



# Lee “Scratch” Perry: The Eternal Power of Dub Science

“I am anti-demon. I ain’t have no trouble with them, they can’t trouble me. They eat my shit. Lion – ROAARGH! Tiger – SLIIICE! Lightning – CRAAASH! The jungle – KABOOM! Thunder – BOOM! The sea splash – SPLASH! Lying imperial vampires – WHACK-ACK-AH!”

As I sat in my flat in Cardiff, with a Jamaican octogenarian spitting out ear-splitting sound effects and beating out rhythms on the desk over the phone, amplified by my fizzing speakers, I wondered what Rachel, who lives downstairs, was thinking. I also wondered what I’d been thinking when I prepared two pages of questions:

Perhaps, somehow, you just know him as the eccentric, strangely dressed dub guy from your parents’ record collection, but Lee “Scratch” Perry has been recording for over 50 years and has had a more lasting impact on our approach to music than the vast majority of ‘living legends’. Beginning as a runner in the studios, Perry became a talent scout, a performer, and finally a masterful engineer and super producer to reggae’s biggest stars, before co-creating the offshoot genre of dub. He was involved with the Maytals, the Skatalites, Coxsone Dodd, Junior Murvin; he shaped Bob Marley and the Wailers’ sound into its most perfect form. Lee “Scratch” Perry’s role in reggae, dub and also the birth and growth of hip-hop and electronic music is beyond exaggeration – bass-bins worldwide emit sounds carrying the DNA of his alchemical dub experiments and murky studio science.

I’d also recently watched *Vision of Paradise*, a new documentary about his

life for which director Volker Schaner spent 15 years getting closer to his unique outlook, and I had read enough interviews to know he’d have some interesting things to say. So there was a nervous excitement on my part as I called the number I’d been given, and was answered by Lee’s wife, Mireille. She’s seemingly the gatekeeper and custodian of this revered individual; the devastating fire at Perry’s Swiss studio in December 2015 was the result of his being allowed a single candle for a photoshoot, against Mireille’s normal rules. I’m given another number, for the man himself, and am greeted with a surprisingly strong “Hello!”

“I have a good ‘outerview’ for you, you’re not gonna be getting an interview, this is an outerview.”

All my intentions of how our chat would go were soon extinguished. At one point – perhaps sparked by my Russian surname, he provides an insight into his unusual biology.

“And you can tell them that I have all of the Russian magic, man. All Russian magic. And I have the Russians behind me. I have the Russian sickle and the Russian hammer. I have the Russian sickle and the Russian love... on my back. And I have the Japanese soldier, all the Japanese soldiers in my cock. All the Russian soldiers on my back.”

His voice is stronger than you might expect. He launches it at the handset from deep inside his chest, which ironically makes it distorted and difficult to understand.

Biographer and reggae historian David Katz says that becoming his ghostwriter “felt like both a blessing and a curse – a cumbersome burden, yet at the same time an honour that I could not refuse.” I could relate. Perry pours out rhythmic patois, mystical speech; mystifying non-sequiturs are often followed by hollow, mechanical laughter. His words course with enticing images and ideas – he’s an enigma, in the true sense of the word, and a fountain of surreal fervour for his own personal mythology. Seeming to absorb elements of Pantheism alongside his Christian and Rastafarian beliefs, he calls upon totems and figures that hover constantly at the forefront of his mind.

“I follow the master of iron and the master of lion. The master of tiger and the master of elephant. The master of the jungle. Whooooop! The master of the animal in the jungle. Animal love! Jungle love! Whooooop! Tiger law! SLICE! Lion law! SLASH! Pure love, unity, racial harmony. No war, no Babylon. No evil. Lion bear no demons, no bullshit, no vampire, no bloodsucker. No black bonfire, no black vampire. No white vampire, no black vampire.”

For the most part though, speaking to Perry is less of a dialogue and more a case of tuning in to his rhythmic proclamations, incantations and animal impersonations, seemingly guided by free association rather than by any intention to make a point. He’s also got joyful, childlike passion for playing with the sounds and meanings of his words, liberally using rhythm and rhyme. Sharp and funny, when asked where he got his wisdom, he responds, barely hesitating,

“I have too much energy! Atomic power heart,  
atomic power mind, atomic power truth”

“Wisdom! With tongue! I looked down and it was there, the perfect tongue.”

