

Diversity

“We have a stake in one another ... what binds us together is greater than what drives us apart, and ... if enough people believe in the truth of that proposition and act on it, then we might not solve every problem, but we can get something meaningful done for the people with whom we share this Earth.” BARACK OBAMA

2010. The year of the tiger. Coincidentally, this is also the Chinese sign of the zodiac under which Gentleman was born. Tigers are known to be sensitive, courageous and born leaders – in fact, these are the very qualities that define Germany’s most popular reggae musician. At barely 35, Gentleman has made himself a name as a tireless ambassador of reggae. Indeed, with masterly albums like “Journey To Jah” and “Confidence”, he has given this genre a new, distinctive profile and the kind of contemporary relevance which reggae hasn’t had hereabouts since the days of Bob Marley. Moreover, Gentleman has long since become an internationally renowned star. He is a recognised constant in several European countries as well as South America, Africa and even the US. Wherever he goes, people appreciate the stage artist’s charisma as much as his fabulous reggae hymns, dedicated to Consciousness, Righteousness and Tolerance.

“Diversity” is the title of his fifth studio album. He understands it primarily as a musical challenge for himself but also for his fans and what they are expecting. There are not many German musicians who are so deeply rooted in roots reggae, but that doesn’t mean that Gentleman can’t explode to a dancehall-riddim as if there was no tomorrow. His album offers a multifaceted range of styles, textures and collaborations. “This time round, I was completely self-confident when it came to working with others and yet remaining the common thread myself,” says Gentleman, who took on the new album with an equal measure of creative voracity and the pluck to deal with self-reflective criticism. “That fire you feel as a newcomer does not keep for very long. Then it is up to you to stoke up the embers and this has much more force. I feel this craving, I want to go for it again.”

Gentleman has braced himself, has re-sorted and re-adjusted himself. The vocalist now has a new record deal which allows him to turn this new album into a veritable *opus magnum*. Even the standard CD features an amazing 19 songs which explore all the forms and hues that reggae music has to offer. The 28-track deluxe edition offers an extra helping of tracks and then Gentleman even has a few more delicacies to download. Every collector will be in seventh heaven with quadruple vinyl and an opulent box set. Gentleman’s musical surrounding has also changed somewhat. His band is now called Evolution. Even though the cast is more or less identical with his former Far East Band, a few switchpoints have been re-positioned, so that now the band can start out with just that passion which Gentleman demands in order to guarantee an impressive live show. Gentleman is set to burn and so his band must also reach maximum temperatures at all times.

“Diversity” is the line of approach – it allows for any kind of stylistic option, even heeding the same value for analog as for digital recordings. What is immediately recognisable is the multitude of beautiful melodies; a sure indicator for a creative high. The first single release, “It No Pretty“, is a mid-tempo jewel clothed in warm minor keys including piano, strings and choir. And yet, at the same time, it is a piece of outspoken social criticism – a topic that defines the entire album. There are several tracks on the album that equally appeal to the listener as potential singles – “Lonely Days“, for example, or the gently rocking opener “The Reason“ (produced by the Austrian IrieVibration posse). No less marvellous are “Time Like Now“, “Changes“ and “Fast Forward“, all superbly produced by Don Corleone in his Kingston studio. Incidentally, a third of all the tracks were produced here and the Firehouse Crew was at the ready to produce that tailor-made full-bodied band sound whenever needed. The league of proven producers furthermore include Benny Blanco and Pow Pow from Cologne, Silly Walks from Hamburg, Red Roze, Shane Brown and Xterminator from Jamaica as well as Massive B from New York.

Some songs really go skindeep. The yearning acoustic ballad “I Got To Go“ for example, an open love letter to his family, or “Thinking About You“, a captivating duet with soul singer Cassandra Steen, who started out with German soul band Glashaus and has since become a fully fledged solo star.

This virtually flawless R&B song speaks volumes about the emotional depth with which Gentleman fathoms the human frame of mind. Another female star to flank him is Tanya Stephens, one of the first ladies of the Jamaican reggae scene and, according to Gentleman, “an amazingly creative lyricist”. Years ago, he toured Germany with Tanya and a soundsystem. Now they have finally found the opportunity to record together. The result, “Another Melody”, shines and sparkles like a diamond in this already beautifully set and arranged tiara of reggae songs. The most heartfelt musical declaration of love, “Everlasting Love”, is dedicated to his wife Tamika, and holds a special place as the album’s closure.

