Bo Diddley - The Black Gladiator (1970/2012)

01. Elephant Man 4:28 02. You, Bo Diddley 3:30 03. Black Soul 2:47 04. Power House 2:50 05. If The Bible's Right 3:08 06. I've Got A Feeling 2:46 07. Shut Up, Woman 3:40 08. Hot Buttered Blues 3:44 09. Funky Fly 2:55 10. I Don't Like You 3:10 Bo Diddley - Guitar, Vocals Bobby Alexis - Organ Clifton James - Drums Chester Lindsey - Bass Cookie Vee - Tambourine, Vocals

It was four years between the release of Bo's last album of all-new cuts, 500% More Man, and this album, during which time he'd spent time recording with Chess' top bluesmen, Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf. The death of Leonard Chess in October of 1969 resulted in the sale of the label to the GRT corporation, and cost the company what little artistic guidance it had. The result was The Black Gladiator, an attempt to reshape Bo into a funk artist, in the manner of Sly and the Family Stone. As an experiment it's understandable, and Bo tries very hard (even making another song-length sexual boast on "You, Bo Diddley," which also ends with a great guitar/organ duet between Bo and Bobby Alexis), but he finally fails to find a groove that works. Despite some good guitar here and there, this record falls into the same category as Muddy's Electric Mud and After the Rain albums, and Howlin' Wolf's New Album, all of which attempted to transform each into a psychedelic rocker. "Power House" is a pretty good cut, using a modified Muddy Waters-"I'm a Man"/"Mannish Boy" beat and lyrics. Much of the rest is for absolute completists only, however. ---Bruce Eder, AllMusic Review

Recorded and released in 1970, The Black Gladiator was Bo Diddley's first album of all new material since 1965's 500% More Man. In the intervening half-decade the music scene had been through some pretty radical changes, and the astute and forward-thinking Diddley wasn't about to be left behind. "I just decided to do somethin' different," he told biographer George R White. "Everybody was wearin' funny lookin' crap—Isaac Hayes had come out with chains an' stuff on, an' it was kinda flowin' in that area at that particular time—so I got me some belts an' stuff, an' said I was The Black Gladiator."

The resultant album is one of the overlooked gems in the Diddley catalog, showcasing a freakier, funkier sound that was in step with the times, while retaining the raunch and swagger that defined his earlier work. Bo goes balls-out on the very first track, "Elephant Man," whipping up a torrid, wall-shaking guitar riff over which he hollers some of his craziest rhymes yet, about how he constructed this bizarre animal, called the elephant (maybe you've heard of it?), piece by piece, naming its various body parts, then letting out a blood-curdling scream every time he gets around to not quite mentioning its ass. Such profundity was in short supply at the time.

The album never quite scales the elephantine heights of its monster opening number, but there's still much to enjoy. The backing band cooks throughout—plenty of wailing organ, rattling tambourines and crisp, funky drumming—and Bo is clearly having a ball with this new, different sound. "Black Soul," "I've Got a Feeling" and "Funky Fly" all boast tough, memorable grooves as well as plenty of muscular guitar work. "You, Bo Diddley" is one of Bo's archetypal self-tributes, as is "Power House," a virile boast built around his trusty "I'm a Man" riff, while the strange but wonderful "I Don't Like You" is one of Bo's trademark signifying pieces in the tradition of "Say Man," with Bo trading insults with backing singer Cornelia Redmond (a.k.a. Cookie Vee) and also showing off his abilities as an opera singer—was there no end to this man's talents?
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