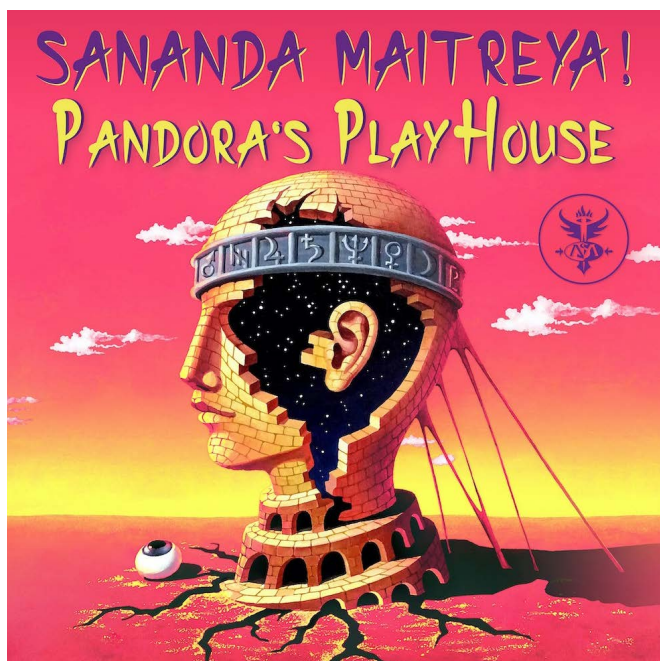




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Unsurprisingly there's plenty to consider, with **'Pandora's Playhouse'** following a similar format to the 'quartology' of lengthy albums that began with 2011's album **'The Sphinx'**, through to **'Prometheus and Pandora'** in 2017. Each album, heady with content, and emotionally draining to the point of becoming contextually meaningless ('Prometheus and Pandora' consisted of 53 songs with over 3 hours of listening) - 'Pandora's Playhouse' weighs in with 28 songs, comprising complete works, musical interludes, soundbites, and songs that sound like demo's, or are or just unfinished. Without question, if Maitreya has got something to say, it will find its way onto the album.

Maitreya took to residing with his family in Italy, exonerating any associations with his former critics, record label hang-ups and the condemnation towards his commercially unappreciated recordings during the latter part of his career as Terence Trent D'arby. Long gone are those years of self-importance and using every interview opportunity to crown his own genius. By virtue of the culturally appreciative surroundings that appear to have gifted Maitreya greater stability to concentrate on making music, his songwriting has flourished and diversified, almost to the annoyance of finding it difficult to place.

Pandora's Playhouse' hears the multi-instrumentalist drawing inspiration from the wells of Greek mythology, with folklorish tales of love, life, and mortality, striking a parallel with his own life's journey.

By Jim Mumby

Somewhere between profit and gospel singer, **Sananda Maitreya's** voracious songwriting continues with his latest conception, **'Pandora's Playhouse'**, which hears the multi-instrumentalist drawing inspiration from the wells of Greek mythology, with folklorish tales of love, life, and mortality, that strike a parallel with his own life's journey.



Nevertheless, as the journey of Pandora continues on from the 'Prometheus and Pandora' album, then to some degree, so does the concept of writing 'Pegasus, Prometheus and Pandora' variations of songs. Seemingly confusing to anyone new to this period of his music, Maitreya helps to explain: **"Each CD/Volume has its own thematic space. Such as does the Positive Force, the Negative Force & the Neutralizing. Prometheus is the MASCULINE Principle in Action, Pandora the FEMININE, & Pegasus the RECONCILING, MEDIATING force. Since Pegasus chose mainly to remain silent, he was given most of the 'Instrumentals' which is meant to be a 'chillout' kind of space before the hurricane that is Pandora"**.

The cosmic introduction hear's **'Pandora's Plight'** as a poem recital, a musically sparse, spoken word serving of meditative calmness. The more raucous gospel-blues power cover of **'Time Is on My Side'** reminds us of Maitreya's dry-throated vocal tone, whereas the flippant, Vaudevillian overtones of **'Don't Break My Ball's'** irritates like the embarrassing guest at the party. However, everything is thrown into the ballsy **'The Ballad of Rod Steiger'**, a fantastical country rock-blues, recounting a chance 'meeting' with the many faceted actor, who spoke with wit and wisdom, "play stupid games, win stupid prizes". Albeit fragmented, the overall result is outrageously theatrical.

As a multi-instrumentalist, although Maitreya has free licence to explore his playing capacity at will, that can occasionally be an oversight, certainly in the face of proficiency. Without being totally dismissive of his ability, there's evidence of complacency and some notably sloppy playing, compared with the technical proficiencies of studio musicians, noticeable when Maitreya's relatively simplistic rhythm playing demands precision. While there's a focus on Maitreya's voice, there are jarring moments of poor technical performances with **'Her Kiss'** being a prime example, where such a tender vocal is numbed by weak instrumentation. Fortunately, thanks to Maitreya's concept to explore variants of his songs, there's a 'Pandora' version, essentially acoustic, and it's understated performance is all that is needed for it to be an album highlight.

What Maitreya has successfully proven, is his ability to cross genres vocally. The funk-rock sound that was synonymous with his early work, is a given, therefore suits **'The Madhouse'**, while **'Yuki Suzuki'** echoes trashy **'American college-rock'**, but stands up fine. Even on the 'boom-bap' flow of **'The King's of Avalon'** Maitreya sounds well-versed with a take on early rap. Disappointingly, regardless of the gossamer-thin connection with Pandora's box, **'Pie'** hears vocals that are really quite painful across one of the longest tracks on the album. Fortunately, there are no variants. Meanwhile, **'GlassHouse'** is another fine example of less-is-more, on a paired-back, solemn tale of reflection.



Where it may have been expected to hear the mysterious interior of **'Pandora's Playhouse'** showcased, the title track dismally reveals itself to be Maitreya's great unfinished masterwork, a weary piano instrumental with a repeating motif, that goes from A to B, then back to A, through a lacklustre chord progression that makes Commodores **'Easy'** sound technically demanding. There are encouraging glimpses of new directions, that finds Maitreya trading digital for acoustic, with some intriguing electro-infusions on both **'The Queens of Babylon'**, and on the contemporary reimagining of James Brown's most commercial song **'Living in America'**, aptly titled **'In America'**. There are also dabs of electronica painted onto **'The Ballad of Smokey Robinson'**, and retro drum-machines shaping **'Excuse Me, But...'**



...But, as 'Pandora's Playhouse' progresses, so too does the weakening of the album's concept. Aside from the fleeting mention of **Pegasus and Prometheus**, there's little to hang on to and little in the way of relatable Greek folklore. It seems Maitreya's albums have often become victims of their own excessiveness. In a society where streaming, randomising and playlist management are the norm; overworked, bloated albums don't appear to have any justification. Strip away all of the unfinished sounding works, rationalise the album by only including the strongest and most treasured songs, then a decluttered Playhouse may prove to be Maitreya's finest hour. ■