

The Man in the Mirror

The contradictions in John Butler are evident, and, despite his magnificently successful career (with number one albums and sell-out tours) his is a troubled soul. One of the most successful recording artists Australia has ever produced, and a musician whose reputation has begun to rock the waters of both Europe and America, Butler is nevertheless a man on the edge, poised like a beautiful suicide. Where will he go next? Up or down? Despite the tensions within the man and his music the new album makes his future trajectory abundantly clear.

An independent role model, founder of Australia's Jarrah Records, family man and proud skateboard aficionado, JB, in spite of his matey public persona, remains an enigma. He is from everywhere and nowhere, an Australian/American, Everyman/Nowhere Man, and his music mixes rootedness and rootlessness, pain and celebration in a way that is utterly beguiling. He is the consummate rebel-refugee whose songs chart a disenchantment with the corporate world and show a yearning for truth along with an ongoing struggle for a sense of locus. The songs' off-centre grooves have always been their charm, and yet now there is a sense, in the new album at least, of resolution and peace after years of being against the world and what it offered. Maybe the man on the brink will not jump after all?

The Past

Born in California and of mixed Australian, Greek and Bulgarian ancestry, Butler began his musical career in classic if tentative style. The narrative arc is well-known Down Under. An art-school dropout, he was 'discovered' (although in truth his career was already taking off) busking in 1996, bystanders marvelling at 'the sweat flying off his brow' and 'the holy madness in his eyes'. The tape of these early compositional soundscapes (*Searching for Heritage*) gave an inkling of where Butler was going, reaching as it did both forwards and backwards in time, conversant with all genres and yet somehow defining its own. The sound had, and still has, elements of folk, funk, reggae and rock all drizzled through the 90s Seattle sensibility of Cobain and Vedder. Behind all that there was a wistful Celtic ambience surreally counterpointed by a Jamaican roots/rudeboy vibe. What could have been a mess somehow made perfect sense, with the bluegrass fingerpicking, hip hop beats and psychedelic wig-outs proving not uneasy bedfellows but perfect complements.

Now

On the new album it goes even further, yet with a restraint that bespeaks a deepening maturity. There are dirty Stevie Wonder style boogies, ghostly refrains that could come from Simon and Garfunkel, sonic poltergeists which

seem, at times, to resemble lost Sting classics. In the hands of a lesser man this would be mere thievery dressed up as 'eclecticism'. But Butler is a maestro, not a grave-robber: he takes his influences and transcends them. He creates a sound that is as ancient as aboriginal bone-art and yet as modern as your Twitter feed. It is clear, too, that he is one of the world's greatest guitarists, a musician's musician, one whose sound, unlike Johnny Cash's, offers not three chords and the truth but a *thousand*. His prestidigitation is astounding. An old song like 'Ocean', for example, has chalked up 30 million Youtube hits, and not just with guitar freaks studying his technique. The new album has songs that are less expansive and more 'reined in', but the playing is all the more impressive for being more tightly corralled. Less sometimes really is more.

The new album is his best yet. In parts it is simply overwhelming and this reviewer was, at times, close to tears. The album has captured that elusive thing: *soul*. Butler has spoken in interviews of his songs being like 'wild horses, wild beasts' and you can see what he means. Songs, he says, come from the 'ether', from a savage hinterland: they must be caught without breaking their spirit. A 'song-capturer', Butler's job has been not to tame those horses but to present their wildness. His myth of composition evokes the timeless expanse of both the Aussie Outback and the American West, and he and his fellow band members have been at pains to honour the songs as independent things that belong to no one, least of all themselves.

