

Lost and Found: Lewis Taylor's Pop-Rock Masterpiece

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IF LOS ANGELES is the perfect place to fall in love with an album-as-road-soundtrack – as aural companion to the zen ebb and flow of the city's freeway traffic – then my love affair of the last three weeks in Southern California has been a lost album by maverick Brit genius Lewis Taylor. Or rather, *The Lost Album* by this '90s prince of hybrid rock'n'neo-soul, recorded (and rejected) after his Island debut saw him lazily hailed as something like the new Mick Hucknall.

The Lost Album has been out for a while on its native soil, but I never bought or heard it because I didn't dare believe Taylor could pull off pop-rock in the way he has here. I've never been absolutely sure about Taylor anyway. Though *Lewis II* featured what is for me a true pinnacle of modern music – the incandescent 'Satisfied' – I've remained agnostic on the issue of whether this Jewish wunderkind was truly the heir to the spacey meta-funk sensuality of Sly Stone, Marvin Gaye, and their many clones (come on down D'Angelo, Maxwell and brethren).

The curious thing is that repeated exposure to the sonic smorgasbord that is *TLA* has made me reconsider *Lewis Taylor*, *Lewis II* and *Stoned Pt 1* – made me understand a little better where the guy has always been coming from. (He once alienated almost the entire audience of London R&B station Kiss FM when, as a guest DJ, he spun tracks by Can, Tim Buckley and even Scott Walker's thoroughly opaque *Tilt*. He's also a notorious prog-rock head.) It's as if I needed to hear him do white music before I could really appreciate him doing "black" music. (The unplugged demos of 'Lucky,' 'Track,' and 'Song' tagged on to the end of Hacktone's belated US release of the record also assist in that understanding.)

But what "white" music this is! *The Lost Album* is as stunningly lovely as the tropical sunset on its cover – as poignantly beautiful as the sun sinking below the life-and-death line of the horizon in a cloudless summer sky. When 'Leader of the Band' first came on in my LA rental car I literally burst into tears of joy – joy at the power of music to disable the mind's control over the heart. In that sublime moment I felt sheer gratitude for what music has given me over almost 40 years.

Nor is it a coincidence that *The Lost Album* calls up so many ghosts from pop's past. After 20 years of Record Collection Rock I thought I was weary of magpies like Taylor serving up simulacra of Brian Wilson, Arthur Lee, Crosby Stills Nash and Todd Rundgren. But then let's face it, Todd Rundgren was no less of a magpie in *his* time and place - a one-man band pop god channeling Laura Nyro and George Harrison to his own divine ends.

So I hear the Rundgren of 'We Gotta Get You a Woman' on 'Leader of the Band,' just as I (sort of) heard the Rundgren of 'The Last Ride' on 'Satisfied.' (Taylor, like Todd – and like that other Rundgren disciple Prince – is a magnificently unabashed guitarist, always willing to strangle his axe in pursuit of some unattainable orgasmic high. Well, why the hell not?) And yes, I hear the Beach Boys of *Sunflower* and *Surf's Up* on the delectable 'Let's Hope

Nobody Finds Us.' I hear Love unfolding into CSN/America on 'Yeah', Lenny Kravitz spilling over Jane's Addiction on 'See My Way.'

But so what? So I'm an ancient rockscribe adept at spotting references conscious or unconscious in the work of would-be *auteurs* ten or 20 years my junior. Big deal. Frankly it doesn't matter if you hear echoes of 'Til I Die' or 'Our Sweet Love' in 'Let's Hope Nobody Finds Us' because with any luck you'll respond to the luminous loveliness of its melody and angelic harmonies – all Lewis' own work – in the same way I responded to *Surf's Up*.

And if the Beach Boys aren't the zenith of pop genius for you, try the subsequent track 'New Morning,' a song of hope and rebirth that's pure undiluted Lewis. Or track back to the powerpop-rock of 'Hide Your Heart Away,' with its soaring key changes and sparkingly Badfinger-ish twin-lead guitar solo. 'Say I Love You' is a song of devotion so sweetly soulful it'll melt your heart, Taylor triple-tracking his creamiest falsetto harmonies to date. Penultimately, 'One More Mystery' is an astonishing rush of a song, Taylor urgently reaching for the power of his love: "Can't take my eyes away/Please don't let go my hand..." By the time you've got to it, you'll agree that only Todd or Prince have matched the frenzy of its yearning, climaxing as it does in a solo that – like the one on 'Satisfied' – will leave you either drooling or sniggering. You won't be surprised to learn I'm in the former camp. ('Lost,' the final track, is a short orchestral coda worthy of the great Jimmy Webb.)

Kudos to Hacktone for polishing this diamond of an album and securing its American release. *The Lost Album* has, thank the lord, been found and is available to any American willing to enter the ecstatic musical realm of Lewis Taylor. That the man has opted to "retire" from the enervated circus of rock – though we've all heard *that* one before – makes investment in this masterpiece all the more imperative. It may turn out to be the single greatest thing he ever did.

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