



BRIT SOUL MAN JAI UPDATES SINATRA, COMMENDS MISSY ELLIOT AND IDOLIZES AUDREY HEPBURN

heavenly

BY ELIO IANNACCI

Nursed on spoonfuls of Steve McQueen movies and Nina Simone records, Jai's (a.k.a. Jason Rowe) ability to replicate the same type of aggressive magnificence Simone and McQueen have mastered is evident throughout the pop sophomore's debut album *Heaven*. Rich, spoiled soundscapes for *Heaven's* singles "I Believe" and "Cry Me A River" are brought to an infinite, dreamier level of consciousness with Rowe's vocal finesse and consistent knack for bending or breaking notes. While his ambition to "update Frank Sinatra" is immediately dealt with in the first half of the album, Jai's mixing of soul, supper-club and trip hop also brings to mind the victories of nouveau soul crooners Erykah Badu and Maxwell. Like these contemporaries, Jai's unique mix begins with fresh blends of lyrical and personal catharsis.

Jai explains his music as "a frustration for the lack of creativity" he sees in soul and R&B in the '90s. He feels "house has been too commercialized" and "rap has virtually no social commentary anymore." While Jai still appreciates risk takers such as rap star Missy Elliot (for making "well cut, strong and interesting tracks,") he does consider himself to be "broken off" from the rest of the top-40 pop crowd. And why shouldn't he? Jai's razor-blade hooks and memoir-laden verses induce immediate visions of American/European Hollywood and film-noir idols complete with scenes involving Isabella Rossellini, Catherine Deneuve and Audrey Hepburn, the women Jai proudly claims are his "private icons of film."

Jai boasts that his awareness of his audience is also the reason for such a planned and sophisticated musical mingle in *Heaven*. He admirably lists "the finicky ears of gay men, business women, hip-hoppers and mods" as his prime patrons. Among those who gave him insight into his audience is Britain's crowned 'alterna-

tive queen of music,' P.J. Harvey. Jai speaks so often of her, describing the singer (the same one known to throw massive tantrums of passion on stage) as a "lovely, quiet country girl who adores folk music."

In studio during the recording of P.J. Harvey's first album Jai met up and sang with her bass player and her drummer for a while, forming a band of his own. He clarifies that "being in P.J. Harvey's environment and her space" during the recording of her debut was "musically incestuous" for him. "It got to the point where the really fine musicians ended up playing with each other and working off one another."

With an androgynous voice that plays off both the traditionally masculine and feminine strings of pop, Jai's vocals are a combination of Julee Cruise and Terence Trent D'Arby. He admits that his music is fashioned into that "Lynchian" physique which American director David

Lynch invented in such classic films as *Wild At Heart* and *Blue Velvet*. Rowe wants his listeners to know that *Heaven's* direction (co-piloted by his guitarist/producer Joel Bogen), was created in that same filmic system, giving his sound the complimentary "instrumental twists" he needed to "create suspense."

His next release, prior to a second in-the-works album, proves his attachment to film all the more real. This will be a sister single to one of *Heaven's* last deliveries, and will be included in the much-anticipated *James Bond Tribute* album, Jai being among a select group of artists asked to take a James Bond theme song and re-record it into a personalized, contemporary sound setting. His interpretation of the famous "To Russia With Love," is sure to become one of the compilation's highpoints, complementing the eyebrow-raising early buzz of the album.

Elio Iannacci is ICON's music editor.



creature