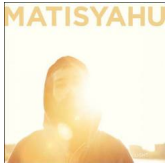


Matisyahu – Light (2009)

Written by bluesever

Friday, 26 February 2010 17:39 - Last Updated Friday, 21 April 2017 09:10

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01. *Smash Lies*
02. *We Will Walk*
03. *One Day*
04. *Escape*
05. *So Hi So Lo*
06. *I Will Be Light*
07. *For You*
08. *On Nature*
09. *Motivate*
10. *Struggla*
11. *Darkness Into Light*
12. *Thunder*
13. *Silence*

Those who know Matisyahu only as “that Jewish reggae singer” will have to rethink their definitions. Matisyahu’s faith is as much a part of his music as ever, but no style dominates his third album, *Light*, which moves between reggae, dance hall, hip-hop, and rock (of both hard-edged and acoustic varieties), often within the same song. Matisyahu’s refusal to heed the constraints of genre is laudable. But by the time “So Hi So Lo,” a straightforward alt-rock banger with no appreciable reggae or hip-hop influence, kicks in, one begins to suspect that the artist’s able genre-switching reveals a deeper lack of confidence. Matisyahu, it seems, piles on the stylistic shifts and production gimmicks because few of his ideas are strong enough to build entire tracks around. While working his broad sonic palette with ingenuity and verve, he sacrifices the opportunity to develop a sound that is truly his own. *Light* ends up with exciting moments, but few memorable songs.

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It's not that Matisyahu wasted two years in the studio. Light has its share of intriguing ideas, they just never amount to much, and by this point in his career, Matisyahu ought to be much closer to establishing his own voice. He's hindered by an extensive cast of collaborators, who sometimes make the guy sound like a guest on his own album. "Motivate" finds him contending with a song-length guitar solo in addition to sampled claps and stomps, with only a static vocal refrain to make the song his own. His vocals are run through an extensive battery of digital effects on the aggressive dancehall opener "Smash Lies" and its surging pop follow-up "We Will Walk," rendering them almost unrecognizable. Matisyahu already impresses with his acrobatic blend of chants, wails, and rapid-fire raps; add Auto-Tune and a few layers of overdub and the result is more dizzying than dynamic. "Light" is the first track to feature any appreciable amount of undoctored vocal work, though listeners could be forgiven for not being sure whether the capable, charismatic MC revealed there or the one on the breezy "Thunder" is the real Matisyahu.

Some of the album's better production ideas come courtesy of the Glitch Mob's Ooah, whose off-kilter electronics liven up blander cuts without crowding Matisyahu out. Ooah is ostensibly responsible for the excellent bridge on "So Hi," which uses a dissonant synth melody to elevate the track above its tame SoCal funk-rock inspirations (think latter-day Red Hot Chili Peppers). Ooah's minimal glitch flourishes are appreciated, especially during the album's second half, when it seems like every other track is bringing in a children's choir or a thundering church bell sample.

Lyrically, Light is an album concerned with spiritual struggle, but it's rarely insightful. Matisyahu has an unfortunate tendency to slip into generic New Age sloganeering: He's for compassion and integrity, against war and lies, and he often lets us know in the broadest and most apolitical terms possible. The chorus to "We Will Walk" is frankly incomprehensible: "You are the only good thing in my life/We will walk/Until my blood runs out/Until my heart is done." Meditative verses on "Of Nature" and "Silence" evince more genuine reflection, and the latter track is especially welcome in that it strips down the studio distractions and gives its pulsing beat and acoustic backdrop room to breathe. Finally uncluttered, Matisyahu offers a solemn memoir of his struggle to keep faith despite the apparent absence of his God. Neither preachy nor banal, it's an affecting closer, even if it's not as sonically inventive as the rest of the album. If he could match that level of focus and sincerity in his more energetic cuts, Matisyahu could have a great album on his hands. ---Matthew Cole, slantmagazine.com

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