

Taproots, the Album

Reflections by Vanessa Adel March 14, 2018.



Matthew King's self-produced independent release, *Taproots*, is a gift of balm, reckoning, integration, and transcendence. A delicious meal, like the ones he concocts so beautifully in his home with his loved ones — it's got everything to soothe the pained soul. It's cleansing, lubricating, satisfying, affirming, filling, warm, and energizing.

Maracas and congas, trumpets and trombones, bass drums and hi hats, agogos and afoxés, guitars, acoustic and electric, voice, coquis, crickets, ocean waves and birdsong come together in a formidable energy of rhythm and lyric that also folds in various instruments of language and thought as found in its political, linguistic, and spiritual forms.

The musicians and instruments Matthew brings together on this album reflect his deep commitment to the collective and to the global, and to the tremendous creative brilliance of people whose names you “seldom hear” but who are “the ones who do all of the work” (Gomez on track 8), including longtime friends and community members. Talent shines all over this album. Each track underscores how beautifully Matthew gathers friends and plays to

everyone's strengths, facilitating vibrant energy that arises from being courageous and practicing creative generosity. Three musicians join this album from The Alchemystics, a band for which Matthew has played percussion for more than a decade — singer Illana Morris, keyboardist John Corda, and vocalist Garrick Force Perry. The ease with which these four play together reveals the deep ties forged between them through years of musical collaboration, as well as the bonds created through the devastation of losing their musical brothers Demse Zullo and Ras Jahn Bullock.



Dave Noonan's drums tie the album's rhythms together, while the soulful range and depth of Zami Buggs King, Ilana Morris, and Deja "Mal Devisa" Carr's voices will make you rise up from any folding in on yourself you might have been experiencing in these dark times. Jesse Ball, Mitch Chakour, and John Corda play keyboards on separate tracks, giving a smooth groove to the entire album. Kai Sandoval, Adam Thornburg, and Frank Newton lend their soulful talents to brass sections on several tracks with trumpet, trombone and sax.



Spoken word rises up in fierce articulation throughout this album, highlighting the urgent political and inspirational voices of Garrick "Force" Perry, Eraun "Catalyst" Dugger, and Magdalena Gomez. On track four, *Walk Lightly 'Pon the Land*, Perry sharpens our focus on the present US political moment with a rap that expresses the distress of living under the current destructive administration, and the challenge of finding our way out. Perry opens doors in the face of personal and collective despair with lines like these:

*"precipice I'm pressed against it Present tense the President convinced the climate isn't climbing
I'm inclined to jest but just can't justify or find a way to tie rants (tyrants) in"*

This, while Ahmed Gonzalez on flute, and John Corda on keyboards lift us up as the urgently soothing refrain sung by Matthew and Ilana Morris to "tread lightly 'pon the land" repeats itself with loving warning.

On track 7, Hands Up, Eraun "Catalyst" Dugger raps a testimony to police brutality against black men in the United States:

*"Stand up, fist up, lift up til my times up Look like me get picked out the lineup I swear the times
suck Stuck, inside a mindset of racism So take it til we make it need to break the schism"*

Dugger takes the stage and Matthew supports his linguistic prowess, belting out the song's refrains on electric guitar with a fast-paced funky beat reminiscent of Prince, and vocals that echo James Brown and David Bowie. In the final section of the song, students from the WOFA African Drum and Dance Company at the Pioneer Valley Performing Arts School where Matthew teaches



history, voice the dying words of 14 of the hundreds of victims of police violence like Eric Garner and Kenneth Chamberlain, imprinting lasting echoes of this senseless waste of beautiful human lives on our souls: “What did I do? What’s going on?” “I don’t want to die too young,” “it’s not real,” “I can’t breathe.”

While politics structures the scaffolding of our suffering, the earth is the ground upon which we live and survive. The album pays homage to the planet, our home, throughout. In the fifth track for example, called *Bosque*, we hear the sounds of coquis from Puerto Rico, crickets from the Pioneer Valley, and the piercing, evocative call of the red tail hawk, native to both Massachusetts and Puerto Rico, two specific lands that call Matthew — through ground and sound. These earthly sounds bind us sonically to both our rhythmic and ecological selves, reminding us of the power and fragility of the life that connects and sustains us. This song is a call and response between Matthew and a chorus — and its literal use of call and response is figuratively played out between Puerto Rico and Massachusetts, between northeastern deciduous forest and equatorial rainforest; between earth and humanity. In the face of climate change, rising seas, and environmental degradation, one consolation is that the earth will survive us, sixth extinction be damned. As Deja “Mal Devisa” Carr sings mournfully on *Hallowed Ground*, “The hills will sing our songs.”



Matthew draws from the musical traditions of funk, Cuban drumming, Brazilian Tropicalia, salsa, hip hop, samba, reggae, soul, pop, rock, acoustic folk, poetry, and spoken word. And yet, there’s no need to settle on genre here — the music pours through the soul. It is a libation like the one offered to the Orisha, Elegba, in the ceremonial opening of the album, titled *Opening*. Elegba is the Orisha of choices and possibilities. And the album propels us to feel the

possibilities we face despite the despair of climate change and climate injustice; despite enduring racism, mass incarceration, cruel deportation policies, and police brutality. The album shakes

Elegba's keys at us literally and figuratively — there are other doors, the album tells us. The album tells us playfully. It tells us earnestly. It gets us to dance and behold. New doors appear for our opening, if we so choose.

