



Album review: SANANDA MAITREYA – Fallen Angel Tour 2019 Live From The Ruins

January 6, 2020

By [Jason](#)

TreeHouse Publishing [Release date 13.12.19]

In 2001 the singer known as TTD legally changed his name to Sananda Maitreya, telling *The New Yorker* at the time that he had meditated for “a new spirit, a new will, a new identity”. Whatever his personal or spiritual motivations, this was the latest in a series of decisions that left the casual listener confused and forced the more dedicated fan to work harder to track down the newly designated Maitreya’s output.

Manhattan-born Terence Trent D’Arby first emerged in the pop world with his 1987 debut album, ‘Introducing the Hardline According to Terence Trent D’Arby’ on Columbia Records.

This was the era of the black superhero; Michael Jackson, Prince and Whitney Houston reigned supreme – larger than life figures that had “crossed over” to white audiences and received media coverage and adulation that made them seem God-like (at least to begin with). There is an alternate universe where Terence Trent D’Arby joins that trio; like Prince, Trent D’Arby’s music refused categorisation and hopped genres.

Perhaps difficult to imagine now, but in the 1980s American radio was still very much segregated and anything that wasn’t easily marketable to a specific audience was discouraged. Yet paradoxically those who did move between worlds – soul to rock, disco to new wave, were rewarded with the greatest success.

The music critic Nelson George termed this type of unencumbered black artist as *retronuevo* and Terence Trent D’Arby was the most *retronuevo* artist of them all. His bohemian style, dreads and stripped back presentation style were gloriously out of step with the outrageous outfits and jheri curls of the era and arguably opened the commercial door for other bohemian figures like Lenny Kravitz. ‘Hardline’ was rapturously received by critics and record buyers alike and boasted two monster singles in ‘Wishing Well’ and ‘Sign Your Name’, not just in the US but in the ever important European territories.

Unfortunately the curse of the difficult second album struck and 1989’s, ‘Neither Fish nor Flesh’, was routinely dismissed

by critics as self-indulgent and pretentious, while the sales disappointed.

The fate of his sophomore effort was not helped by the record label seemingly going sour on their virtuoso poster boy and barely promoting the album. From then on, Terence Trent D’Arby would surface intermittently through the next decade, often giving the impression that having been to the mountaintop he wasn’t keen on returning there – occasionally he’d garner a modest hit single, like 1993’s ‘Let Her Down Easy’ but the fervour and plaudits of ‘Hardline’ were never to be recaptured. Eventually rebranding as Sananda Maitreya, moving to Italy and releasing work independently through indie labels and his own website, Maitreya has maintained a modest dedicated fan base and of late has started embracing the totality of his career, performing live the work of both his identities.

Sananda Maitreya’s new live album is recorded across his 2019 tour of Italy, with new band The Sugar Plum Pharaohs’ who have been recruited locally. Immediately grabbing the listener’s attention, the collection starts off with the hard rocking, ‘Mid Life Crisis Blues’ from 2017’s ‘Prometheus and Pandora’, drummer Marco Mengoni brings a heavy but deft sound and Luca Pedroni’s Guitar is dynamic without being overly showy.

Now boasting a rasp occasionally reminiscent of Living Colour’s Corey Glover, it is evident that Maitreya’s voice has changed over time; on more tender, slower numbers his voice sporadically goes flat and the signature falsetto is noticeably absent, however the man of today brings a soulful earthiness to proceedings. Indeed, on ‘It Ain’t Been Easy’ he sings “SANANDA is my name and I was dead before I ever knew the game” with a conviction that informs the listener that he’s definitely lived a life.

Also apparent is that Maitreya enjoys the interplay between other musicians, there are several moments where he’ll throw over a spotlight to another band member, as on ‘The Birds Are Singing’ where backing vocalist Beatrice Baldaccini brings an airy, joyful quality. Maitreya and Luisa Corna duet on a cover of Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice’s ‘I Don’t Know How To Love Him’, making the abstract Jesus Christ Superstar number a more conventional love ballad, which is surprisingly effective.



For those who lost touch with Maitreya's later work, this album offers a helpful jumping on point and it is pleasing to note how the newer material slides-in easily against the more famous hits. A good example is 2005's 'The Ballad of Lonesome Rhodes', a bluesy ode to lost loves and 2017's 'It's Been A Long Time', a jaunty number with funky guitar favourably reminiscent of Prince's 'Alphabet Street'. 'It's Been A Long Time' is one of three songs that features an appearance by Orchestra Ritmico Sinfonica Italiana adding additional gravitas.

When the setlist does cycle to more well known material it is with mixed results. 'Let Her Down Easy' is poignant as ever, Maitreya's aged vocal only adding to the song's beauty. 'O Divina' is euphoric and expanded by the Sinfonica's horn lines but closer, 'Sign Your Name' feels a bit by the numbers and Sananda doesn't sound engaged with the song, perhaps this is to be expected as a lot of water has passed under that bridge but his biggest single probably had to be in the collection somewhere.

The collection also suffers from being recorded at different venues; the best live albums conjure an atmosphere of what it is to be in the audience on that specific evening, by chopping between gigs it feels a little bit of a cheat however it does allow for the best takes. That said, 'Live From The Ruins' is a welcome opportunity to reconnect with a too often overlooked musician, that still has an abundance to offer. *** ½

Review by Phillip Beamon