

The Matthew Herbert Big Band **There's Me and There's You (!K7232CD)**

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Matthew Herbert's dazzling new album 'There's Me and There's You' is the most seductive, sophisticated and subversive collection of protest songs ever recorded. Blending lush jazz instrumentation, soulful vocals, fascinating rhythms and a secret underground arsenal of outlandish samples, it marks Herbert's second collaboration with his big band.

Featuring the cream of British jazz musicians, 'There's Me and There's You' is a sequel of sorts to Herbert's 2001 project 'Goodbye Swingtime'. It was largely recorded at London's fabled Abbey Road studios, although Herbert also incorporates sounds specially orchestrated at significant sites including the British Museum and the Houses of Parliament.

Effortlessly wrapping deluxe avant-jazz arrangements around polemical lyrics and artfully selected noises, the album's dominant theme is power and its abuses in the 21st century. The war in Iraq is a key rallying point, informing several tracks including 'One Life' and 'Waiting'. The power of monarchy is addressed in 'Regina', religion in 'Pontificate', media in 'The Story', wealth inequalities in 'The Rich Man's Prayer', and state-sponsored torture in 'Battery'. The hypocrisy of climate change politics and the evils of rampant consumerism are also recurring motifs.

An electronic innovator, sonic explorer and prolific collaborator, Herbert has released a huge catalogue of critically acclaimed music under his own name as well as Doctor Rockit, Wishmountain, Radio Boy and others. He has also produced and remixed artists as diverse as Björk, REM, Quincy Jones, John Cale, Yoko Ono, Dizzee Racal and Roisin Murphy, as well as working with highly regarded original thinkers such as the chef Heston Blumenthal and playwright Caryl Churchill.

But 'There's Me and There's You' marks a new chapter in his career. This is Herbert's debut recording with revered and versatile London-based artist Eska whose vast array of past collaborators includes David Sylvian, Lewis Taylor, Anthony Tidd and Afrobeat legend Tony Allen.

"Eska's a vital part of it," says Herbert. "She's really the beating heart of the record. It's vastly impressive the breadth of styles she passes through, but always in service to the original intention. This is hopefully the beginning of a long-term collaboration."

Herbert's albums always closely interweave medium with message, surface beauty with political subtext. But he hits bold new conceptual heights on 'There's Me and There's You', which turns the very fabric of power against itself in unprecedented ways.

The album's dense mix of audacious samples includes the sound of 70 condoms being scraped along the floor of the British Museum, a match (amongst other things) being struck in the Houses of Parliament, one of a 100 nails being hammered into a coffin, vocals recorded at a Kent landfill site, a Kensington branch of McDonalds, a "stop and search" document issued under the Prevention of Terrorism act, and 100 credit cards being cut up. This is an album, in many senses, of extraordinary renditions.

Herbert's original plan was to compose the album using sounds gathered solely inside the Houses of Parliament, Britain's ancient seat of government. "I wanted to record the corridors of power, literally to hear what they sounded like," he explains. After initial signs of interest, and a year of waiting, his request was denied.

"That's what 'Waiting' is about," Matthew explains. "What outraged me was they seemed more worried that this would bring the House into disrepute than the fact that they went into an illegal war with our money, and without our permission. That's why the song became about murder. On the other hand, I was thrilled that they felt threatened by a piece of music. It meant that the residual power to challenge political hierarchies through creative subversion was still present."

The album contains a further memorial to the victims of the Iraq war in 'One Life', which samples the incubator system which kept Herbert's prematurely born son alive. Each beep represents 100 people killed in Iraq, from the start of the war in 2003 to October 2006.

"My son was in special care for eight weeks," Herbert recalls. "The government will have spent well over a quarter of a million pounds keeping him alive. During that period, they spent considerably less than that killing people in Iraq. I think there is something wrong with a society where that kind of disparity can be allowed to happen."

For 'The Yesness', a collage track made up of 100 powerful people all saying 'yes', Herbert requested contributions from Queen Elizabeth 2nd and Britain's Prime Minister, Gordon Brown. Both declined. But elsewhere on the album veteran political radical Tony Benn, former London mayor Ken Livingstone, and ex-Prime Minister John Major all make clandestine cameo appearances.

Another track, 'The Story', opens with a crackle of avant-garde noise produced from a stack of mainstream media products, including 70 copies of The Sun newspaper, 70 celebrity gossip magazines, and one Madonna album. It then blooms into a polished, jazzy dance tune about the news stories these publications routinely censor.

"That track is about the absence of anything of consequence in so much of our media," Herbert explains. "The absence of stories about Free Trade Agreements and their consequences in Rupert Murdoch owned press, for instance. Things that affect billions of people in tangible ways, and yet they are entirely absent. It's just part of a collective failure of the imagination, and a determined and considered plan by corporate media companies for it to remain that way. That's part of my responsibility as an artist, to try and reconnect those dots."

'Battery' begins as a strident electro stomp before blossoming into a brassy big-band epic. It was inspired by the case of Bisher Al Rawi and Jamil El Banna, who were arrested in Ghana in 2002. Transported to CIA prisons in Kabul and Guantanamo Bay, both suffered years of torture and illegal incarceration before being released without charge. Their crime? Possessing a battery charger from the UK chain store, Argos. The same charger that Herbert received for his 35th birthday.

"From possession of the same object, how does one person end up recharging batteries at home and the other one tortured in Cuba?" Herbert asks. "How much control do we genuinely have over the shape and direction of our lives when so much is at stake?"

'There's Me and There's You' may be full of playful melodies and deceptively joyous music, but Herbert's message is deadly serious. For example, the disturbingly beautiful collage track 'Nonsound' is made of ambient recordings from Palestine, including the sound of protestors being shot against the wall that divides the territories. He wanted to record both the favourite and most hated sounds of ordinary Palestinians, and this is what was sent back.

"When you hear those sounds, it's no longer just about music, or genre, or chart positions, or press releases, it's life or death," Herbert explains. "That immediately transforms the process for me. With it comes a greater responsibility. The music comes with images, artwork, films, and notes - all of that is part of the message. Music doesn't exist in isolation, and people don't either. This record is about me coming out of my comfortable studio environment, opening it out to other people. That's how life needs to be. We can't all operate according to our individual desires."

But for all its dark and angry themes, 'There's Me and There's You' is ultimately a hugely optimistic statement of people power. A harmonious collaboration between dozens of musicians, a choir of 27 voices, and 100 people singing one word each from around the world, it also features 70 people enlisted to blow over water bottles, shake US election badges and squirt bottles of Britney Spears' 'Curious' perfume in the grand entrance hall of the British Museum.

In the months ahead, Herbert plans to tour the album with an 18-piece orchestra, taking his Trojan Horse of sophisticated subversion directly to the people. This is democracy in action, speaking truth to power in defiantly hopeful ways. A new kind of community for an atomised age. A musical resistance movement, turning swords into ploughshares.

“I’m absolutely, fundamentally optimistic,” Herbert insists. “The glass is definitely half full for me. But it’s time to make our own glasses. Everything is described in detail by these corrupt and corrupting powers, but this is our opportunity as artists to describe the world how we see it. The things that are dead wrong, the things that are wonderful, and how we can make it better”.

Stephen Dalton