

# music

# A special kind of brew

This surreally beautiful collaboration between the reggae stalwarts The Congos and the US indie underground artists Sun Araw and M Geddes Gengras is accompanied by a film that chronicles their work together, writes Andy Battaglia

"Music can take us all around the world." As statements of artistic intent go, this one might not seem destined to linger. We've heard it many times before, and usually with such a void of meaning and conviction that it can be hard to hear at all. But it sounds different issuing from the mouths of The Congos, a group of musicians who by all indications have been around the world a few times over.



**Icon Give Thank**  
FRKWYS Vol. 9: Sun Araw & M Geddes Gengras meet The Congos  
RVNG Intl  
Dh62

More than three decades later, the music on *Heart of the Congos* continues to sound somehow both old and new. In certain ways, it's the archetypal reggae record, marked by the soulful singsong cadences and loping low-end rhythms that have attended the genre since its origination in Jamaica in the late 1960s. In other ways, however, *Heart of the Congos* sounds like nothing so much as it-

self - a singular masterpiece that endures in its own realm, both real and imagined.

But the roots of all that date back to 35 years ago, while the sentiment in question - "music can take us all around the world" - is of a more recent vintage. It figures prominently on *Icon Give Thank*, a new album created in collaboration between the now-elder Congos and Sun Araw and M Geddes Gengras, two much younger musicians who travelled to Jamaica to make music different to their own. Sun Araw, in particular, has made a lot: since his earliest overtures in 2007, he has released a slew of albums and singles on CD, vinyl and tape - whatever media might prove amendable to his streams and slurrings of skewed neo-psychedelia.

All of that established Sun Araw as a formidable figure in the US indie underground, which happened to be swelling all around him in Los Angeles, home as well to the enterprising record label Not Not Fun and creative currents swirling in from a revitalised southern California art scene. So it is that Sun Araw (real name:



Sun Araw, M Geddes Gengras and The Congos. RVNG Intl

Cameron Stallones) got together with a friend and found himself on a plane to Jamaica.

Footage from a flight into Kingston figures at the beginning of *Icon Eye*, an equally striking travelogue movie made to document the otherwise expressly musical project. (A DVD comes packaged with the album, both produced as part of the enterprising New York-run collaborative album series *FRKWYS*.)

The film is a worthwhile work in its own right. Shot and edited by the New York filmmaker Tony Lowe, it plays as a largely wordless visual diary of a trip filled with a genuine sense of searching for all involved. Lowe's camera zooms in on scores of impressionistic scenes, some of them musical and many others not, which are artfully assembled and presented in

a moving mosaic whole. The technique draws from a long lineage of experimental film, but the effect of it is decidedly earthy, unaffected, sincere - a chronicle of a trip taken with eyes, ears, and minds open wide.

At one point in the movie, Sun Araw talks about reconciling the prospects of paradise so prevalent in Jamaica with the conflicting realities of poverty and crime no less rampant there. "It's that flip between outer and inner space that's so difficult for people to make," he says. "It's like the Kingdom of Heaven is here and you see it - it's a decision." At another point, he speaks of the music that would come together in the form of *Icon Give Thank*. "This was never a record that I would have made," he says. "It's a record that emanated from a situation I was in."

Behind Bob Marley stood The Wailers. Behind The Wailers stood Jamaica. Excellent essay on the island and reggae music pegged to a film and two biographies

## this week's essential reading

{ 'Neither sand nor sea' by Joshua Jelly-Schapiro, LA Review of Books

## playlist

### From Prince Far I to Pablo and Perry: more adventures in Jamaican sound

#### The Congos

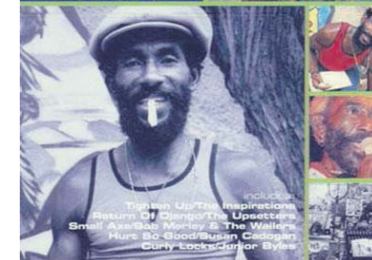
Heart of the Congos (Blood and Fire)

The classic that established The Congos as otherworldly heroes, this album seems to sound off on a slightly different frequency than all the rest. It will get The Congos' sound stuck in your head with no hope of ever shaking out.