Matthew skillfully integrates the global — both in terms of the global moment in which we all find ourselves, in which our very ecological and political survival is at stake; and in terms of global musical influences that amplify the rhythm and facilitate transcendence to our better selves — through play, both serious and ludique. As he and his daughter, Zami sing so poignantly in harmony on track two, called *Everything*, “everything is everything.” Every slice contains the whole. Every dynamic contains another. Every manifestation expresses currents and vectors of energy, movement, rhythm that are echoed everywhere. How we specify the distinctions can disable our ability to see the patterns that bring it all together. Track two is a play on the distinctions. We love distinctions. We love specificity. And still, “everything is everything.”

This album calls us not so much to see, as to feel, especially in these times where we have lost our ability to tell the truth from the lie — the focus of track number three, the *Truth and the Lie* — a song based on a Lukumi creation story in which Olofi, one of three creation gods in the Orisha tradition, creates Truth in the shape of beauty, and Lie in the shape of the ugly and

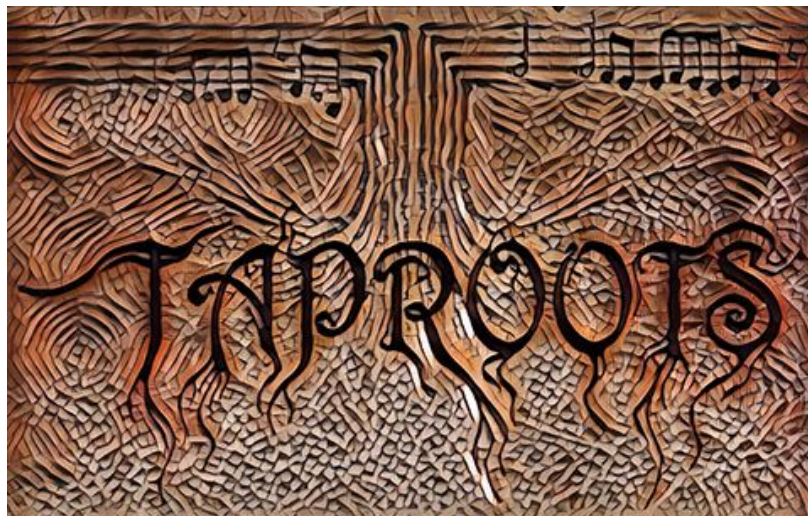


puny. Feeling sorry for the Lie, Olofi gives him a machete to defend himself. One day, Lie cuts off Truth's head. As Truth walks around trying to find his head, he finds Lie and wrenches off Lie's head to put it on his own body. On this track, Matthew employs the mischievous quality of Elegba, as he sings: “Truth and the lie/when we speak how do you know what's true?/Truth and the lie/Can you tell me which face speaks to you?” Here, Matthew embodies the trickster, shaking his head to the rhythms, his smile expanding furtively, ready to erupt knowingly and mischievously into a cascade of transformative laughter.

On the last track, *Invocation*, to a backdrop of traditional Cuban rhythms played by bata drum player, William Rodriguez, Magdalena Gomez ties the political, spiritual, and ecological threads of the album together in one emphatic weave in the form of a poem in which she calls “upon the

names of warriors, poets, artists, and mystics. . . the exiled and erased” to “invoke the trees of our segregated neighborhoods/to sing down the walls of fear...to ignite a sacred justice in the halls of tyranny.” She invokes all that is powerful and authentic, including the macaw and the tortoise, in order to assure us “I will find you in darkness and in light,” and in this crescendo of naming what is true, yet targeted; authentic, but dying; terrorized, yet still living — she challenges us to find ourselves and each other.

A tap root is a strong, wide root which grows deep into the earth and is a center from which other rootlets spring. This album is a taproot for humanity. The earth, spirit, redemption, and collective liberation spring from its musical source. Tap in, for this album gives us keys to our survival, to finding our way back to justice, to courage, to connection with the earth, and with each other. Play it and dance. Play it and weep. Play it and pick yourself up off the floor. Play it and open doors to your freedom, because we are *“headed to the crossroads ... it’s time to make a choice.”*



Full disclosure: Matthew King is my brother by another mother, sib by another crib. We met at Friends World College, an experiment in social justice and global education before study abroad was a thing. We were Generation Xers with a deep desire to extend the rebellion of the 1960s into the 1990s and beyond. We grew as scholar-activists, agitating in the face of racism, misogyny, colonialism, imperialism, capitalism. We were part of a mess of mostly privileged kids trying to figure out how to move forward with our lives while upending society and ourselves towards liberation. We marched in Act Up protests chanting silence=death. We marched against US imperial involvement in El Salvador and Nicaragua. And we drove a beat-up van to protest the Gulf War started by Bush senior. We explored various epistemologies, trying to shake off the chains of dichotomous thinking and victim-perpetrator dynamics we hated and knew were part of the logic of oppression, death, and destruction. We and our peers studied and lived in Costa Rica, China, India, Japan, England, Israel, the US, and Kenya, and traveled everywhere. Later, we had daughters within a year of each other and strolled with them during their toddler years in double strollers and baby

sunglasses. And Matthew, always with the music — with his guitar, his sitar, and his congas. This album has deep roots, and I feel tremendous gratitude to be friend and witness to Matthew's musical journey. Ashe!