A human sound of the world

The Hour of Two Lights, an album by Terry Hall and Mushtaq

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The Hour of Two Lights, *an album by Terry Hall and Mushtaq (Honest Jons Records)*

Terry Hall's spectral voice has long been one of the most intriguing and attractive sounds in British popular music. His projects have sought to create something musically articulate. At their best they have also succeeded in expressing something intelligently humane.

Hall's track record suggests that every new album (which are not that frequent) deserves a listen. His latest, *The Hour of Two Lights*, a collaboration with Mushtaq (formerly of the group Fun-Da-Mental), takes a significant cultural and musical stand at one of the lowest points for the music industry.

Hall is best known for having been one of the voices of The Specials, the articulate pioneers of the British Two-Tone movement of the late 1970s-early 1980s. Emerging from Coventry, the car-building heart of the industrial Midlands, the band took Jamaican ska of the 1960s as their musical starting point, mixing classic ska covers with their own songs. Like many industrial cities, Coventry was a city of migrant workers, which found its reflection in the band's make-up—and, indeed, in the Irish-German-Jewish Hall.

Their lyrics, mostly written by the band's keyboard player Jerry Dammers, tackled social concerns head-on, from teenage pregnancies to macho drinking culture. In the face of the rise of the fascist National Front, a more general stance was being taken by the multiracial band. As Hall put it in a recent interview, "There was a huge political statement being made with The Specials. You just had to look at a photo [of the band] and you got it."

Hall looks back at Two-Tone as being black and white, culturally, because of the background the bands shared. He contrasts this with today: "Now, 25 years on, there are so many more cultures here. It's a better place."

Hall quit The Specials just after their finest moment, the number one single "Ghost Town" (1981). This haunting song was a brilliant musical evocation of the social devastation of the Thatcher years. Even now it catches the emptiness left by the depredations of capitalism on society, while still managing to hanker after some kind of humanity.

Hall left because he felt that The Specials had achieved, with that record, what they set out to achieve. In the interview just quoted he said, "With every record, it's a little agenda. If I feel like I've achieved it then I stop it."

This is laudable. It is a rare trait in an artist to know both what his or her goal is, and also when to move on.

For Hall the next project was the Fun Boy Three, in the company of the Specials' other vocalists Lynval Golding and Neville Staples. Where Dammers continued to come at subjects head-on lyrically (Free Nelson Mandela and Racist Friend with the Special AKA), Hall's work was becoming more elliptical, more elusive, whilst remaining lyrically honest and exploring such complex themes as the British occupation of Northern Ireland, the inanities of the so-called war on drugs and his own bitter experience of sexual abuse. The band were responsible for their own memorable and darkly humorous attack on the Thatcher government, "The Lunatics Have Taken Over The Asylum."

Subsequent projects (Colourfield; Terry, Blair and Anoushka; Vegas; not to mention his solo albums) sought to continue the artistic development in new directions. He has always been looking to expand his cultural horizons (there was an interesting Urdu version of the Fun Boy Three's biggest hit "Our Lips Are Sealed").

There have been considerable gaps between projects, although other artists (Tricky, the Lightning Seeds and Damon Albarn's Gorillaz) have often used his distinctive voice. Hall is dismissive of the idea that slowness is a problem. "It's just about being honest, and not bothering about brand-names and making the same album over and over.... Sometimes it seems like there's a huge gap between records. To me it seems like 10 minutes. Because I'm spending that time listening to music, doing my homework. It's like an architect drawing up plans for a building. It can take years—it isn't a race. I've never bought into being part of that pop-music, disposable thing."

Such an approach is fundamentally at odds with a music industry determined to produce lowest-denominator records to make a quick buck before the audience loses patience with the act and the company is forced to repeat the trick with another artist. Record companies increasingly gear their protégés to short-term success because they have no conception of any long-term artistic effort.

In an interview with Nick Hasted of the Independent, Hall argued that music may be less important to audiences now, but that did not prevent artists trying to get their message across. "Finding your voice and wanting to communicate thoughts and ideas—that's a reason to make a record. If you're not trying to say anything, I won't listen. The avenues are still there. You can communicate any message you've got. A lot of people at the moment are just dealing with fame."

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For *The Hour of Two Lights* this meant the customary period of preparation in order to realise the music fully. Hall spent the best part of a year planning the record with Mushtaq before they started to look for their astonishing cast of musicians. Most had not recorded before, and they came from a wide range of backgrounds. A blind Algerian rapper, a 12-year old Lebanese singer, a Syrian flautist, Hebrew vocalists, Polish gypsies, a Jewish clarinettist and Blur's Damon Albarn join Hall and Mushtaq in their polyglottal venture. (Hall's lyrics are in English, the other singers bringing their own languages to the mix).

