

Reggae Runnings

The independents continue to lead the field when it comes to releasing reggae in this country.

Wellington's enterprising Jayrem label not only fosters local talent such as Dread Beat and Blood, Sticks and Shanty, and Aotearoa, but has now acquired release rights for the premier international labels Greensleeves and Shanachie. Many of the releases are cassette-only, but I've had few complaints about the quality of the tapes so far. Besides, as most retailers will tell you, reggae sells far better on cassette than on vinyl. The UK-based Greensleeves is also venturing into CD, so who knows what we'll see in months to come?

Currently offered on cassette is my favourite of last year, Mutabaruka's *The Mystery Unfolds*, along with Alpha Blondy's *Jerusalem* and *Rally Round* by Ras Michael and the Sons of Negus. Mutabaruka is now the angriest poet, with LKJ in semi-retirement. On *Mystery*, the musical backing is harsher and more urgent than his earlier works, and his lyrics are as sulphurous as ever.

Alpha Blondy is from the Ivory Coast, West Africa, but is backed on *Jerusalem* by the Wailers, which is displayed prominently on the cover and should ensure healthy sales here. The old band, which really needs a strong singer for impact, sounds fine on what sadly must be among the last sessions by the late Carly Barrett. The album, sung in three African languages as well as French and English, retains its African feel while being Caribbean in approach. Blondy's ululating vocals show how Africa influenced Bob Marley in his later years, and *Jerusalem* is a must, especially for Wailers addicts.

Michael Henry, aka Ras Michael, is a country dread who retains a strong link with Africa through traditional drum riddims that typify his sound. The earthy, testifying vocals sound as ancient as the Bible itself as the drumbeats converge, even converse, with one another. *Rally Round* is a newly-mastered collection of some of Ras Michael's vintage recordings. While occasionally providing some recognisable contemporary rhythms, its appeal is probably more esoteric. Serious reggae/Rastafari students, take note.

On disc and tape, Jayrem also have Judy Mowatt's essential debut LP *Black Woman*. Her newest, *Love is Overdue*, is promised soon, as are Max Romeo's *Holding Out My Love to You* and the Mighty Diamond's *Reggae Street*. All are on Shanachie, while on Greensleeves will come the first Black Uhuru album and the NME compilation *Burning Bush*, with Gregory Isaac's *Private Beach Party* a strong rumour.

The big labels seem to have little interest in reggae these days. Festival import small amounts of top earners and Virgin have done well with Maxi Priest and UB40, though the

major new talent of Shinehead still awaits release. UB40's *Live in Moscow* LP (DEP International) complements the videotape for which it forms the soundtrack. The reggae-starved Muscovites plainly enjoyed it, but the music has a dreary professional atmosphere. UB40 should have treated this gig as a triumph. Instead they warble 'I Got You Babe' without Chrissie, and thus blow what little attraction that dire single had in the first place.

Peter Tosh seems happy to trade on his reputation as an original Wailer and a macho fighter for equal rights and justice. *No Nuclear War* (EMI) shows a dearth of new ideas and a monumental ego problem. The title track just rumbles on and on, 'Nah Goa Jail' repeats tired sentiments about legalising ganja, and 'Fight Apartheid' is a retread of an old song. Tosh also credits himself with most of the arrangement and production, and therefore must take the blame for the band sounding like it's sinking slowly into a swamp.

Duncan Campbell

LIVE

Music Centre Work Trust
Gluepot, July 30

Well sorry, but the proposed late licence didn't eventuate so the bands were on early and I missed the Doubting Thomases.

Fish for Life weren't half as bad as rumour had it, displaying a tight guitar sound with vigorous vocals from singer/guitarist Matt, accompanied by an adroit lead guitarist and controlled bass and drums unit.

