

Bert & Ernie, make room for Lupe!

by *George_Varga*

Lupe Fiasco recently had the distinction of being the first musical guest to appear on the first episode of TV's "The Late Show With David Letterman" following the program's two-month, writers-strike-fueled hiatus. It was a fitting honor for the hip-hop maverick, who cites Billie Holiday, Tom Waits and Johnny Cash among his favorite artists, and credits "Sesame Street" and Dr. Seuss among his biggest songwriting influences.

FIASCO IN THE MAKING - Making albums requires a single-minded approach for hip-hop maverick Lupe Fiasco. CNS Photo courtesy of Lionel Deluy. Lupe's music icons

A true maverick, Lupe Fiasco draws from a deeper and more varied musical well than many hip-hop artists. This helps explain why he cites "Sesame Street" as a songwriting influence and hopes to record with members of Pink Floyd. Here are two of his all-time favorites:

ARTIST: Billie Holiday

The 411: Lady Day, as she was also widely known, is one of the most eloquent jazz and blues singers either music has ever known. Only 44 when she died in 1959, she left behind a remarkable body of work that included myriad solo albums and collaborations with such icons as Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Artie Shaw and Benny Goodman. A hard-living woman who battled depression, abusive relationships and debilitating drug and alcohol habits, she was able to channel her personal pain into a series of exquisitely moving records.

Classic songs: "Strange Fruit," "Lover Man" and "God Bless the Child."

Fiasco: "She's one of my heroes, my icons. She didn't have the greatest voice, compared to Sarah (Vaughan) and Ella (Fitzgerald), but she always had a certain kind of pain she conveyed. And she was a tough lady who

knocked out sailors in bars! She was a gangsta!"

ARTIST: Tom Waits

The 411: Born in Pomona, Calif., and raised in San Diego, Waits is one of pop's most distinctive and uncompromising singer-songwriters. His early songs from the 1970s have been covered by Bruce Springsteen, The Eagles, Rod Stewart and others. The music he's recorded since his landmark 1983 album, "Swordfish Trombones," is so raw and distinctive that almost no one else has even dared to even try. Equal parts hobo and barroom raconteur, sonic daredevil and junkyard poet, blues shouter and skewed crooner, he's an American original.

Classic songs: "San Diego Serenade," "Heart of Saturday Night" and "Day After Tomorrow."

Fiasco: "He's a master storyteller and performer, both on and off stage. He has a certain approach, which is very guttural and sloppy, but also very controlled. I love his (1975 album) 'Nighthawks at the Diner,' and (1999's) 'Mule Variations,' which has 'Big in Japan' and 'Chocolate Jesus' on it." Fiasco recently launched a national tour of clubs and small theaters. Timed to promote his excellent second album, "Lupe Fiasco's the Cool," the tour is the eighth of his career but his first with a band. His previous shows found him accompanied only by a DJ.

"You have to grow into it; I don't think it's wise to start out with a band," said the 25-year-old Fiasco (real name: Wasalu Muhammad Jaco), who got his start rapping at high school talent shows in his hometown of Chicago.

"A band can become a crutch. If you look back through the history of hip-hop, in the beginning it was just you and a microphone, and the challenge was: 'How do you rock the crowd when you don't have any music?' So, it's like training and actually learning how to entertain a crowd with the most minimal amount of tools. ... It's always about progression, instead of starting out really huge, and then - when people want more - where can you go, but down? If you don't know how to entertain with just you and a DJ, first, a band won't help

you."

With or without his six-man band, this uncompromising rapper is a force to contend with. Witness his new album and his nearly as impressive 2006 debut, "Lupe Fiasco's Food & Liquor," which earned him three Grammy Award nominations.

A savvy social observer who first made waves with his 2006 vocal cameo on Kanye West's "Touch the Sky," Fiasco is upbeat by nature, yet deeply concerned about the constantly declining state of the world around him. Both of his albums begin with a stark spoken-word performance by his sister, Iesha Jaco, 27, who briefly ruminates on timely social and political topics.

"I want her to shine so she can never say she had nothing to do with my career!" Fiasco quipped. "But, really, we share some of the same ideals because of our parents. Spoken-word is to the point and abrasive, so I wanted to open up the albums with her, and say: 'Hey, listen! Pay attention!'"

Fiasco's breakthrough song, the infectious "Kick, Push," chronicled a skateboarding-fueled mall punk love affair, while lampooning authority figures. Other songs on his first album explored more weighty topics with a wit, insight and a level of spiritual and ethical consciousness missing from the work of almost every hip-hop artist who isn't named Common, Mos Def or Pharoahe Monch.

On "Hurt Me Soul," Fiasco - raised as a Muslim - takes hip-hop to task for its demeaning treatment of women and chronic lack of morality. "The Instrumental" smartly laments the mind-numbing reality that is modern-day TV, while "Daydreamin'" is a sci-fi-inspired fantasy about America's inner cities that also takes aim at the empty aesthetics of hip-hop: "Come on everybody, let's make cocaine cool / We need a few more half-naked women up in the pool / And hold this Mack 10 that's all covered in jewels / And could you please put (your breasts) closer to the 22s? / And where's the champagne? We need more champagne."

He's even more to the point on "Dumb It Down," a standout song from his new album. It finds Fiasco pointedly observing how much he could improve his prospects for commercial success by pandering to the

lowest common denominator of gangsta-rap stereotypes.

"'Dumb It Down' looks at how musical entertainment as a whole is used as a distraction, as a tool, to keep people dumb, instead of focusing on real issues and solutions," he said.

"Most definitely, I rap about issues like this for a reason. I don't just do it to do it; I present it in as unbiased a way as possible, so that people know it exists. You can't expect people to act if they don't know it exists. Situations that are sad and uncomfortable take a long time to address, especially when you are living in a culture of instant gratification."

An agile vocalist and a skilled wordsmith with a gift for creating intricate internal rhymes, Fiasco regards himself as a performer who uses his music to educate while he entertains, and vice versa. What results - he calls it "edutainment" - is a tricky balancing act by any standard. But it is one he is eager to take on, even if he cites an unlikely source of inspiration.

"Being raised on 'Sesame Street,' that's how I learned, that's how I was 'edutained' and learned how to 'edutain,'" he said.

"It has to be catchy. A serious subject works better and is digested better if you put it in more of a light environment and make it more palatable. Do you teach Einstein's theory of relativity out of a textbook, or by having Frank Sinatra sing it? You'll remember more if Frank is singing it."

Such ambition is admirable, certainly, and helps explain why Fiasco is one of the most critically acclaimed hip-hop artists of the past few years. Yet, while his record company would like to see him score hit songs, he's convinced the best way to ensure longevity in the here-today gone-tomorrow music business is by not even trying to make hits.

"I don't know how to make a hit record; I always say this at record company meetings," Fiasco noted. "I don't know how to experience flash-in-the-pan success, which we equate with a hit record, where you are a 'flavor of the month,' and then it dies off because that record is bigger than the artist themselves.

"I have to make great bodies of work - I'm not saying my body of work is great - but I have to intentionally make very good albums. I'm like the 'no-hit wonder,' because there are no hits on my albums. So, people are more interested in me as an artist, and that's one of the key ingredients for me to be successful, to be relevant.

"It's the difference between selling a million records and making a ton of money on a (music) ring-tone, and then disappearing, or hustling and grinding and really working hard. It pays off in the end. Because concert promoters can say: 'You only have one song.' But they can't pull that with me; I've got two hours of good songs."

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