

WHAT THE SPIRIT KNOWS ...

Thomas Stanley connects with the Bad Brains' HR for a wide-ranging conversation about his new album, Rastafarianism, and his Positive Mental Attitude. Photos by Liz Flyntz.

HR stands for Human Rights. It also stands for Hunting Rod. His other names are Paul Hudson and Joseph I. He calls the group that as lead singer he helped push into the early vanguard of the punk rock movement the "Good Brains." Words are very important to HR. There are words he will not and did not use during our sit-down.

Every major metropolitan area in these United States has a "side" or an "end" that has become synonymous with urban blight, chaos, and danger. Hudson and his brother Earl lived across the line in District Heights, Maryland. With Earl behind the drums, Daryl Jennifer on bass and Dr. Know (Gary Miller) rounding out the team with virtuosic lead guitar, the Bad Brains were incubated in Southeast DC—that part of the capitol most resistant to the scouring tide of gentrification. After one aborted gig as Mindpower in March of '79, the group opened for the Damned in June of that year as the Bad Brains. Henry Rollins and Ian McKaye were in the house, and were so impressed by the group's speed and chomp that they became ardent Brains supporters and began modeling their own music on the four's energy and punch. During the group's early apogee they were under-recorded, releasing in December 1979 a 7" single ("Pay to Cum" b/w "Stay Close to Me") that appeared on a couple of compilations and on their self-titled cassette-only debut album on the ROIR label (released in 1982). In 1996, Caroline Records released the first Bad Brains studio sessions from 1979 as *Black Dots*.

The Bad Brains are like the tennis-playing Williams sisters, showing up in a field that many had tagged as the antithesis of Black expression. In a short period of time both the sisters and the Brains reworked the standard of their respective

games around their extraordinary talents and assets. And like the Williams sisters, the Brains checked all reserve at the door and poured something like their totality into their work. Punk rock owes much to the quartet, who brought a needed precision, refinement and mad explosive energy while helping to launch the art of hardcore speedrock.

After attending a 1978 Bob Marley concert at the long-since-demolished Capital Center in Landover, Md., the group adopted the style and ideology of Rastafarianism, taking on the Rastas' characteristic locks and imperial Ethiopian tricolors. Rastafarianism and reggae soon figured prominently in their music, with cannabis-grounded dubbin' and skankin' unapologetically woven into their sets of unbolted, adrenalized hardcore. Vocalist HR's commitment to the messianic movement birthed in Jamaican suffering was overwhelming, and soon became a wedge splitting the group into opposing camps over the question of how much reggae to perform and record. In concert, HR was a movement unto himself—juggernauting his small, wiry frame on, off, and around the stage while articulating the Brains' lyrical message in a polished, lilting tenor. Off-stage, there were sporadic incidents that cultivated an aura of volatility and abuse, the dark side that is as much a part of the Brains' legacy as the legendary stage shows and seminal recordings. Although a series of solo projects, often backed by some version of the Human Rights band, have allowed him to sing Jah praises to his soul's content, HR still plays a role in the mercurial existence of the Bad Brains, reprising a more subdued version of his position as front man.

On the eve of the release of a highly anticipated solo project, I sat down with the singer

on the third floor of a hulking shell of a building in downtown Baltimore that serves as rehearsal space for the HR band and residence for HR's saxophonist Doc Night. HR smoked a cigarette before and after our 45-minute interview; he wore a brown tweed jacket and politely spoke in a near-whisper, preceding most of my questions with a perfunctory "yes sir."

"This is HR—Human Rights with the Good Brains outfit—and we do have a new release called *Hey Wella*. It's a culmination of soul, reggae, hip hop, rub-a-dub-love, groove-on music, a little bit of pop and some modern rock and jazz." HR explains that the title is about "all the happy people and we belong together." He describes the title track as "crunchy and raw, with a very pleasant danceable type of rhythm to it. The song is about what the modern day African and Jamerican, Asian and white (Japhite) go through, and their ability to pass through that emotional space test that sometimes may stand in the way of human beings being able to reach their optimal pleasure and grasp the essence of the music."

HR professes a philosophy of positivity. His sax player is proud to point out that there are no bad words anywhere on the album and underscores how rare that has become. That PMA (Positive Mental Attitude) thing was there back in the Mindpower days, and has imbued HR and the Brains with a resiliency that has secured their survival, but I sense that this Paul Hudson (he's 53 in February) has mellowed: "Well, it requires a little bit of meditation and preparation psychologically, trying to stay as pleasant and positive as humanly possible, but as honest and vindicated to the commitment of authenticating the production. So one has to take time out to meditate and reach an essence with the One,

with the almighty I, and then to be able to clearly and consciously focus upon the objective of the victory or the production and to try to refrain from as much stereotypes and peer pressure as possible, and then one will be able to channel and create the type of groove that the masses would appeal to."