#### Lee Perry & Friends

THE SINGLES COLLECTION ANTHOLOGY 1968 TO 1979



#### Lee Perry & Friends

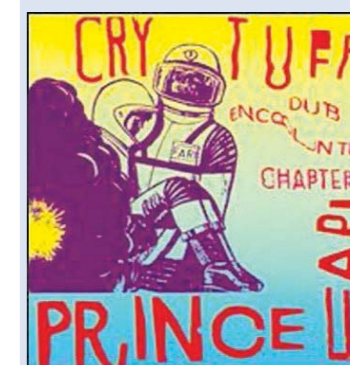
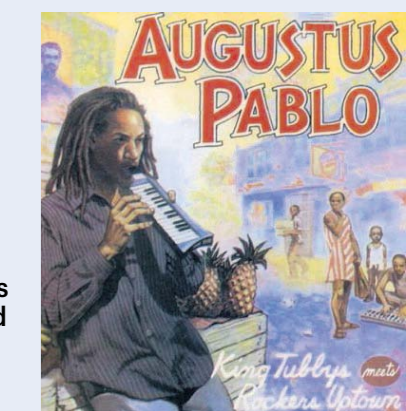
The Singles Collection: Anthology 1968 to 1979 (Trojan)

This two-CD compilation gathers some of the most brilliant and idiosyncratic productions of Lee "Scratch" Perry, whose work with The Congos in the 1970s happened alongside similar studio sessions with Bob Marley and numerous others.

#### Augustus Pablo

King Tubbys Meets Rockers Uptown (Shanachie)

Mellow and spacious, relaxed but wildly alive with a persistent sense of mystery, Augustus Pablo's classic matches snaky melodica-playing to wowing dub effects (echoes, EQ shifts, abstracted drum breaks) put in place by genre mastermind King Tubby.



#### Prince Far I

Cry Tuff Dub Encounter Chapter 3 (Pressure Sounds)

Known appropriately as the "Voice of Thunder", Prince Far I delivered booming, guttural vocal chants made ever-deeper in dub collaboration with artists in the UK including Adrian Sherwood, David Toop and Ari Up from The Slits.

tronic beat and smears of weightless guitar are greeted with the sound of The Congos alone with a microphone. Footage in the film shows them each in such a state, focused on something unseeable and seemingly floating on their feet after spells of ceremonial ganja-smoking. Their eyes slowly close, and their dreadlocks reach out all around them.

Their voices are still as singular as any ever recorded, and they stir all the more when, with mesmerising patience, each takes up his own command to "sing my favourite song". It's after that that they start intoning a message worth never forgetting: "music can take us all around the world".

The passion with which they sing it makes it disarmingly true, and the new context in which they have made themselves at home attests to ways that "the world" can change with exploratory shifts in time, place and states of mind.

Andy Battaglia is a New York-based writer whose work appears in *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Wire*, *Bookforum* and more.

The music on the record shares with the film a sense of coming-together in a series of fleeting and fitful moments meted out in real time. As some of the video footage shows, the members of The Congos - now well into their 60s - weren't quite sure how to sync up with a pair of young American cohorts at the start. Inside their studio compound, they tried to find their way into songs more shambling and electronically processed than they were used to. The governing sound was less traditional roots reggae than a form of futuristic psychedelia imagined by two young Californians raised in an era with no real allegiance to any genre or style.

All of that makes for a special kind of magic when the parts coalesce. The backing tracks by Sun Araw and M Geddes Gangras

revel in abstracted sounds: guitars processed to sound like they're dripping, drum machines that move in and out of time, keyboard tones stretched to the limits of recognition. All of it is strangely funky, in a roughed-up and ramshackle way, and summons a surreal sort of prismatic beauty.

The Congos, meanwhile, sing and chant, with a devotion to the kind of high harmonies that stoked their legend from the start. In *Sunshine*, the mix of voices that make up the group sing a hymn to the glories of a day awash in golden light. In *Jungle*, one of the voices gets lowdown and guttural in a way that mimics the lions central to Rastafarian iconography, while another chants a series of chirping notes in a falsetto upper register.

In *Happy Song*, a bellowing elec-