Arising from a series of agenda-free jams in Butler's studio *The Compound* in Fremantle, WA, the album took a mere 20 days to record and, though beautifully structured in sonic terms, there is a rawness and honesty to the album that reflects the brevity of its laying down. The songs have a wide-open, semi-improvised feel. The crisp and beautifully spare production of Jan Skubiszewski accentuates the sense of limitless space: the drums (courtesy of the aptly named Nicky Bomba) kick with dub explosions, while the bass ('Lord' Byron Luiters) goes on inspired transient walkabouts. Butler's voice, free of the 'anger' that has dogged him for so long, now soars with both melancholy and plangent purity. 'Wings are Wide' evokes rainforests: it is drenched in dizzying guitar loops in which the listener is enmeshed and lifted timelessly elsewhere. 'Spring to Come' could be a classic Paul Simon song, Butler's acrylic fingernails plucking more of their extraordinary patterns. 'Blame it on Me' is a cocky peacock-strut juxtaposed with dark references to apocalyptic 'heavy times', the fuddled guitar patterns conjuring the incendiarism of Jimmy Page or Hendrix at their most exuberant. 'Young and Wild' has the simple beauty of a song by Gillian Welch, a down-country feel offset by the gorgeous shadowing of female vocalist Ainslie Wills. 'How You Sleep at Night' is a hypnotically anthemic piece featuring the ferocious drumming of new man Grant Gerathy, Bomba having jumped ship (albeit amicably) to front his own Melbourne Ska Orchestra. The synth-anchored 'You're Free' sounds like its title: it is as if the composer, haunted by righteous ire, has taken flight, escaping earthly confines but not flying too close to the sun. New single 'Only One' shows a new maturity in pop craftsmanship. The quiet/loud dynamic is beautifully exploited yet again. A

simple three note refrain and rolling storm-cloud drums establishes a minor key mood: a place of 'castles built out of sand' and 'something haunting' the protagonist. But then the chorus erupts with steel drum euphoria transporting the listener to what sounds like Africa — a third world of ecstatic being. That is the JB trick par excellence: the shift from fireside ballad to communal dance, from private to public, from doubt to assertion.

Credibility

John Butler is no pie-in-the-sky hippy. He has dirt beneath his feet: red dirt. He is well-known Down Under for his environmental and political commitment. His white Rasta look once suggested a teleported Bob Marley - but that has gone. The more recent barbered image makes him look like a handsome American from the Civil War era. His stare is hypnotic. Who will draw first, you or him? He is not, however, all gun and no trousers. He has put his money where his mouth is, fronting a campaign that helped stop a vast gas plant from despoiling the natural beauty of the Kimberley area in NW Australia. He has also set up a charitable trust that has enabled many aspiring artists find an outlet. He is a man who cares about the world he is in and one who has tried, in his own way, to set it right.

Home Again

Butler has come full circle. 'Searching for Heritage' led ultimately to 'April Uprising', an album that delved into Butler's family history, one in which ethnic Bulgarians (Butler's kin) rose up in 1876 against the tyrannical Ottoman Empire that had suppressed them. John's own name derives from his paternal grandfather, a forestry worker who died fighting a bushfire in Nannup, Oz. From these historical titbits we glean some inkling of the artist. He is a man fighting for justice, a man fighting fires — those of love gone bad, of corporate greed, or simply of his own angry soul. As Butler has confessed in a recent interview: 'I thought my anger was my strongest asset and that's what made me powerful, but it was actually my weakest link. My vulnerability, my honesty and patience and trust are my strongest attributes.' The album bears this out. As Butler has matured the anger has been sublimated in poetry, and his voice, on the tender love songs especially, has become his outstanding instrument.

This new album is testament to his great talent, and to a man who has finally found himself. On some songs he sounds simply reborn. 'I wanted the songs to be a lot more guttural and fleshier,' says a newly humble JB. 'I wanted to smell it and feel it a bit more. And I wanted my voice, now and always, to be more convincing.' If it's authenticity he was seeking he has surely found it.

If he has been a 'man on the edge' he is certainly not going to jump and end it all. He now has the wisdom and the courage to take a step back - and enjoy the view.

Graham Strugnell 2017