reggae, Hill adds, “Give thanks for that man, because he was such an inspirer ... many people surpassed their place, not giving gratitude to what he did to hoist the flag of reggae music ... I’ve

got to say – give thanks to Coxson for the whole house, the whole event, the whole happenings, the whole teachings and the whole activity.” Hill also fondly remembers that various singers who were working at Studio One at the time (including the Heptones, Horace Andy, Ken Boothe), would come out to a peaceful spot in Linstead called “Africa” to have rehearsals, and get away from the hustle and bustle of working in Kingston.

Following his tenure with the Soul Defenders, Hill played and sang with a number of groups around Jamaica. Two of those groups, C35 Incorporated and Stepping Stone also included the talent of future reggae star Glen Washington. “C35 - that’s a bad boys band,” Hill enthusiastically exclaims. “We just ... we were boys who did not have a place to go in those days – boys which loved the music more than anything ... which thought that music has more to give them than mere listening ... myself and Glen Washington. I taught him drums and the rest of it.” Both Hill and Washington went on to be members of Stepping Stone – a band that would later provide the music for Culture’s *Africa Stand Alone* album in 1978. In addition, Washington made a recording of Hill’s Studio One song ‘Behold’, which appeared briefly as ‘The Voice of the Father’ on GG Ranglin’s ‘Volcano’ label.

It is somewhat surprising to discover that the formation of Culture was not Joseph Hill’s idea. In 1976, Hill had been out of the recording portion of the business, and was playing in tourist-oriented bands on Jamaica’s north coast. It was his cousin Albert Walker – who had no previous singing experience at the time - who approached him with the idea of forming a vocal trio. Although the fiercely independent Hill had misgiving about the idea, Walker was successful in convincing him to give the group a try. Kenneth Dayes, who was Albert’s mother’s neighbor, made up the third member of the trio. At the time the group operated under the name African Disciples. It wasn’t until they started to work for producer Joe Gibbs later that year that the studio musicians re-christened the group ‘Culture’. In those days, Joe Gibbs, along with ace engineer Errol Thompson (collectively known as ‘The Mighty Two’), ran a flourishing studio on Retirement Crescent in Kingston – scoring major hits with the likes of Dennis Brown, the Mighty Diamonds and Junior Byles. However, it was the singer ‘Blacka’ Morwell, who was working as a production manager for Gibbs at the time, who convinced the producer to give Culture a try.

These initial sessions would eventually yield Culture’s classic debut album titles *Two Sevens Clash* (Joe Gibbs/Shanachie). The album continues to be considered a classic, and as recently as last spring, Rolling Stone magazine included the album in an article titled ‘The 50 Coolest Records’ – the only single-artist reggae album to make the list. Reflecting on the longevity of the album, Joseph offers much of the credit to the musicians. “The notoriety that it gain was from the input that was made from square root one ... because, to begin with you can clearly hear that the people, all of us, enjoyed what we were doing ... most of the people that were on that album – they were from the first generation of reggae ... a whole lot of talent there.” In particular, Hill has a great deal of praise for bassist Lloyd Parks, drummer Sly Dunbar, percussionist Ruddy Thomas and

the engineering skills of Errol Thompson. However, the relationship between Culture and Joe Gibbs proved to be short lived.

While the group had been recording for Gibbs, producer Sonia Pottinger had helped Culture obtain passports for their first off-island performances. Indicating that Gibbs was unhelpful with their travel plans, Albert Walker remembers, “We heard about Mrs. Pottinger – one of our friends, Sticky, tell us about that lady – so we go to see her. She didn’t know us before then, but she hear our problem, and tried to help us the best she can ... and she get the passport for us, and boom we get the visa – and from that day we never stop from travelling.” By late 1978, Culture was recording a string of singles of Pottinger’s ‘High Note’ label. The fruitful new relationship produced several singles, and four albums, *Harder Than the Rest*, *Culture in Dub*, *Cumbolo* and *International Herb*. The group’s career was also greatly aided by the distribution agreement Pottinger had with Virgin Records.

The group’s profile was further boosted by a performance at the historic ‘One Love Peace Concert’ in 1978. Appearing prior to such veterans as Dennis Brown, Peter Tosh and Bob Marley, and backed by Lloyd Parks and his We The People band, Culture performed moving renditions of their hits ‘Natty Never Get Weary’, ‘Natty Dread Taking Over’ and ‘Stop Fussing and Fighting’. “Well, that vibe is one of the highest I really ever see in Jamaica within the region of reggae music,” recalls Walker. “For I thought it would do a lot of things, but I didn’t really expect it would happen – like (for Bob Marley) to make Seaga and Manley shake hands – Oh my God!”

In the early 1980s, as the dancehall sound of reggae was moving to the fore, the Culture line-up became less certain. Hill recorded the striking *Lion Rock* (Heartbeat) album as a solo artist, but after that remained dormant for a few years. However, in 1986, Culture reemerged with two strong albums, *Culture at Work* (Shanachie) and *Culture in Culture* (Heartbeat), demonstrating they were able to adhere to their original sound, and roll with some dancehall punches. The late 1980s marked the beginning on an extremely active period for the group, as they continued to mount massive tours and release annual albums. However, following the release of *Wings of a Dove* (Shanachie) in 1992, Kenneth Dayes left the group to pursue solo work. Hill and Walker continued on – at first using their backing band’s singer as a third vocalist, then eventually recruiting Telford Nelson (who had already enjoyed a lengthy solo career in Jamaica) as a more permanent replacement in the late 1990s.

