

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW FEATURE

Roy Ayers

MELODIOUS LOCKDOWN

His samples synonymous with the birth of Hip Hop and crowned most iconic inspirer of UK's acid jazz movement, Roy Ayers dance floor delicious rhythms and ingenious improvisation have blessed dozens of our favorite hip hop tracks (ATCQ, Erykah Badu, Mary J Blige, Notorious BIG). Never lost on the vinyl shelf to faded glory status, after speaking to Roy Ayers it wasn't hard to figure out why he's still on top.

"I'm very excited. I'm 63 and I've been performing for 40 years, this is a very high, exciting moment for me like I've never had in my life! I thank god for my health and everything is just going good. I feel so happy. You know something? I'm now 40 years in show business, I just made my 63rd birthday and I'm continually working all the time. I really believe I've been able to be successful because I've been able to be consistent. It doesn't mean you have to make all the money in the world, you just have to be consistent, that makes up success".

With a career that started over 40 years ago, the emergence of the 70's jazz funk-fusion scene brought with it Roy's most groundbreaking work. 1973, the year of the classic funk soundtrack 'Coffy' (Polydor) for super-bad blaxploitation flick starring Pam Grier and Brooker Bradshaw. Throughout the decade Roy continued to drop his most memorable work including Virgo Red, Everybody Loves the Sunshine, You Send Me, Mystic Voyage and Fever. These are the rich sounds that hip hop producers are still sampling and are yet to recreate.

"I was talking to Erykah Badu and she said 'Roy, you know, you're the neo soul man!' I said 'what the heck is that'? She said 'neo-soul is a concept of music that people like myself, Jill Scott, Alicia Keys and The Roots are doing, so we have a lot of respect for you and it's true'. I felt very good that she told me that. I'm just thankful that I am so versatile that I can play any genre of music. I play jazz, blues, pop, soul, reggae, classical, you name it, I can play it, I do it well and I've been very innovative".

It's this same innovation that has seen masters 'Running Away' and 'Love will bring us back together' really stand the test of time. "Every time I perform a show I have to do those two songs, and 'everybody loves the sunshine' and quite often, 'you send me'. The big hits. I have to try and incorporate them into my shows. Those big songs have given me my longevity".

"In junior high school I played the electric guitar for six years. It's called the steel guitar. It's the Hawaiian-style, used in Hawaii music as well as country and western sometimes. I would have played vibes (vibraphone) sooner had my mother and father been able to purchase me a set. But they did buy me a set of vibes in my senior year in high school. I learn't very fast because I made sure that I played with a lot of musicians that were in California. I started out with my own group, but from there went straight onto the professionals. Curtis Amy Sextet, Gerald Wilson Big Band and Venus Dubois Jnr. If this had not happened to me I don't think my musicianship would have grown and been what it is today. I was a very fast learner. I worked with all of the hot west coast musicians. I continued to grow and eventually I worked with Herbie Mann, Chico Hamilton and then I formed my own group Roy Ayers Ubiquity in 1970".

'Ubiquity' now hand in hand with all that is exquisite about Roy Ayers music. "Ubiquity means 'a state of being everywhere at the same time', and of course I always tell the people I can in fact be everywhere if everyone has one of my albums or CD's! I got the name from one of my managers at the time, Merna Williams. She said, 'why don't you call your group Roy Ayers Ubiquity'? I said, 'what does it mean?' and she told me 'omnipresence'. The rest is history.

Creating history while receiving critical acclaim continued throughout the 1970's and following decades. Leaving a rare legacy in which future musicians could only aspire, notably through teaming up with the legendary Fela Kuti. Visiting Nigeria in 1979, Roy Ayers-Fela Kuti tour was an outstanding success and spawned the album 'Africa – the centre of the world' (Polydor). Roy's respect for Fela was as evident as the joy he shared when paying homage to the African superstar. "Oh man, I'm so glad you mentioned Fela! You know he passed away two years ago, but his music will live forever. I went to Nigeria four times. The first time I went there, my attorney told me 'Roy, there's a musician named Fela Kuti, you should come and meet him because maybe you could do something with him'? So I flew to Nigeria in 79 and met Fela and we hit it off right away and decided to do a Nigerian Tour".

