



## SHAWN LEE Prolific producer trades instrumentals for fundamentals

His English accent is hard to place and slightly jarring—the cadence too languid, the words too streaked with fine Midwestern enunciation and shades of L.A. surfspeak to be native. Shawn Lee, an American musician from Wichita, Kansas, and longtime London resident, is talking to *Wax Poetics* about his new record, *Soul in the Hole* (Ubiquity). A departure from the ornate cinematic instrumentals he's known for, *Soul...* is a love letter to a formidable influence.

"It's very much a case of coming home musically," Lee says. "Soul music's always been a staple diet for me. Southern soul, Philly, Motown, West Coast, psych-soul; it's such a deep genre."

Deep indeed. And wide. But Lee explores the depth and breadth of the style with conviction, conjuring Memphis lope ("Playboy Bunny"), cavernous, Spector-esque psych-soul ("Land of Soul"), and moody electric piano vamps channeling Charles Stepney. An accomplished multitasker, Lee played nearly all of the instruments on the record, even sang lead on a few, but left most of the vocal lifting to soul flowers like Fanny Franklin and Karime Kendra, and OG Bay Area hip-shaker Darondo.

Having built his rep as a composer of crisp, compact instrumentals on a series of Ubiquity releases, Lee says *Soul...* forced him to refocus on songcraft. "Instrumental music is a pretty free idiom, pretty wide open, with a lot of leeway," he says. But songwriting is a higher discipline, a form that "everybody sort of recognizes," that offers little room to mask shortcomings.

"With the classics as a benchmark, we've got more of an idea of what it's supposed to be," Lee says. "You should always be aspiring to write a great song. Otherwise, what's the point? The world doesn't really need another mediocre song."

Fearing mediocrity, Lee nearly psyched himself out of the project. But with records by Shuggie Otis, Eugene McDaniels, Sly Stone, and Marvin Gaye fueling the flow, Lee decided that songwriting required a less academic approach. You should aspire to, but not *worry* about, writing a great song. "Just do it and

move on," he says. "Some songs are better than others, so you just don't think too much about it."

This same loose, creative spirit has pushed Lee since his move from Wichita to Los Angeles more than twenty years ago, and to his current London base with his wife and daughter. In L.A., Lee battled it out in bands, played Lollapalooza as a sideman. He even had a publishing deal. But nothing was happening until a chance meeting between his girlfriend and U.K. tastemaker Gilles Peterson, in which Lee's demo changed hands, netting a deal and an opportunity for Lee to live and record in London, near Peterson's Talkin' Loud label operations.

With the L.A. "machine" taking its toll, Lee says he would've been a fool to pass up the opportunity: "I was at a point where I would have to lay low for a couple of years and reinvent myself before any labels would have a look. They know you've been through the grinder. [In London], I could just escape that whole process."

And in escape, he would also find inspiration, namely down the instrumental path and into the world of European library music and composers like Nino Rardini, Eddie Warner, Alan Tew, and Piero Umiliani. Expatriate life has also turned him on to more obscure American artists like Otis, McDaniels, and Terry Callier. "[Europeans] have a way of 'exoticizing' obscure American artists who are overlooked in America, but become cult figures over here," he notes.

And though London is home, and has been for more than fifteen years, Lee cops to a measure of artistic homesickness. He'd like to work with more American artists. Recent transatlantic travels have yielded projects with Clutch Hopkins and sessions with Tommy Guerrero and Money Mark for the new album *Lord Newborn & the Magic Skulls*. And there are additional artists to build with for the *Soul in the Hole* follow-up.

"There are so many talented people in America," he says. "Sometimes I feel like a Lone Ranger over here." ● Dan Frio

