

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Interview with The Incredible Music-Mage Derek Menchan

Mish (Eileen) Murphy · Wednesday, July 15th, 2020

I heard it through the grapevine—multi-talented singer/musician/music producer-arranger/philosopher/humanities professor Derek Menchan is about to drop his new album, his second, entitled *The Incredible*. His first album, *The Griot Swings the Classics* (2018), was quite well-received, even achieving top of the chart ranking for its category on Amazon for a time.

At the end of this interview, there's a YouTube link to one of the singles on the new album, "At Last," a cover of the Etta James classic. Menchan's version of "At Last" is simply phenomenal. It's a taste of what to expect when the album is released later this year.

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Eileen Murphy: *What can you tell us about your new album—for example, when will it be released? Who's on it? What's on it?*

Derek Menchan: Indeed, new stuff coming, and I plan to drop it late Fall.

When I wrapped work on the project, just two months ago, I looked back and saw that I had recorded in three different states, and had collaborated with no less than eight artists on this project, each amazing in their own right. I teamed up again with drummer Marty Morell, formerly of the Bill Evans Trio, and a mutual friend of ours, pianist John C. O'Leary. My good friend, Shawn "The Cat" Edmonds, trumpet—the big Broadway dude—is on it, and you've heard him before, at a couple of my chamber music season's concerts—and, as I say, five more world class musicians. I have to say, though, that my new discovery, the Houston singer, Kaci Timmons, really steals the show, in her vignettes on the record.

What's on it is a huge question, but let's just say that my first album was very much an introduction to the *Menchanverse*. This album is a full hang; a party, with me. *The Incredible* is a deep spelunking trip into the philosophico-spiritual underground cave complex of the American Negro unconscious. Not that I, as a Black male, dare to even try to speak for all Negroes, but the album's voice will resonate with many, from so many different perspectives.



EM: *What is there about your new album that you feel will probably attract and engage the listener/audience?*

DM: When it comes to me and my work, I don't churn out crowd-pleasing "hits"; I create art, so my listeners include admirers of old school vibes, and connoisseurs. So, I do have a following, but even newbies to my sound will love that it expands and opens up even farther than in my debut, onto a vast sound-world, covering, both, the mundane and spaces hitherto untraversed. It's a big trip, this album. It is a sprawling, massive recording.

EM: *You sang and played multiple musical instruments on your last album, **The Griot Swings the Classics**. Do you continue to do so on the new album—if yes, can you comment on how that's working out?*

DM: Yes, yes. There is a curious level of meta always at work in what I do. My mruzick is aware it is being created, by me—*manufactured*— and thus it acts in accordance with that self-awareness. It's kind of like David Lynch's quote from his *Twin Peaks* multiverse, about the tulpas: "*Someone manufactured you.*" My mruzick is an artifice— a deliberate set of *re-imaginings*—*and it knows that it is*. It is a figment; a phantom. So, it adheres to spectral, rather than *human*, rules of music. It's what John Fogerty wrote: "Wondrous apparition, provided by magician..." My mruzick plays involved games with the attentive listener. Think of the theatrical stage direction: *larvatus prodeo* ("I advance, masked"). My music presents itself to you, authentically, yet it is masked. It is itself—in *disguise*. Just as the Hindu god Krishna does with being human, so does my mruzick with musical presentation: *it merely plays at being actual*.

EM: *You've said that the inspiration for your first album was your beloved mother. Who or what is your new album inspired by?*

DM: The albums complement each other, they're bookends; *Griot* channels my mom; *The Incredible*, my dad. On this album are, again, tunes I recall digging from my childhood, and at least one my dad and I would croon, together. We would, laughingly, recreate the singer's vocal stylings, and that is what I do here—not laughingly, but *lovingly*—*re-imagine*, in homage to, both, the artist(s), and my late father.

EM: *You recently posted a little taste of the new album...a cover of the Etta James classic, "At Last" [see the end of this interview for the link to Derek Menchan's version]. Why did you choose that song and does it reflect the timbre and tone of the rest of the work? And tell us a secret...just between me and you...whose photo was in the picture you hold in the YouTube video?*

DM: The interesting thing is that all I knew at the start of the project is that I wanted to pick up where *Griot* left off, so much so that it is literally what occurred. My album was selling well, and I was already eyeing tunes for *The Incredible*. One day, I just thought of the iconic string intro to Etta's "At Last," and mused about how her version captured the sound and feel of an era—and knew I could do the very same thing, mruzick-style. So, I did, mine evoking an era just after hers.

And, what people don't realize is that she isn't the only one who covered that tune. I grew up on a Lloyd Price rendition of this cut, and I kept both versions in my heart when I created mine.

"At Last" is a good representation of the evolution in the aesthetics of my mruzick, on this album; the sound I and my engineer created here is totally evocative of a private entrée—a

stepping into a smoky, pastel-colored, heady, and aromatic portal to the past. You're going into a big speakeasy here, so get ready. Lots of entertainers in there, and they span the decades, baby.

And you're going to love this: the pic I am effusing over in the video is a photograph of me, in concert.

EM: *I do love that. So, can we look for an album that's more jazz-based or R&B influenced?*

DM: Oh, more than just that! The album is simply gargantuan; literally twice as long as the *Griot* album. You can expect a bit of everything here. I would say it is sonically the equivalent of a music history lesson being presented as a ride at Disney World. You'll get taken on an almost hallucinogenic trip from one American music luminary's sound-world, to another, then another, etc. By the end of the album, you'll see why it is named as it is.

EM: *Do you write any of your own songs? Can we expect to see any originals on this album?*

EM: I am a composer, it is true, and have done original works, for soundtracks, and stuff that had world premieres and all that. I can *do* that, but it isn't where my passions lie. I am an arranger and a producer. I am following the path of The Immortals: Quincy Jones, Neal Hefti, Billy May, and Nelson Riddle—cats like that. I am the guy you want to call when a real crooner comes to town and you need those slamming charts that channel the cats and gals from the Atomic Age, or when you need a truly atmospheric soundtrack. I'm really not from this time. I'm the reason people in my family believe in reincarnation...



Further information:

For more information on *The Incredible* album: <https://www.patreon.com/bluelokrecords>

Derek Menchan's new single "At Last" is available on all platforms on July 19.

Derek Menchan's album *The Griot Swings the Classics* is [available here](#).

Read Eileen Murphy's previous interviews of Derek Menchan for *Cultural Weekly*:

<https://www.culturalweekly.com/inner-phoenix-interview-with-derek-menchan/>

<https://www.culturalweekly.com/derek-menchan-motorcycle-inspiration/>

<https://www.culturalweekly.com/music-in-the-wilderness/>

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