

## Albums

# Transglobal Underground: Walls Have Ears — as glorious as ever

With swaggering reggae beats to modern Maghrebi, the near-original line-up reunites for a new studio album



Swaggering beats: Natacha Atlas and Hamid Mantu

**David Honigmann** MAY 8 2020

Transglobal Underground were ahead of their time. Thirty years ago they rose from the ashes of the underrated indie band Furniture as a fusion of dance and world music, the furrow they have ploughed ever since. A revolving cast of characters have come and gone — the Egyptian-British singer Natacha Atlas, whose subsequent solo albums have ranged from Cairene strings to Arabic jazz; Nick Page, known in his TGU incarnation as Count Dubulah, who went on to Syriana, Xaos and most notably Dub Colossus; Johnny Kalsi of the Dhol Foundation and Imagined Village. TGU were in effect a proud net exporter of talent to the UK's world music scene.

Recently the band went from centrifugal to centripetal. Atlas and Dubulah returned to the mother ship, funds were crowdsourced, tours were held, and something approaching the original line-up came together for *Walls Have Ears*. The collisions are as glorious as ever. The opening track, “City In Peril”, rides in on a swaggering reggae beat with chants of “move over” and a fluent trumpet solo from Yazz Ahmed, and Tim Whelan's flute fluttering over the top. Atlas duets with Sheema Mukherjee, the band's sitar virtuoso, on “Ruma Jhuma”, a love song in Hindi and Arabic with gently swaying tabla. The two pair up again on the drifting “Future Ghost”. The “decanting” of social housing residents, “tattooed and decoded/locked up in boxes, their homes . . . outmoded” is the subject of “The People Carrier”, its Lovers Rock swing and melodica belied by the ferocious lyrics.



On “Bloodshot Eyes” there is a “guest” appearance from John Bercow, the former Speaker of the House of Commons, bellowing “the ayes have it” and “order, order” like an apparition from a vanished world. The other side of London life is hymned on “Mind The Gap”, a rare ode to the Underground’s Central Line that connects the city’s west and east. There is silly fun in the form of “Polo Neck”, a thumping, phasing electronic frug that pays tribute to 1960s French pop music. Modern Maghrebi music gets an outing on the crunchy Gnawa chant of “Stand Up (Nifhamou)”, with Atlas singing with rai pretender Sofiane Saidi, and again on “Chant Sans Adresse”, with Nawel Ben Kraïem taking the lead. “Way Down The River” at the end of the album is a classic TGU mix of soul, rap, electronica and bliss.

★★★★☆

*‘Walls Have Ears’ is released by Mute Satellite*

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