Reggae innovator Lee “Scratch” Perry dead at 85

James Vega
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On August 29, reggae innovator Lee “Scratch” Perry died at the Noel Holmes Hospital in the coastal town of Lucea, Jamaica, aged 85.

Perry’s recording and performing career lasted more than six decades. He was best known for his behind-the-scenes work as a pioneering record producer and audio engineer and for being one of the musical creators of the “dub” reggae sound. He worked with, influenced and produced for a wide variety of artists, including the Congos, Bob Marley and the Wailers, Junior Murvin, The Clash, Paul McCartney and even the Beastie Boys.

Indicating Perry’s continuing impact, Kanye West used resung samples from Perry to produce “Lucifer” for Jay Z’s *The Black Album* (2003). In 2011, dubstep electronic artist Mala from Digital Mystikz remixed Perry’s “Like the Way You Should.” The reggae performer/producer voiced himself as the DJ of the Blue Ark radio station in *Grand Theft Auto V* (2013).

Rainford Hugh Perry was born in 1936 in the rural Jamaican town of Kendal in Hanover Parish. He got his nickname from his 1965 rhythm and blues-influenced song “Chicken Scratch.” Although he dropped out of school in his youth, he found his start in music when he came to Kingston, Jamaica’s capital, as a teenager. There he interned and was a DJ for the famous Clement “Coxsone” Dodd sound system in the 1950s. When Dodd opened his renowned Studio One in Kingston in the early 1960s, Perry produced several songs for the label, learning to innovatively record with minimal equipment.

Lee’s first major hit came in 1968 with the song “People Funny Boy.” The song was essentially a “diss” track against his former employer, producer Joe Gibbs of Amalgamated Records, whom he joined after leaving Dodd. It was a major hit, notably sampling a crying baby and using a choppy upbeat rhythm that was an early musical template for reggae music. The creative sampling was also an early use of a technique that would be used later in electronic music and hip hop.

After leaving Gibbs in 1968, Perry started a band called the Upsetters, named as a nod to his clashes with his previous bosses in the music industry. The music became popular in the UK for early reggae and ska instrumentals like “Return of Django.”

Perry was a key figure within a group of artists who would create a sound unique to Jamaica called reggae and its sub-genre “dub” reggae. Artists in Jamaica were combining elements of popular 1950s and early 1960s music—from rhythm and blues, rocksteady, ska, jazz horn sections and West African drumming—to offer a new distinct sound.

This culturally rich and artistically innovative period was inextricably bound up with developments in the political situation, above all, Jamaica’s independence from Great Britain in 1962. As the WSWS pointed out in its September 19, 2020 obituary of Toots Hibbert:

“Resistance and hostility to British imperialism was channeled behind a bourgeois nationalist movement that was to agree a mutually acceptable independence platform with Westminster. An upsurge of national pride that accompanied breaking free of the colonial authority finds expression in the swagger and self-confidence of the period’s popular music.”

Perry’s production technique was one of the major innovations of the early flourishing of reggae. He began remixing existing reggae songs to create new instrumental or vocal versions of tracks by extending the rhythm section, adding a low-end bassline and adding different sound effects and samples. This process, combined with the implementation of studio techniques such as delay and reverb, developed a melodic new subgenre of reggae known as “dub” music.

He began creating long “disco-like” mixes that would splice together different songs, incorporating altered sounds that made the existing music sound more alive,

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vibrant and surreal. The spaced-out textures of the studio effects gave the remix more energy than some of the original songs.

Perry's talents as a record producer reached an artistic high point in 1973, when he produced and managed the Black Ark studio in Kingston, located behind his family's home. There he developed and refined his prominent studio techniques and worked with most of the notable acts in Jamaica. He produced for Bob Marley and the Wailers, Junior Murvin ("Police and Thieves"), the Congos and many other notable artists.

A remarkable aspect of Perry's "far-out" sound was that he produced and audio-engineered with relatively minimal studio equipment. For most of his recordings he used just a Teac 4-track recorder, a Soundcraft mixing desk, an Echoplex delay unit and two different effects units. With this equipment he would often mix down tracks from 4-track to 2-track to make his distinctive "whirling" sounds that made his studio production distinct from the other Jamaican studios.

A noteworthy example of his unique production style was his dub remix of the Congos' "Fisherman Dub." Perry's studio manipulation gives the song a vibrant sonic quality.

Perry was also known for producing two of Bob Marley and the Wailers' early memorable albums, *Soul Rebels* (1970) and *Soul Revolution* (1971). His production helped with the band's artistic turn to a more "rebellious" image and a more confident reggae sound. Prior to 1970 Marley was known more for his Motown-influenced love songs. With Perry, the group began to openly promote their Rastafarian religious beliefs, which Perry also shared, and sang more about poverty and social tension in Jamaica.

Though it could be a volatile artistic relationship, Marley and Perry continued to collaborate up until the former's death from cancer in 1981. Much of their work centered on their Rastafarian religious beliefs and a kind of pan-African nationalism. They collaborated on such later songs as "Jah Live," a tribute to Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie and a cross-genre celebration song "Punky Reggae Party."

Perry's artistic career started to stagnate in the late 1970s. By 1978, stress, depression and lack of creative control over his work began to take their toll on his career, so much so that he apparently burned his own studio to the ground in a fit of rage.

His persona is notoriously difficult to decipher. He often seemed deliberately difficult to understand, sometimes speaking in riddles and coded aphorisms in interviews and even in concert. He was highly protective of his work and feuded with many of the artists and producers he worked with.

Even in many of his lyrics it could be hard to tell if his outlandish imagery was intended as an act of artistic defiance against conformity, as part of a joke or perhaps even related to mental instability. Perry once recorded a song called "I Am a Madman" and told *Rolling Stone* magazine that "being a madman is a good thing. … It keeps people away. When they think you are crazy, they don't come around and take your energy, making you weak. I am the Upsetter!"

His music was not generally noteworthy for strong insights into social or political reality, but he was known as a generous collaborator, well known for educating younger artists in studio production and encouraging musical creativity.

Though he hit a creative wall in the 1980s, Perry had a later-life resurgence. He managed to stay relevant by consistently touring the United States and Europe. He moved to Switzerland with his wife and family and began to revive his career in the 1990s. In addition to producing for others, he made over 50 albums himself, including 15 after the age of 80.

He worked with acts such as the Beastie Boys, performing vocals on the 1998 song "Dr Lee, PHD" and collaborated with British dub music producer Mad Professor. In 2002, Perry's album *Jamaican E.T.* won a Grammy for best reggae album, and he was nominated four other times.

Perry managed to inspire music producers and songwriters of many genres around the world. His innovative pioneering of the remix, the remaster and the reworking of songs had a significant impact on the development of electronic music, hip-hop, punk and dance music. His music itself is heavily sampled by a wide range of artists every year.

Marley's son Ziggy Marley once said about his relationship with Perry, "It was always a unique experience being around him. … He opened minds with his creativity and his personality. Some people thought it was madness, but I recognized it was genius, uniqueness, courage and freedom."

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