



with Mark Baynes

## Leisure, Money and the Soulquarians

**G**o on, do it! Google the word 'soulquarians'. You may already be familiar with this term or you may, as I was, be on the brink of discovering something truly wonderful.

Looking back at movements in the history of popular music, occasionally it seems like certain random events lead to a seemingly random group of musicians creating music so revolutionary that it causes a paradigm shift in our global musical consciousness. In the case of the Soulquarians, this is such a movement, and it lasted almost five years.

Further internet searching may lead you to discover the article J Dilla Essentials, shedding some light on seminal tracks produced by the late James Dewitt Yancey (J Dilla or J Dee), or you may read about the Soulquarian experiences at Electric Lady Studios. Wherever you head, it won't take you long to realise the influence that a small group of musical pioneers made on music ever since they started collaborating in the late '90s.

Founding members of what was to become a revolving collective were Questlove from The Roots, D'Angelo, James Poyser, and J Dilla, sharing the same star sign – Aquarius. Even though anecdotal narrative suggests that it was initially a zodiacal epiphany that helped bond these pioneers, it was their shared love for the unconventional, whether in rhythm, harmony, melody, or production style that secured their musical bonds.

Original members of the Soulquarians were soon joined by artists such as Erykah Badu, Mos Def, Common, Pino Palladino, and Roy Hargrove for a creative period that lasted between 1997 and 2002. Borrowing from an article by the Chicago Tribune in the early 2000s:

'Many of these artists have performed on one another's records, creating a community of likeminded musicians forging a style that doesn't have a name yet. Organic soul, natural R&B...it's music that owes a debt to the old-school sounds of Marvin Gaye, Bob Marley, Jimi Hendrix and George Clinton without expressly mimicking any of them. It refreshes these traditions with cinematic production

techniques gleaned from hip hop and with attitude that is street-smart but above all highly individual, celebrating quirks instead of sanding them down for mass consumption.'

Using musical analysis, but also applying suitable caution necessary when engaging in reductive pursuits, we need to ask some questions.

1. What do these quirks consist of?
2. How have these artists influenced contemporary songwriters/producers today?

One obvious place to start is D'Angelo's album 'Voodoo' where the whole album uses a characteristic rhythmic ebb and flow, a constantly moving groove often referred to by musicians as 'push-pull'. *One Mo' Gin* is a great example. The keys lay so heavily 'back' on the beat, and the drum groove (played by Questlove) is so beautifully loose to the point where sometimes you lose the sense of where the 'one' is – if only for a moment. At the time, the focus was aimed at the feel-good factor, without being over analytical, and is a great example of technology having a positive influence on musicians and musical groups (i.e. MPC-derived J Dilla-isms).

Erykah Badu is an artist who embraces polyphony and harmonic ambiguity (another Soulquarian quirk). A great example is *Apple Tree*, chord sequence derived from a harmonic technique called constant structure, where the type of chord is the same. In this case the sequence is built solely on minor harmony, which moves non-diatonically through the first 5 notes of E major scale – Em7, F#m7, G#m7, Bm7, Am7.

So what does the Soulquarians have to do with the Leisure's *Money*? Well, as you may have guessed, this NZ band utilises some of the influences that these early neo-soul pioneers developed two decades ago. *Money*, like Leisure's earlier hits (and suggested by their name) is all about the groove and vibe. As suggested by Pigeons and Planes Magazine:

'They've got an effortless cool about them, mixing elements of R&B, funk, and electronic for something totally fresh and completely natural.'

You can hear the R&B influences throughout the track via the drum groove and '70s production style, a laid back but funky backdrop to an ephemeral vocal and dreamy electronica. The guitar break at 2min 30s is reminiscent of Groove Armada's *My Friend*, being in the same key and using

a similar guitar sound, as well as containing shared melodic attributes.

Jaden Parkes, Djeisan Suskov, Tom Young, Josh Fountain and Jordan Arts are the personnel behind Leisure. Each member works elsewhere in the music industry, and much like the Soulquarians, Leisure's creative muse is firmly rooted in collaboration.

'The album is entirely collaborative but remarkably cohesive, blending influences from The Beatles, 1970s funk and soul, and Leisure is "more concerned with what's best for our songs, than what's best for someone's ego,"' bassist Suskov told Kate Richards in *Noted*.

Listening to *Money*, perhaps the elephant in the room is that the key link to Soulquarians and Leisure's *Money* lies in the rhythmic displacement evident in the groove. In *Money*, the bassline is polyrhythmic in the sense that different parts of the pentatonically-derived four bar pattern are played in different places on the beat by the bass player. Additionally, the bassline is largely played using a straight feel which rubs against the swung vocal line.

Pushing and pulling of time by the bass (Djeisan Suskov) in Leisure's work provides the x-factor for me, its complexity incongruent to the relaxed vibe of this song. Perhaps if we were to reach for meaning here, it may be possible to draw parallels between tension found in the music and tension and rub of the message inferred in the song – i.e. money (and our flawed relationship with it).

Understanding that correlation does not imply causation, and being reminded of the debate that it is always possible to find things in music that don't exist and miss things that do exist, I would like to propose that, like many tracks since D'Angelo, Erykah Badu, Questlove and the other Soulquarians decided to celebrate the 'distinctive' or 'remarkable' in music (with an emphasis on harmony and rhythm in particular), *Money* is a wonderful offshoot of the Soulquarian era, and its place in mainstream Kiwi music is warmly welcomed.

Looking for the x-factor in the X-Factor? Then you could do worse than embracing the different/strange/unique, rather than relying on genericism and the well-beaten path. Although ironically perhaps, unless you are careful to find your own uniqueness, then even by following the Soulquarians you could be falling into the same trap!

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