What they produce is a fascinating melange of styles and effects. East European rhythms blend in with hip-hop, Middle Eastern percussion, and Arabic vocals. It could have been a mess, but Hall and Mushtaq have worked hard to express a musical whole that makes sense of the way in which the component parts fit together.

Like Hall, Mushtaq is another artist who has sought to express his culturally mixed background. He was born in London, the son of a Bangladeshi father and an Iranian mother. As a child he spent time in both countries. (This is a period in his life that informs the album, particularly the title track, which is inspired by Iranian folklore about the time between night and day, when children should not be playing outside lest they be seized by spirits.) Like Hall he has also eschewed the more obvious, down-the-line agitation of a former group (Fun-Da-Mental) in favour of a more elliptical lyrical approach.

He offered a suggestion of how this informed the preparation process: "We played a lot of records, you know, and whether it be Russian or Gypsy music, Turkish or Sufi, it was all interwoven. It all had pain in it. And those forms of music led to the people, and then you get another dimension of the suffering, because the people would turn up at the studio, people who were refugees. Teenagers as well.... They've got the walk, the talk, but they're Gypsies, they don't know if they're going to be deported tomorrow."

The album is more than just an interesting melange of musicians and styles. As Mushtaq indicated, it is also about understanding the stories of the people involved. Hall has talked about the culture shock of working with refugees, who have a completely different attitude to bank holidays, for example, than the opportunity for a long weekend. "Their solicitor might go away at the weekend and that's when they swoop and get deported." An understanding of such marginalised existences animates the album's edgy music.

For two artists whose interest is in the pain expressed in the music they were hearing (Hall has for many years been a sufferer of depression), it is possible that the end result could simply have been an admission of defeat, an interesting but sterile exercise. That it is not is in part due to their concern to make something that blends all of the voices into a unified whole. Hall compares it to the political statement of seeing The Specials, saying: "That's exactly what we feel about this. If you have Arabic and Hebrew on the same record you've made a political statement."

Where this works best, as on the juddering "Ten Eleven" or the sinuous "The Silent Wail," the pain that is contained within the music finds its outlet in lyrics that call on an understated resistance and sense of dignity.

"Ten Eleven," which is not explicitly about the Twin Towers in the way the whole album is never explicitly about any of its subjects, has Hall's melancholy voice telling us that "One day the walls will talk And we'll get to hear it all." "The Silent Wail" which describes the way in which voices are stilled ("Ruthless and nameless Brutal and shameless How can your tactics fail?"), also has as its refrain the simple statement that "There's got to be a better way."

The skittering "A Tale of Woe" articulates life under such circumstances: "Living in a shadow Keep away the fear Walking on a tiptoe Helps you disappear Whatever the calling We just come and go Another day is dawning In the tale of woe. It's all we know." What redeems the song from being simply a litany of disaster is the fact that the musicians are allowed to express this existence with enough dignity for it to be truly humane. It has something of Damon Albarn's group Gorillaz about the melody, but it drives forward in a way which does not allow of self-pity.

Some credit is due to Albarn. The Blur frontman has released the album on his Honest Jons label. He has recently been seeking to extend his own musical boundaries, visiting Mali and recording there, as well as working on the latest Blur album with Moroccan musicians. One of only a handful of recording artists who publicly opposed the US-led war against Iraq, Albarn seems to be looking for a way forward musically. Looking at social and political questions seems to have spurred him on artistically, and his distinctive voice is a welcome addition to the album.

There is a nervous, melancholy thread running through the album, tugging at even the most upbeat melody or rhythm. This reflects much of the experience of migrants and refugees in the context of persecution by the British government, and the US-led "war against terror" that has sought to scapegoat populations and communities, many of whom are represented here. Some of the songs are without the shape that makes for a coherent whole (the opener "Grow," for example), but what constantly pulls the album back together, and makes it eminently listenable, is the belief of the participants that expressing music in a unified way is in itself a political position.

As a statement of artistic freedom the album has merits. However nervy and melancholy the music (which is its great strength) there is always a quiet determination that it must be expressed collectively. "Hunger, hunter, blunder, thunder It's just a world of wonder Stop yourself from going under ... We've got to stand together" ("Stand Together"). When Hall and Mushtaq conclude the album with the words "The name is ... love," they give as their reason, "In the name of freedom We speak and spell From a place of reason To the gates of hell" ("Epilogue").

In its dignified, understated way, this album is, under the present political and cultural climate, a courageous gesture. That it synthesises so effectively such diverse musics into such a successful mix is testament also to its artistic quality.

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