



Coffee with Lazarus

Artist: Ben Okafor

Label: Plankton Records (London)

Length: 11 tracks/55:44

My familiarity with reggae is limited to Bob, with a little Steel Pulse and Black Uhuru thrown in. Okafor doesn't sound like any of those guys -- he's not Jamaican, but Nigerian by way of London. And he doesn't go for the more modern dancey stuff like Christafari, or bass-heavy dub, or any other reggae I've heard. He doesn't use horns; he's not a fan of the big and bombastic. Okafor is a songwriter, not a maker of Caribbean party music or ganja-smoking soundtracks.

He's refreshingly relaxed and melodic, relying on simple arrangements that leave room for his simultaneously smooth and scratchy voice. His tone (though not his range) is almost reminiscent of Sting's most laidback moments, but with a slight reggae accent. Actually, Okafor's voice is tinged with Jamaican, British, and American inflections, which is odd at first but ultimately matches with his pleasant tone to create a fascinating originality.

For reggae fans, *Coffee with Lazarus* is probably an example of reggae minimalism. Most songs use about as much instrumentation as Bob Marley's "Songs of Freedom." For non-reggae fans, you'll probably forget you're listening to reggae after a couple of tracks, due to the strength of the songs. Several stand out. "Deep Love" has a really nice bass groove. "Give Food" really showcases Okafor's passionate singing, with just an unimposing reggae keyboard riff backing him. "So I Believe" follows with just an acoustic guitar and Okafor's wheezy melody about his faith.

In his lyrics, Okafor doesn't stray too far from traditional reggae references to Jah, Africa, and justice, but throws in much encouragement towards love, good deeds, and taking flight spiritually.

Whether you're a reggae fan or not, Okafor's songwriting is worthy. Track a copy of *Coffee with Lazarus* down.

Josh Spencer 2/17/2001



Josh Spencer, contributing senior associate editor for *The Phantom Tollbooth* for over two years, is also publisher and editor-in-chief of spiritual pop culture webzine *Stranger Things*. Reviews and articles by him are usually simultaneously published in some form at <http://www.strangerthingsmag.com>.