

epiphanies

Christoph Cox learns the hustle with a Last Poet

"Get paid to listen to records," I thought, accepting a friend's offer to spend the summer of 1986 running his record shop in Providence, Rhode Island. As it turned out, 90 per cent of the stock was off limits, encased in shrinkrap and not to be opened. So the imperative to have music playing at all times left only two options: bring in records and tapes from home or draw from the bin labelled 'Imports/Independents', whose thick plastic slipcovers, flimsily fastened with a piece of tape, could easily be re-sealed without the customers noticing. Tired of my own collection, I plunged into the imports and began to work my way from A to Z.

Within a few weeks I came across The Last Poets' self-titled 1970 debut album, and its follow up, *This Is Madness*, both recent reissues on the Celluloid label. Despite the sparse set-up (congas and voice), *The Last Poets* let loose a torrent of political invective, drenched in irony and full of drama, but razor sharp and ruthless. The Poets spared no one, particularly not their Black Power brethren, who were harangued for ideological self-satisfaction and a slavish devotion to drugs and sex. *This Is Madness* more explicitly cultivated the apocalyptic sensibility hinted at by the group's name, featuring that mixture of spiralling disillusionment and ecstatic hope characteristic of eschatological politics. Full of references to venereal disease, drug overdoses, napalm, genocide and the End of Time, the record nonetheless imagined a world after the "fiery holocaust" in which "man will understand man/and live in harmony and peace/and the sun will once again/rise up in the East".

Months later, another friend taped me the rarest and finest Last Poets record, 1974's *At Last*. Late one night, while driving the stretch of highway between Providence and

New York with the opening track swirling around the car's interior, it genuinely seemed as if The End were nigh, summoned by the voice of Jalaluddin Mansur Nuriddin. Over jagged shards of piano, bass, and hi-hat, a possessed Jalal heralded a psychedelic Black Armageddon.

As with all such prophecies, the Day never arrived, and one dawn followed the next. But my fascination didn't wane. Tipped by a fellow student that my university's concert agency was running a surplus that needed to be spent, I called Celluloid to invite The Last Poets up to Providence. I was put in touch with Jalal, whose desire for greater recognition was only increased by my



Jalal: the needle and the damage done

expression of interest in making a video documentary on The Last Poets featuring footage from the concert. A month or so later, Jalal, Suliaman El-Hadi, and a percussionist whose name escapes me, arrived at my apartment to unload their bags before walking over to Brown University's Alumnae Hall. The room was packed, and the largely white audience listened respectfully, but the performance was less than spectacular. Framed by enormous velvet curtains, the three figures appeared tiny on the stage, shuffling awkwardly under pale yellow lights. Like ageing rappers, they fought to generate enough energy to fill the hall, and visibly struggled to connect with this polite congregation of privileged twentysomethings. Overwhelmed by the demands of live coverage, my videography was dismal, making the event seem even more stale and lacklustre.

By the next autumn, I had graduated and moved to Manhattan, where I took a job as a stockman in a secondhand bookstore near Union Square. Unloading a box of paperbacks one afternoon, I looked up to find Jalal heading toward me down the aisle. We greeted each other, and he asked me about the video project. Too embarrassed to tell the truth, I mumbled that I was still working on it and quickly changed the subject. From then on, Jalal stopped by often and we struck up an odd friendship. An autodidact with boundless linguistic cleverness, and a conspiracy theorist with a keen sense of history and politics, Jalal was an immensely fascinating companion. At once hustler and sage, he would set up meetings in Central Park to insist that I buy his own ragged copy of *Delights Of The Garden* for ten dollars and to offer lengthy interpretations of its cosmic vision. Incessantly he recalled his curriculum vitae, railing against Gil Scott-Heron and the rap community for ripping him off without acknowledgment and reminding me that he had worked with Jimi Hendrix on the single "Doriella Du Fontaine", the jailhouse story of a ghetto hooker that Jalal recorded under the pseudonym Lightnin' Rod due to his conversion to Islam. Upon learning that I suffered from chronic back pain due to heavy lifting at work, Jalal volunteered to become my acupuncturist. I was sent off to esoteric bookstores to look for a copy of *The Yellow Emperor's Classic Of Internal Medicine* and to strange apothecaries to buy exotic herbs. Within days I had my first session with Jalal; he covered me with needles and explained the peculiar sounds of various pulses.

Uneasy with the role of apprentice that I had fallen into, I spent less and less time with Jalal, who, I think, had also come to realise that I was a poor patron. By the end of 1988 I had left New York and moved to California. Years later, I opened up a copy of *The Village Voice* to find that Jalal's former colleagues and rivals, Abiodun Ayewole and Umar Bin Hassan, were touring with Lollapalooza under the Last Poets name. I imagined Jalal's anger and the increased sense of disenfranchisement and disrespect he must have felt. But I knew somehow that he would be busy refiguring the schism as a necessary stage in his elaborate picture of universal justice. □