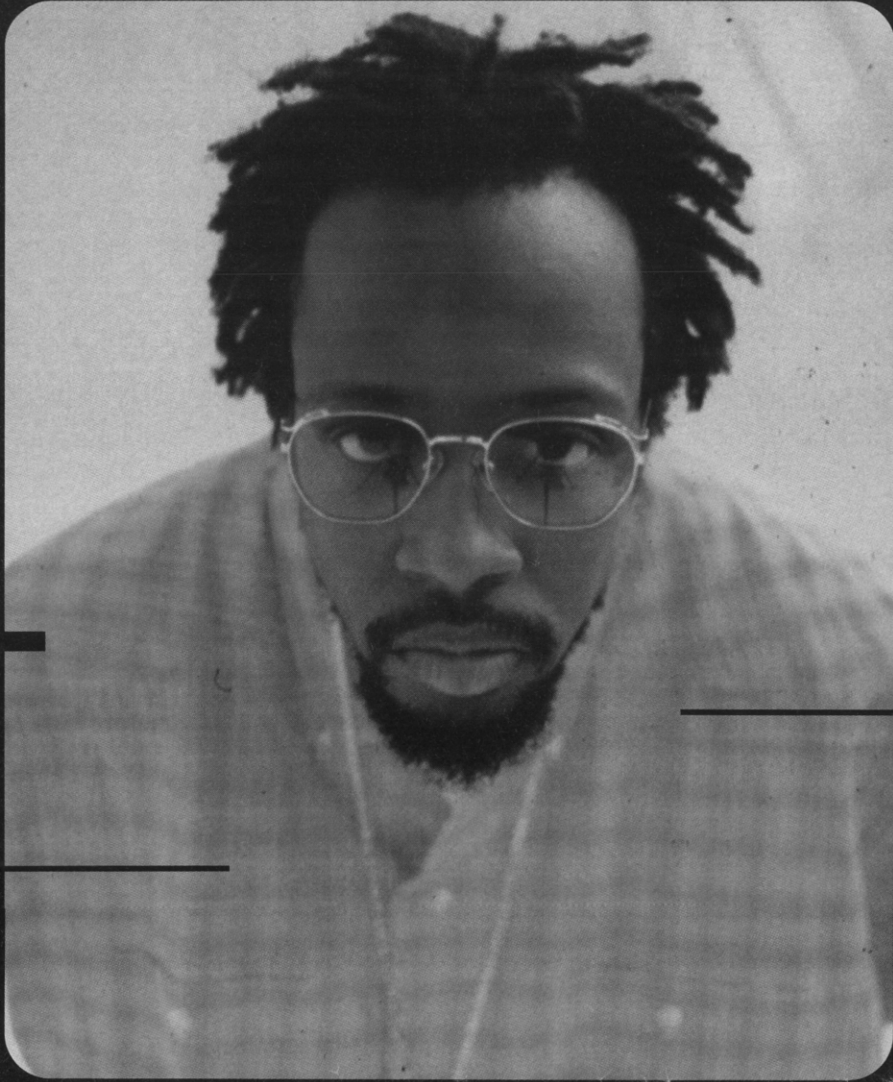


Gunpowder & CHICKEN WINGS

The Fugees' Wyclef



"Yo, whassup? This is Clef!
Peace — New Zealand
'Gunpowder'!"

Er, yes. This meaning of course, that Wyclef Jean, one-third of the multi-platinum hip-hop/R&B act the Fugees, is on the line from the States, doing the last phone interview of the day, before an MTV-Online chat takes place live on the internet. Despite the apparent cheeriness of his opening salvo, he is not in the most communicative of moods, limiting many of his answers to a few words (mostly including the phrases "Yeah definitely"

and "You know what I mean") and appearing distracted — perhaps more by the non-arrival of dinner than by his imminent jaunt into cyberspace.

It's the eve of the release of his new album, *Wyclef Jean Presents The Carnival*, the first of the Fugees solo projects to see the light of day; and it's perhaps significant that his will arrive ahead of the others. Lauryn Hill may be the most recognisable member, and it's her voice that is most associated with the

group and their success — but it is Wyclef, in charge of production duties, who is responsible for the sound behind that success — a subtle fusion of hip-hop beats, smooth reggae, contemporary R&B soul and Caribbean flavours, which invests all their material — even their otherwise unremarkable cover versions — with a distinctive character.

