

# CARL HANCOCK RUX

## GOOD BREAD ALLEY

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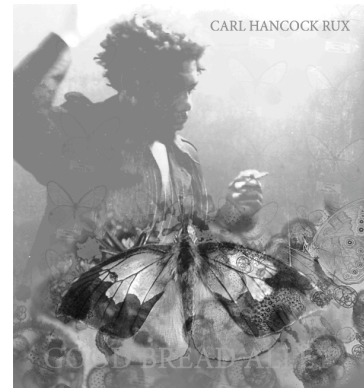
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When Peter Gordon (music producer and president of indie record label, Thirsty Ear) approached writer/recording artist Carl Hancock Rux about doing a full-length album for his Blue Series, Gordon had a concept in mind—contemporary blues. Blues has been showing up a lot of late, especially in the sounds of buzzworthy rock groups such as the White Stripes, the Strokes, Pearls & Brass. While Rux's critically acclaimed 1999 debut, *Rux Revue* (Sony/550) and equally lauded sophomore project, 2004's *Apothecary Rx* (Giant Step), had incorporated elements of blues (as well as gospel, rock, classical and hip-hop) within his heady brew of eclectic soul, he had never been asked to record a *blues* record before. "I was afraid (Gordon) meant he wanted me to sound like Howlin' or something" the 34 year old multi-disciplinary artist admits, "but Gordon was interested in my *concept* of the blues—something he'd already heard in my voice, and wanted to hear more of in my music. Gordon's concept was never intended to be taken literally. He's a conceptual producer, like a contemporary art gallery curator who exhibits artists actively engaging with form. He was inviting me to interact with the blues the same way he'd invited and challenged his other artists (Mathew Shipp, Mike Ladd, Beans, DJ Spooky, among others) to push the envelope of jazz and hip-hop without being self conscious about it."



While the Strokes may have first been introduced to the blues via their parents' 60s rock records before finding their way to the source of its inspiration, Rux decided to take an opposite approach—garnering his influences not only from the African American tradition the blues was born out of, but from the country, folk, and rock traditions it has influenced over the last one hundred years. For Rux, making a 21st century blues record meant "approaching blues as a classical form—the term classical music is misused when it's only applied to 18th and 19th century European composition. That term, especially in America, applies to Blues." Having grown up in New York City's foster care system, eventually adopted by a childless retired African American couple "steeped in jazz and blues culture," Rux didn't have to go far to find his blues muse. "New York has always been a blues city for me," he explains. "It's in everything the city is made of."

The sound of Rux's *Good Bread Alley* (borrowing its title from a now defunct segregated black district in Florida around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century) features a scaled down sound of live acoustic piano (played by Kwame Brandt Pierce and effected by Rux collaborator, Jaco van Schalkwyk), upright bass (Jason DeMatteo) and drums (Chris Eddleton). It's blues-scape brings to mind Son House, Bob Dylan, Nico & the Velvet Underground, as well as the southern fried soul of Bill Withers. If Rux's previous efforts left music critics aesthetically pleased (one critic called his last CD "An album filled with pain, poison, And healing energy propelled by an incredibly layered, textured musical collage...") yet full of frequently asked questions (Is it Hip-Hop? R&B? Electronica? Spoken Word? Nouveau Soul?) *Good Bread Alley* takes a simpler, less cluttered approach to the artist's often difficult to categorize music.

With ten tracks of haunting melodies, beautiful lyrics and Rux's signature lush hypnotic baritone—often described as a powerful vocal artistry somewhere between Hendrix, Scott-Heron and Jim Morrison, a voice capable of transfixing or lulling you to sleep—*Good Bread...* features song writing collaborations with guitarist/producer Vernon Reid (*Lies*), *Ocean's Eleven* soundtrack DJ David Holmes (*Living Room*), and a cover of a 1975 anti-Vietnam blues song by Bill Withers (*I Can't Write Left Handed*).

