

PRETTY MISTAKES

Working fast and trusting instinct, Roots Manuva embraces the hiss and hum

A decade has passed since Roots Manuva dropped his debut record, *Brand New Second Hand*, followed by the 2001 classic, *Run Come Save Me*. Fusing the funk roots of American hip-hop with the erratic pulse of West Indian dancehall, both efforts almost single-handedly made UK hip-hop relevant in a genre dominated by men with names like Biggie and Puff.

Now, on his fourth full-length release, *Slime & Reason* (Big Dada), Manuva looks back to his earliest memories of those Jamaican roots for both sonic inspiration and a new working method. Instead of laboring over the details, Manuva sought the "instantness" of old reggae and dub productions from legendary houses like Studio One and Channel One.

"If something's hot, overloading a little, off-key or not harmonically or rhythmically right, just keep it," he says. "Keep those one takes and the 'unprocessed-ness' of it all."

At first he wanted live drums, bass, strings and horns for the record. But rather than trying to make live musicians sound programmed, he found the programmed material worked better and quicker than "the human jam stuff."

Still, Manuva looped sections of himself on drums and bass, and producer Theo Gordon added horns to a record that slides in and out of distinct niches.

There's familiar ground in dancehall crashers such as "Buff Nuff," grime flavors like "I'm a New Man" (both produced with Toddla T) and nods to the Brooklyn boom-bap ("Well Alright"). And there are moments of plaintive gospel searching, as on "A Man's Talk" and the sublime "Let the Spirit," a song Outkast will wish it had recorded.

"I was trying to capture a sleazy, almost cheesy feeling, but it just slid around and ended up all over the place—just a beautiful accident," Manuva (aka Rodney Smith) explains. "I'm proud of those beautiful accidents."

The album began as sketches that Manuva composed using Logic 7 or an MPC1000 before moving to a studio for further experiments. *Slime* was recorded at London's Alaska Studios where Manuva worked fast and instinctively.

"It's just where my head was at," he says. "I spent way too much time [on *Awfully Deep*]. Different studios. It wore me out. With this one, we just used a lot of the demos. It felt right. You go broke in a 2000-pounds-a-day SSL room trying to mix as if the record was done in a bedroom. It's weird."

And Manuva had to rein in his engineer at times. "Bob [Earland] corrected flabby points that I naturally didn't," he explains. "And we had a little tussle and fight where he took some of the flabby points off and I put

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them back on. Those little clashes of bass tones and kick drums, and the general positioning of the notes, that's what makes a record individual."

Though he's no Luddite, Manuva also isn't hung up on the latest DAW or plug-ins. If anything, he believes that affordable recording technology has simply made it easier for more people to make bland, uninspired recordings. Making a record with an individual sound and ambience like those old Jamaican dub plates takes more work.

"You just have to be into picking up machines," he says. "The studio that I carry my sketches to has a load of old synthesizers lying around." Some of those include the EDP Wasp, Korg MS-10, Roland SH-101 synths and a circuit-bent Alesis HR-16 drum machine. "It's all about using outboard gear to bring out the hiss and hum," he says, "and letting the studio get a little bit hot. Leaving the desk on for a few days, get the hum going on, so it's not just a switched-on, totally computerized sound."

Though not a global brand in the vein of Kanye or Diddy, Manuva celebrates his 10th year with the same label, Big Dada—nearly the music industry equivalent of a silver anniversary.

And while his end goal is simple—make enough money to make more music—he notes that the consistency in his work and organization has helped achieve that success.

"It's important to be around teams that you have respect and love for. I've been very privileged to be connected with Big Dada and Ninja Tune and be moved by their enthusiasm. Nice people connect with nice people." 

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