That professed positivity came under attack early and cost them critical support when the group developed a reputation as homophobes in a gay-friendly hardcore scene. Daryl Jennifer has described the events that led to that label as the one thing in the group's history that he would "go back and change," and attributes the misbehavior to his inexperience as a young convert to Rastafarianism. He was quoted on Exclaim.ca as stating that he had needed to learn gradually that "how you roll out here with your sexuality is your business and your life and what a human being chooses in those respects should have nothing to do with being accepted as Jah children." HR won't go that far, but speaks somewhat obliquely about the excesses of judgment: "[Rastafarianism] has a direction, and it teaches young students as well as elders important instructions that are needed, but one must be able to then rise above the genre and the scenarios and keep on seeking, because it does not require for one to allow oneself to become judgmental. One might be still in [the] theory level of the production instead of actually having answers and solutions. One has to remember, it's so important because listeners when dealing with that kind of music look to it [for] a prophetic solution. And so for the teachers, it's so important to remain as innocent and as humble as possible, because some listeners might [get] the wrong interpretation from your interpretation. I would suggest that teachers try not to be as judgmental as possible."

In spite of an association with unsavory beliefs and behavior, HR's charisma, tenacity, and talents have won believers in his music, if not his message. Bill Warrell's DC Space was one of two venues in Washington where the group's early efforts could be regularly heard. DC Space started a year or two ahead of the Brains, and hosted a mixed bill of national and international advanced jazz acts along with mostly local punk and rock. "I knew HR from the start," recalls Warrell. "We were always close. I still try to keep up with what he's doing." While much more of an avant-garde head than a punk kid, Warrell remembers HR at the center of a sound that was making Washington, DC one of the freshest scenes in the country. The building that once housed DC Space is now a Starbucks, but back in the day you might have heard Don Pullen, Julius Hemphill or Sun Ra in the same week as the Bad Brains, Minor Threat or State of Alert. The main stage was upstairs directly over the café/bar area on the ground floor. Warrell can still remember anxiously watching the Brains and their audiences taking a toll on the aging structure. "Early hardcore dancing wasn't as organized as it is today; they mainly jumped up and down. We had these banks of eight-foot fluorescent tubes downstairs, and when they played the lights would drop a foot, and there were some nights where we lost a tube or two. That was getting scary, so we started asking that they put their shows on downstairs. It wasn't the music I was following, but I was impressed enough that later when I was working on a [jazz] opera I seriously explored using HR as the male lead. He had great energy and an amazing voice in its limited way."

The singer, who counts Earth Wind and Fire,

Stevie Wonder, David Hinds, Ziggy Marley and Chick Corea among numerous influences, sees his new project as a chance to reclaim a legacy that has to some extent been marred by controversy and false starts. "I'm doing much better," he volunteers. "I did finally get the album out; it took me about 17 years. From New York, I went to Atlanta, and then went to Richmond and then we went to New York and then from there we went to DC and then from there we went to California, and while I was in California—like I said it took me about 17 years, but finally I was able to get the Human Rights album completed." He and the Brains have reconciled enough to play together, and HR envisions a kind of symbiosis between his solo act and the original quartet: "I wanted to try to get a marriage together and eventually try to put on a production show where we can have both groups playing, and perhaps work as a co-billing, [HR] headlining and co-billing alongside the Brains." In 2007 the Brains released *Build a Nation*, produced by the Beastie Boys' Adam Yauch, another of the group's rock elite patrons (along with Madonna and Ric Ocasek of the Cars). *Hey Wella* is the second salvo of a one-two punch that should create new performance opportunities for both acts, in situations calling for either punk revival or roots reggae.

Today, HR measures his words against their consequences. He seems aware that he has at times been his own worst enemy and that he will only be allowed so many comeback efforts: "I would think the more important principles to remember are to stay away from trouble, stay away from troublemakers, violence, violent-minded people, and to remember the love I-and-I concept: to love oneself, to love others. It's so important to balance out oneself, to take time out with your loved ones and to remember the consciousness of the universal love for the proper understanding. It is still in the philosophy stage. It sounds good to talk about it, but doing it does require a little bit more time, so I would say to eat good food, exercise, and when playing one's instrument, between 30 minutes to an hour every day."

Achieving balance and health does require a little more time, and the admonition to keep clear of trouble and troublemakers has not always been easy for HR to heed. Whether he felt he was pursuing an ideal of the rock'n'roll bad boy or was just seriously impaired, the Bad Brains' front man has on more than one occasion found himself at the center of troubles that fed his miscreant mystique. In 1995, for example, he was jailed on battery charges after wielding a mike stand against skinheads attending a Brains show in a Lawrence, Kansas nightclub. The incident is a dozen years old, and while defenders of HR claim the skinheads were racially taunting him, most eyewitness accounts describe the attack as the unprovoked fallout of a psilocybin mushroom freakout. Drugs have been an acknowledged part of HR's meandering path. He beat a heroin addiction before bringing the band and his life under the PMA banner. His embrace of Rasta went along with an enthusiastic embrace of cannabis—the Rastafarian sacrament. In 1985, HR was jailed for four months for possession with intent to distribute. When I asked him about the arrest, he dismissed it as a case of "mistaken identity. They thought I was somebody else." While incarcerated, HR recorded the vocal to "Sacred Love," a tune that has become a Brains signature piece precisely because it is anomalous—a nasty blackadelic ode to physical love that isn't in triple tempo

