

## The Eclectic Preciseness of

# M.U.G.A.B.E.E.

Men Under Guidance Acting Before Early Extinction

by C. Leigh McInnis

Men Under Guidance Acting Before Early Extinction's *Earth Tones* is a very smart album in that the group rarely sacrifices imagery for rhyme and no beat or groove is an exact replica of something else. Thus, the lyrics are as engaging as the music. The entire work is inquisitive, asking questions of themselves and of us. The album is filled with anthems that inspire one to continue to fight the good fight. M.U.G.A.B.E.E. rarely takes the easy way out with their subject matter and their writing skills. As their art is searching, the album reverberates with the act of wanting to know more, wanting to become better than we are now, and needing to find a reason to continue.

"Eternal" is the introduction, not just to the group but to their ideology. Horns blaring over the top of a big, booming beat--it's 2001 Space Odyssey meets John Coltrane with some P-Funk coordination. From here, the work slips into a collection of tightly arranged musical movements and thought-provoking lyrics. "Watchugondu," featuring Princess and Tongyalahsol, it evokes memories of Tupac. The beat bounces while the lyrics remain smooth and smoky with the lovely voices of Princess and Tongyalahsol rounding out the texture. The lyrics are smart and are accompanied by a groove that can be bumped in the clubs, the jeeps, and the picnics. The next cut, "2000 & Beyond," is driven by well arranged harmonies and the hip lyrical stylings of Carlton. Not only are they funky, but their lyrics are uplifting, "So let go of what they told u...anything u want u can have.

There is nothing to stand n your way."

"Full Moons MT Promises" evokes images of Miles in an after hours cafe' with the vocals of a midnight crooner all underneath Carlton's precision lyrics in timely spots. A "Strange Fruit" sort of groove, M.U.G.A.B.E.E. uses beautiful music and vocals to make social commentary, "What



shall we implant in our seeds?" "3 2 Da 4" continues the jazz vibe. This is the most perfect blend of poetry and music, where the music is merely a complement to the layered imagery. The muted horn takes the hand of the bass and lays a carpet for the feet of Carlton's metaphors to guide us into a mental awakening. Toward the end of the track, the horn engages the spaces left by the bass, providing both closure and framing.

"School Daze" introduces Gill Scott-Heron to Diggable Planets. Spoken word comes to full fruition over the top of crackin' drum and subtle bass.

as we're informed of teenagers whose lives are filled with "partly cloudy skies with a 5% chance of becoming rich and famous." This is another smart and self-aware cut that plots the points between the wars of Bush I and Bush II, while the only things that have changed is artificial fashion and "baby girl's baby girl just had a baby girl." M.U.G.A.B.E.E. wishes to awake us from our "School Daze," and become critical thinkers so that we may break the cycle of being the pawns in everyone else's game. And "Last Days Alpha" bookends "School Daze" and proves that the group is more analytical than political by venting their "metaphysical rage," and calling on the ancient spirits. With "Last Days Alpha" the group is stripping away the ideologies of organized institutions and shooting for right and wrong, rather than democrat versus republican. Thus, the music is also stripped down to a "Rock the Bells" flavor that allows the lyrics to live and thrive on their own.

"It Duzn't Matta" presents the group as ghetto poets, speaking to the concerns of the streets. If the brothers on the streets are willing to wade through the metaphysical musings of tracks 1-7, they will be rewarded with some street funk. The mix of Maurice and Carlton with the soul of Tongyalahsol and the razor swift raps of Cat Girl bring the song's meaning home. What separates "It Duzn't Matta" from the nihilism of its peers is the ray of hope that it presents. The bad things of life do not matter because they will live the positive regardless. There is a peace that abides in M.U.G.A.B.E.E. that forces their feet to walk the narrow way of positivity.

And this entire album is not about preaching that, but about sharing some of it.

affirms Kalamu ya Salaam's notion that the musician's goal is to be poetic. Brown's playing constructs



gap of inconsistent space between Armstrong's message and the actual pain endured by Black people during that time. In the same manner, M.U.G.A.B.E.E. distorts the refrain and the verses to show the hypocrisy of the rhetoric of Condoleezza Rice, Armstrong Williams, and J. C. Watts who proclaim that Black people are enjoying a wonderful time in history. This song takes on the hypocrisy that Black people are fed and forced to eat on a daily basis, especially in this time of pornographic patriotism, "I see 31 shoots fired...under patriotic flags...what a wonderful world..." Musically, this track keeps the agony of Armstrong's horn, but burns it with a fiery mute and cracking drums.

In 1987, the only knock against Prince's Sign "O" the Times was that it is too musical, too eclectic, and too varied. If this is a flaw, then Earth Tones is guilty of this crime. The album is a Hip Hop challenge--no bitches, no whores, no n-words, no body killed. Constructing a musical and lyrical workshop, M.U.G.A.B.E.E. has erased certain words

from their lexicon as if to challenge themselves not to fall back on the dogmatic or the cliché'. What is left is a very experimental journey that plots indexes of the possibility of rap/poetry/music.

"Solar Systa" and "Get Urself 2gether" not only display the groups musical diversity, they battle for the direction of the album. "Solar Systa" is a maze of horns flexed and blared at precise points, and "Get Urself 2gether" is laced with bumpin' beats and not much else. And just when you have settled into the battle between horns and break beats, "Lyf 2 Def" hits you with a house/techno inspired ramp that displays even more range. Accordingly, "Last Days Omega" displays more of their lyrical prowess. "U better start douching your mind from years of unclean living or u'll be swept away in the minstrel cycle...if u allow urself 2 b caught up in anything other than progress." While Carlton is spewing verbal rain, Maurice reaches up with his horn and opens the windows of space so that Carlton's words can soar freely with his musical phonemes.

While the album is hip and radio friendly, it is seasoned with just enough local flavor to separate itself from becoming cookie-cutter music. "Da Tym Iz Now" features local saxophonist Ezra Brown, and "Wyzen Up" features local guitarist Chris Alford. Brown's playing

*While Carlton is spewing verbal rain, Maurice reaches up with his horn and opens the windows of space so words can soar freely ...*

a conversation with the discourse of M.U.G.A.B.E.E., further pushing the group's musical boundaries and dissolving their limitations. Maurice and Brown engage in a musical tap dance, trading licks as Carlton soft shoes just beneath them. Alford's fingering and the group's harmony creates a mellow but august sound, while Carlton's lyrics call for the mass to take responsibility for their own understanding of life.

The apex of the album is "What A Wonderful Wurd," featuring poet/activist Jolivette Anderson, aka the Poet Warrior" and Tongyalahsol. Opening with scorching verbiage from Anderson, this track is a modification/reconfiguration of Louie Armstrong's work. The song is driven by Maurice's raspy vocals and Carlton's poignant lyrics, "I see blood skies & holy cries...I see hungry children with no medication...mothers tricking and no fathers there..." The genius of the song is that it exploits the