A question about his tour of the UK starts him off on an anti-monarchy tirade for which he's renowned. “I think the Queen is a punk, and I make the Queen very drunk. I inherit London, England, Great Britain.”

It's tempting to link Perry's crude, absurd references and surreal responses with his advancing age, but it's foolish to assume he's lost the plot. A defining characteristic of his sound has always been the wild, inscrutable logic guiding his arrangement, and the gleeful, seemingly-nonsensical lyrics – back in 1975 he was burping over his tracks. He harnessed the accidents, faults and malfunctions of the equipment, giving an unconscious, human, original power that he saw as spiritual. Blowing ganja smoke over the tapes, burying microphones underground and so on – I abandoned my plan, and just mentioned things that seemed important to him, which seems to go down well: “I like this overview, it's perfect,” he chuckles. I asked if he could explain his unusual reserves of energy.

“I have too much energy! Atomic power. Atomic power heart; atomic power mind; atomic power truth. I've got destruction power,” he cackles, “I've got real destruction power; I have all the power.”

This facet of Perry's personality is inescapable – the aloof self-importance that's part bravado, part messiah complex. This could well be a hang-up from an early musical career where, for a talented individual in the fiercely competitive Jamaican reggae scene, there were constant threats of exploitation and musical trespass. Even in the golden era of dub, as a renowned hitmaker, he often had to

wrestle for the opportunities he wanted, and he's often downplayed the involvement of important collaborators like King Tubby. Now truly on a throne, ‘The Upsetter’ does the same in interviews. *The Guardian's* Tim Adams phoned him up on the 50th anniversary of Jamaican independence to seek his thoughts, and the bottom line was the “secret number 9. Nine nine nine!”

He truly has majesty in modern music. It's hard to imagine the effect the sounds coming out of his Black Ark studio had in the early 70s. There's a living movement in the busy, breathing bustle of drum and bass rhythm; sounds that aren't possible with only human hands but are totally organic and alive in feeling. Much has been made of his crazy recording techniques – and this fits with his personal eccentricities, but he was importantly a technological pioneer. He was among the first people to approach music technology and studio engineering in the way that he did, using relatively basic equipment but paying a minute attention to the intricate and subtle dynamics of the mix and using ingenious, outlandish techniques to create the effects he wanted. Foundational dance music producers, like Tom Moulton in New York, borrowed the aesthetic pioneered by Perry and his highly technological rhythm science shaped club and soundsystem music thereafter – from house and jungle to garage and dubstep. Schaner describes Perry's early productions as “geometric, abstract music that keeps your mind going and flying into unseen spaces,” a description that could just as easily be applied to any modern mutation of rave music.

But maybe the impossibility of achieving a dialogue about specific parts of his career is only natural – how could I be so naïve to think I could ask a man who has played such an enormous part in

musical history about specific moments or reflections? His preference for an ‘outer view’ seems somehow appropriate, equally to do with a philosophical kind of transcendence of the shallow clamour of media and cultural renown. Maybe his obtuse humour does make more sense – Perry as the laughing Buddha.

He does indeed have a spiritual resilience and an appreciation for pleasant moments; sounding confident after the setback of his second studio fire (he burned down his Black Ark studio 1979, due to “bad energy”). He's happy to have settled back in Jamaica, “in the black house of power.” In paradise? Yes, he laughs; he's on the phone to me. But after three decades in Switzerland, he resists placing any importance on the countries we live in – “why be an extraterrestrial covered in flags?”

Finally, after explaining a few more important points to me – “I am anti-negative;” “I wouldn't use money to wipe my bottom” – and proclaiming, at length, his hatred of the Pope and his love of Japanese food, he's gone. He suddenly bids me a quick goodbye and leaves me on the line to his personal chef (“my name's Joseph, but my nickname is Joe”). It's been a bewildering, exhilarating experience, like standing too close to the speaker for too long – it must be all that atomic energy.

For information about Lee “Scratch” Perry's *Vision Of Paradise* film, visit [visionofparadise.de](http://visionofparadise.de)