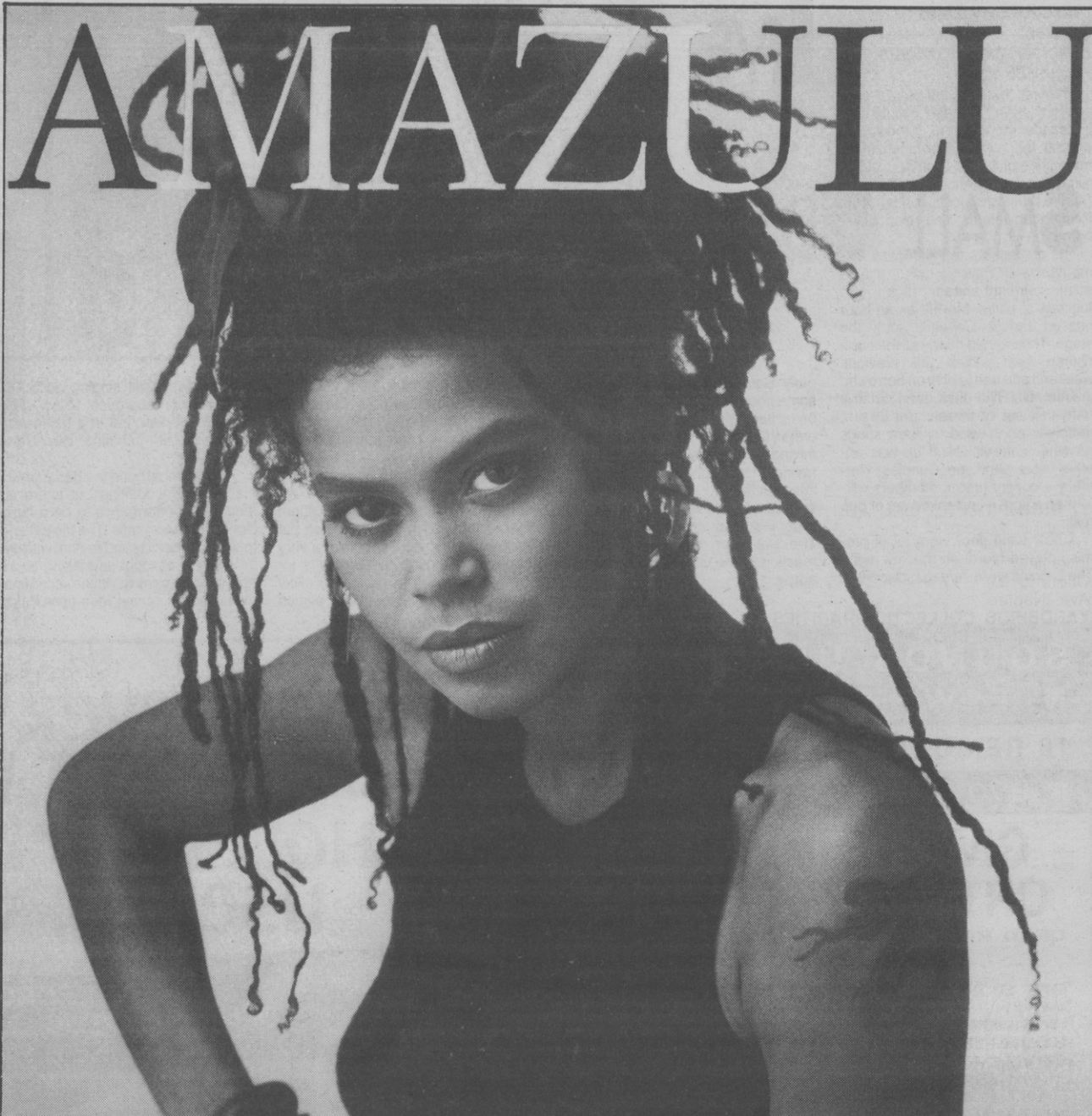
They were nearly very good but fell down in the lack of diversity of their songs which tended to be similar in structure and tempo. And less wailing in the Ian McCulloch vein would have moved the songs along at a better pace.

The more dramatic Jack Pudding initially didn't sound too promising and the repetitious lyrics and anguished singing did nothing to endear them to the crowd. Limp heckling from the numerous leather-jacketed cropped heads in the audience produced some sharp witty retorts from Graeme Pudding.

Then they seemed to get their act together and thrashed out some excellent tunes such as the funkish 'Blind as Me,' the catchy 'Dead Meat' and 'Scared of the Sun.' There were some harmonious backup vocals from the drummer and Graeme dabbled round on a Roland, but it was a more gimmick than a worthwhile addition to the overall sound. He saved most of his energy for his singing and performance, which was better than that of your average bashful frontman.

Let's hope the Music Centre Work Trust will hold more events for young aspiring Auckland bands needing exposure.

Susan Camden



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