Although the first single from his album, 'We Trying To Stay Alive', which is built upon the BeeGees disco anthem 'Stayin' Alive', may provide the sceptical with more ammunition to discredit Wyclef as nothing more than a clever, opportunistic manipulator of other people's material; *The Carnival* has a diverse range of musical approaches, hip-hop through to reggae, and including pop, Latin, and orchestral. Wyclef has also ventured into more personal territory, reaching back into the folk sounds heard in his early years in his birthplace of Haiti (where the Fugees played benefit concerts in April), and three songs on this album are sung in the Creole dialect — 'Sang Fezi', 'Jaspora', and 'Yele'. They tell of the pride and struggle of a culture that has survived the ravages of colonisation, only to be fractured by internal political turmoil, where a succession of military coups and international interventionist policy has destabilised the island's economy and social structure. More than just being acute political statements, Wyclef feels that the inclusion of these songs, like the benefit shows, is a way of giving something back to his culture — while at the same time, reminding him who he is.

"It's important we never forget our culture. That's what keeps me grounded, know what I mean? That's what keeps me doing music. The day I forget about that, I'll no longer be who I am." But the album also goes further, beyond roots, and into the present tense.

"It's a story," he continues, "A story of leaving Haiti, [being] brought up in Brooklyn, and then jumping on a plane travelling all around the world."

Ah yes, travelling. Obviously, being in the Fugees at the height of mega-success leaves very little time to get an extra-curricular album together. Consequently, *The Carnival* was written and recorded over a period of time that was predominantly spent with the Fugees on tour, different tracks being laid down at different studios across the globe.

"The whole album was a spiritual, created off the spur of the moment thing y'know — a sound of the streets all over the world, definitely, that's what it is. All around the world, baby."

"The carnival — for me — means the streets of Brooklyn. In the carnival, anything can happen. You can fall in love... death... riot; it's all part of everyday life. But the carnival means that every song stands alone by itself. It don't sound like

the next song, sounds like the eclectic sounds of music."

Much like his production work. Not limited to those within the Refugee Camp, he has manned the boards for Simply Red, remixes of Cypress Hill and Michael Jackson and Sublime. The style doesn't matter — it's all music.

"Yeah, well I did Aerosmith, man. I grew up, an' I was a jazz major ... so you can't categorise my style, it's eclectic, you know what I mean. Like I grew up listening to rock and classical as well as hip-hop, you know what I mean. It's all about the vibe."

Wyclef is assisted with the vibe on *The Carnival* with help from a variety of places.

"The album is Wyclef featuring the Refugee Allstars. Lauryn's on the album, Pras is on the album. John Forte. The family just gets bigger now."

Some of these family connections have resulted in some high-powered collaborations — he conducts the New York Philharmonic Orchestra on 'Gone 'til November', plays with the Neville Brothers on 'Mona Lisa, a "ghetto love song" that was written with them in mind, along with some other special guests — all that came about, he says, simply by running into people and asking.

"The I-Threes — you know that's the Marley family, we was doing the Grammys and I had to talk to them about that and everything, cause they perform with me in the Grammys. Like we was rehearsing, so I was like, 'Yo, I have this song called 'Gunpowder' I wrote, and I'd love for y'all to bless me with your voice'. And they was like — 'Word, yeah', and we made it happen."

There are plans to tour *The Carnival*, with a series of what Wyclef describes as "little gigs, you know what I mean, little gigs"; though there are a number of other projects on the horizon to keep him busy. He is currently producing Refugee Camp rapper John Forte's album; and still in the planning stages is his involvement in the sequel to the Peter Tosh reggae film *The Harder They Come*. The Fugees may provide the soundtrack and appear in the film, and although careful to stress that things are still in the works (he describes it as "... a big talk" happening), Wyclef says, "I may be doing more than appearing, I may be an actor in the movie."

By this stage in the interview, he can no longer keep his mind on what he's talking about, and it is apparent that we must wind it up when he breaks off in mid-sentence to shout to his publicist, "Hey you! Send the chicken wings!"

Chicken wings?

He explodes in laughter, at the unintended humour of the situation.

"That's so ghetto, right?"

TROY FERGUSON

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