It is fascinating to see how Gentleman manages to once again unite entire reggae generations on his album. On the one hand, there is freshman Christopher Martin, who cut a dash as the winner of the TV premiere of “Jamaica’s Rising Star”. The 22-year-old shooting star, whose distinctive falsetto reminds one of the timbre of Michael Jackson and who has now been taken under the wings of Shaggy, recorded “To The Top” with Gentleman. This must be the most modern-sounding track on the album; it advances with an unusually catchy Euro dancebeat and as such makes a stark contrast to “Good Old Days”, the most classical roots track on “Diversity”. For this song, which reminds one of a Trojan Records evergreen, Gentleman was able to recruit no lesser than Sugar Minott, the 53-year-old Studio-1 veteran and dancehall pioneer, who lends the album a wise, shimmering hue of patina.

Apropos dancehall: in tracks like “The Finish Line” and “The Ceiling”, produced by Xterminator, Gentleman actually uses one or the other auto-tune or HipHop beats, presenting a style that will specifically appeal to a young audience. Another track that has punch is “No Time To Play”, Gentleman’s debut with New York’s Massive B soundsystem. “Tempolution” offers us the chance to admire once more the precisely placed beats and undaunted experimentalism of drum luminary Sly Dunbar. This revamped version of the dancehall stunner “Tempo” was produced by Red Roze himself – after all, the original track was the centrepiece of his career, and now it radiates in new brightness.

In Jamaica, a lot of things come about perchance, spontaneously, and so it comes as no surprise that the recording of “Shut Eye Country” resulted out of a spontaneous session and finally brought together the three soul brothers Jack Radics, Gentleman and Luciano – a truly creative summit. A collaboration that has been long overdue and only came about now after a chance meeting on Jamaica is the song “Along The Way”, recorded with Patrice, another well-known aficionado of roots and vibes from Cologne. Million Stylez from Sweden, on the other hand, who brings in an armful of positive vibes for the well-tempered “Help”, produced in Mediterranean style by Pow Pow, came to call on Gentleman in Cologne. This is yet another proof – just like the song “Intensions”, which features Rebellion The Recaller from Gambia – to show that the way in which Gentleman has been travelling the world for years now, with openness and curiosity, bears fruit ever and again.

In the course of the years, Gentleman has established a truly unique network combining both Europe and his second home, Jamaica. Whereas a few years ago, physical presence was of utmost importance, these days the creative dialogue between Cologne and Kingston is characterised by a fruitful continuity. The constant exchange of ideas with the two musicians and longstanding friends Daddy Rings and Jack Radics bears true moments of glory when the verbal repartee produces lyrics for Gentleman that count amongst the best. A constant flow. This could also describe the collaboration with producer Don Corleone, who kept track via every possible web application. And yet, Gentleman remains rather critical about the Web-2.0 euphoria and various other phenomena of our global age.

Accordingly, his lyrics reflect the disastrous state of affairs that determine life in the 21st century: an excess of religious conflicts that make our world seem increasingly godforsaken; an environment that is dramatically destroyed by mankind and with no end in sight; millions of people who are starving or seeking refuge in flight; people retreating into artificial worlds. Gentleman markedly opposes these phenomena with his call for more tolerance, solidarity and mutual respect. He is an idealist who never tires, who believes in the good of mankind, whose creative primum mobile is spirituality and love. Often, or so he hopes, a few song lines should suffice to make people listen attentively, to galvanise them and cause things to change. Gentleman sees the main conflict area in a lack of tolerance towards other cultures and designs of life. He, on the other hand, embodies kindness and gentleness – these are both, his most powerful weapons and his sore spots.

“Diversity“ is a fluorescent game of deception with the many possibilities which reaggae has to offer, and in its variegation of the present state it has little to do with the reigning clichés of sunshine reggae. Gentleman hasn’t really changed anything in the basic approach of his work, which is unique in the way it embraces various continents. Now as before, the basis to all his songs is formed by the riddims, some of which Gentleman digitally pre-produces in his own studio, while selecting the others in listening sessions in Jamaican studios, which can last for hours. These he then adapts with his infallible instinct for marvellous and sophisticated melodies. In spite of all the exuberant joy which the songs of “Diversity“ radiate, the album still is marked by a certain sense of sobriety. The cover of the album, shot by star photographer Olaf Heine, visualises this to perfection. It shows an iconlike portrait of Gentleman in double exposure, permeated by trees in autumn shades, which symbolise how widely ramified and deeply rooted his art is, an art that is itself in a constant process of change. Gentleman banks on change, progress and pluralism. Diversity rules!

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