"We did 7 weeks in Nigeria, it was a wonderful tour. He was an extremely talented musician, singer, dancer and performer. He was extremely important in giving me more knowledge about my African heritage. When I first met him he said, 'you know, you are Yuroba'? I found out about Yuroba and all the different dialects and tribes. I found a whole different way. I thought a lot about my African heritage. A lot of African-Americans don't know anything about Africa. African-American musicians seldom have the opportunity to go to a place like Nigeria or any part of Africa. I feel gifted that I've been over to Nigeria, South Africa, Ghana and The Congo. What I really felt about Africa is that I was coming home. I can remember when I was in Nigeria going down the main streets down town and I saw Africans gathering in the street in the neighborhood stores and bars talking and reading

newspapers, and I said, 'That's where we got that from!'. In America, you go into black areas and they're standing in the streets around the stores talking, especially on the weekends, and that's what they do in Nigeria. Also sometimes when you look at peoples faces, you can see a resemblance. I saw a lot of resemblance of my father over there".

Roy's African influence is written all his 1997 'Nuroyican Soul' collaboration with Louie Vega. His timeless, innovative contribution to the album which also credited fellow legends George Benson and Jocelyn Brown, has made the album not just incredible listening, but a collectors item. "Working with Louie Vega was wonderful. Louie is a club DJ by roots and he has turned out to be a great engineer and producer of good music because he knows the sound. His ears are probably worth millions! When you work with him he respects your musicianship so much. He says 'Roy, you go ahead and do it, you know what to do, put your touches on there'. He is fantastic".

With an unimaginable queue for colabo-requests , one could wonder if any artist can match the enthusiasm evident in the 1979 Fela history maker. "Probably the most inspirational thing happened to me in 1987. I was being booked by an agency that also booked for Lionel Hampton, my idol. I asked them if they could bring him to my show at the Village Gate Theatre. Lionel came and I had the whole show planned for him. I told the audience, 'I need a vibe player who can come up here and play', and I said 'there's Lionel Hampton, come on up here!'. He came up and I was playing his song 'flying home'. He and I were playing the vibes together, it was a brilliant evening of fun, laughter and good music. I will never forget it. The only thing I regret is I didn't get it recorded

The misfortune of not recording his one-off debut with his idol aside, it is to our delight that some of Roy's rarest material lay archived on tape, only to re-surface for release on BBE. "I had a production contract with Polygram records and whenever I did an album, I always did more music that I needed. I would give the record company the album, say 12 songs, but maybe I did 20 altogether, so I put the other 8 away, and they were really good! I just put them aside and forgot about them, I didn't care about them. I have 200 24-track tapes because I was doing so many albums, I was a studio fanatic. I told Louie Vega, 'I have some tapes that I did from 1976 to 81, some old stuff from my hot period', and he said 'well, I'm interested in it'. But he never called me back about it, so time passed by. Then I talked to Giles Petersen and he was interested, but nothing happened. Then I talked to Peter Adarkwah, who runs BBE out of London. I didn't know he was such a big fan! He flew over to New York and we got out about 30 tapes that I had from the days I recorded with Polygram. We had to bake them so it would stay on, because of the oldness of the tape. Then we transferred everything to Pro Tools. When Peter heard them he flipped out! He started doing a dance like Jamiroquai! He kept giving me these looks saying 'Roy, I've gotta have it'.

The Roy Ayers revolution continues to be televised via BBE's worldwide release of his archived material. Loyal fans and musicians marveling all over again at the abundance of material that set an untouchable standard in jazz funk. "When I was with Polygram, they would never release my albums at the same time all over the world. They'd release them in New York, Detroit and Washington. They'd wait about a month, then release them on the west coast, then in England. But now they release my records everywhere at the sametime. I'm getting off on this"