Culture continues to be highly in demand on stage. Their long-time agent George Michailow, who operates Fast Lane International, reports that the group continues to play well over one hundred concerts each year. As well as regular engagements in Europe and North America, in recent years the group has also played in Brazil, Sierra Leone, Ghana, South Africa and Kenya. For his part, Hill continues to be an energetic figure on stage – at times demonstrating his 1960s dancehall roots (as a young man the singer deejayed for a handful of sound systems including the Linstead based set Bismarck) as he often stops his band mid-song, ‘rewinds’ to the beginning, and generally offers a great deal of editorial commentary. Considering the participatory nature of the group’s concerts, Hill

says, “In my book, as an entertainer, not including the people in the concert is a form of musical bad manners to the audience ... to me you people are not prisoners, you are listeners.” Clearly Hill sees a Culture concert as more of a two-way conversation than a mere presentation of songs. “For you know we have been working every night ... singing every night 20, 22 songs,” adds Walker. “We do our best – we are designed for show business!”

At the same time, while on tour, Joseph Hill sometimes feels frustrated by the divisive nature of the world – with its checkpoints and borders. “Well, you see, I am a ‘Worldian’ because in myself, and in my spirit, I feel like the world should be an open country without any gate, without anybody asking you lots of questions ... As long as you do not commit yourself against a person’s law, I don’t see why there should be an obstacle to anybody.” At the same time, both Hill and Walker prefer to live in Jamaica when they are not on the road touring. Often referring to Jamaica as “reggae’s kitchen”, Hill adds, “The fact is that I don’t really want to leave my country to be disrespected by other people – taking up their space while my space is left uninhabited in my country.”

There is also ample evidence that Hill is finely tuned into the current sounds of reggae in Jamaica. The *Humble African* (VP Records) album, which emerged in 2000, featured an up-to-the-minute sounding production by the Fat Eyes team. As well as featuring a sweetly humorous duet with Marcia Griffiths, the album also had Hill mixing it up with the likes of Tony Rebel and Morgan Heritage. More recently, Joseph did an intense re-cut ‘Two Sevens Clash’ with popular dancehall deejay Anthony B – a combination song that can be found on the Joe Gibbs tribute album *Old to the New* (VP Records). In addition, for the first time in years, Hill has contributed percussion to another artist’s album – playing on five or six songs for Everton Blender’s new album *King Man* (Heartbeat). Not wanting to draw too much attention to his involvement on the album, Hill simply states, “That was just a ... it was just out of love between me and the brother ...”

It is a major accomplishment for Hill and Culture that their entire back-catalog is still in print, and much sought after. In addition, the group remains absolutely tireless when it comes to performing live concerts. What is even more striking is that the group has never rested on its laurels – has never been content to be a mere oldies act. With their new *World Peace* album, Joseph Hill and Culture sound like they are entering yet another new creative era. Once again, Hill seems to have tapped into a new source of inspiration and energy. For a man who was considering retirement a couple of years ago, Hill seems both motivated and rejuvenated. When considering the issue, Hill using appropriate automotive imagery, jokes, “Seems as if I have to re-rim before I retire – because the tire goes on to the rim.” While Culture is often rightly associated with reggae music’s rich past, there is also strong evidence that the group will continue to be a significant part of its future.

Jim Dooley

Additional interview material was kindly provided by Carter Van Pelt. Thanks as well to Jackie Watson.

ALBUMS (in order of recording/release)

Two Sevens Clash (1977, Joe Gibbs, Shanachie)
Baldhead Bridge (1978, Joe Gibbs, Heartbeat)
More Culture (1981, Joe Gibbs)
Africa Stand Alone (1978, April Records)
Harder Than The Rest (1978, High Note, Virgin, Shanachie)
Culture In Dub (1978, LP – High Note, CD – Heartbeat) - CD doubles length of lp
Cumbolo – (1979, High Note, Virgin, Shanachie)
International Herb (1979, High Note, Virgin, Shanachie)
Tro'd On (1993, Heartbeat) – Pottinger tracks recorded in late 70s
Lion Rock (1982, Cultural Foundation, Sonic Sounds, Heartbeat)
Culture At Work (1986, Blue Mountain, Shanachie)
Culture In Culture (1986, Music Track, Heartbeat)
Live in Negril (2003, Roots & Culture) – recorded in late 1980s
Nuff Crisis (1988, Blue Mountain, Shanachie)
Good Things (1989, RAS)
Three Sides To My Story (1991, Shanachie)
Wings Of A Dove (1992, Shanachie)
One Stone (1996, RAS)
Stoned – One Stone Dub (1997, RAS) – One Stone dubs
Trust Me (1997, RAS)
Cultural Livity – Live Culture (1998, RAS)
Payday (2000, RAS)
Humble African (2000, VP Records)
Scientist Dubs Culture Into A Parallel Universe (2000, RAS) – Payday dubs
Live in Africa (2002, RAS) – from concert in South Africa - also available on DVD
World Peace (2003, Heartbeat)

COMPILATION/GREATEST HITS ALBUMS

Culture At Their Best – Stronger Than Ever (1990, Rocky One) – lo fi Gibbs productions
Vital Selection (1981, Virgin Frontline) - lp of Pottinger productions
Too Long In Slavery (1990, Virgin Frontline) - CD of Pottinger Productions
Strictly Culture – The Best Of Culture 77-79 (1994, Music Club) - Gibbs & Pottinger
17 Chapters Of Culture (1992, Sonic Sounds) - Lion Rock & Good Things combination
RAS Portraits (1997, RAS) - tracks from Good Things, One Stone and Stoned
Production Something (1998, Heartbeat) - exclusive and rare Pottinger singles and mixes