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*Lies*, perhaps one of the record's most identifiably blues influenced songs, was initially recorded for an unreleased project of Reid's. Rux's voice, harmonizing with itself over plunking piano licks, takes on the wit and sarcasm of the blues tradition;

*I told a lie  
and I liked that lie  
oh my oh my  
loved that lie  
that ol' lie of mine*

*but the lie grew thick  
and the lie got old  
and people got tired  
of my stories told..*

*Living Room* is a punked out foot stomping bass thumping rant in which Rux hand delivers the blues of rock and roll back into the bosom of its inventors. On the track (originally produced by David Holmes and recorded on his *Bow Down to The Exit Sign*, released in the UK on the now defunct Go! Beat label) Rux intones a violent soul fury paying homage to the gods of jazz and blues—

*I think Archie Shepp  
played hambone hambone  
where you been  
lin my living room  
the night faces and fists  
melded mellifluous  
melancholy madness*

*spurt/splash/  
torrent falls/  
gushing reds  
/primeval screams/  
crashing through vodka spittle...*

Kicking off with a funky three/four twelve bar blues tune, the album's title track features Rux in Pentecostal preacher mode, aptly riffing a political prophecy to the masses that bobs and weaves in and out of a sea of heavy handed juke joint piano and drums;

*We had found a happiness  
in a nothingness—*

*We were threatened  
by the lessons of living*

*It was a wound that we embraced  
kept us safe from remembering  
the suffering that existence brings  
These are the things,  
the sounds that we love*

*The Truth is not what's being said—  
that bed of emptiness is where we lie  
and try to keep  
warm/forewarned  
of the magistrates and the apostates. . .*



Then, as if to assuage our fears of a pending (albeit sexy) doom, follows with *Union Song* (*My Brother's Hands*), a psalm like folk chant over an almost minuet waltz piano melody written in honor of his younger brother;

*My Brother's hands  
Tapestries  
And His face  
Just like me*

*Graceful legs  
Like jewels  
Craftsman's hands—*

*Worker's tools...*

*If my brother  
Looks Just like me  
Bring Him here  
Let me see...*

*Our Allah  
Is on high  
He's awaiting  
His own trial*

"My brother and I grew up in foster care, separately" Rux explains, "and we're just getting to know each other now. He's a schoolteacher, a Muslim, and married with three kids. We're very different, but we're the same...and Union song is about those things that unify us as well as attempt to divide us, both spiritually and politically." On "Behind the Curtain," Rux reaches into his days growing up in the South Bronx and Harlem where he sang in the local churches—a sweet and sour reflection that embraces the experience while subtly criticizing the damaging effects of its social construct;

*Another summer  
Another night  
Of decaying buildings  
And broken lights*

*Storefront church  
Of El Beth-el  
We gave birth  
to Jesus will*

*And Penola  
She sang and prayed  
Holy Sharon, she obeyed*

*And their smells still come to me  
Gates of hell  
And sanctity*

*Another idea  
Behind the curtain*



Listening to *Good Bread Alley* inspires a very visual response to the music. On songs like *Union Song*, and *Thadeus Star* the piano has an almost orchestral presence. *Thadeus Star*, co-penned by Rux and Portishead's Geoff Barrow and first recorded by Stephanie McKay (McKay, Go! Beat, 2004), sees Rux combine the tradition of Hip Hop with a waterfall of Baroque piano parts. With repeated listening, the track, about a woman who wills her own vanishing, also seems to lament the passing of the established forms contained within it.

*Thadeus Star  
Where are you now?  
You said to me... I've got to be free*

*Lady scorned, worn down, born around  
A time of wine and war  
Chore of the misbegotten  
You said to me  
How can a woman be loud and free?*

Geneva sees Rux returning to a whiskey and wax stained sound reminiscent of John Lee Hooker and the basement recording studios of a post-Second World War Midwest. "I had been performing this song live for years," he explains, "first as a duet with singer Queen Esther, and I even recorded a version of it with Nona Hendryx for my first album." (*Corn Bread, Cognac, Collard Green Revolution*, 1996, Unreleased). The *Good Bread* version, featuring slide guitarist Dave Tronzo and long-time Rux vocalist Marcelle Lashley, finds Rux revealing an intimacy kindred with the soulful recordings one expects of a once fragile recording medium. The track, spare and tempered in its simplicity, hearkens back to an era where cutting a record meant more than burning megabytes. This much can also be said for much of *Good Bread Alley*, which comes across as a record founded in necessity.

