



## Shocks Of Mighty: An Upsetting Biography

**NAME:** Reinford Hugh Perry

**AKA:** Lee, Little, King, Scratch, Pipecock Jackxon, Super Ape, Ringo, Wonder Man, and many others

**BORN:** 20 March 1936, Kendal, Jamaica

**HEIGHT:** 5' 4"

**CURRENT RESIDENCE:** Zurich, Switzerland

**OCCUPATION:** The Upsetter

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*With a man as legendary and eccentric as Lee Perry, the story of his life is a mix of fact and fiction, newspaper clippings and ghost stories. Much of what we know about Perry is open to conjecture, point of view, clouds of ganja, and grains of salt the size of golf balls. Therefore, I make no apologies for taking artistic license in telling Scratch's story.*

**"I came, I saw, and I conquered."** Lee Perry's early life mirrors many of Jamaica's musical super stars: he was born poor in a small village, earned an early reputation as a wise guy, came to Kingston in the 1950s, heard the music, learned the moves, and got the groove. His first job was with pioneering record producer Clement "Coxsone" Dodd and his soon to be legendary Downbeat Sound System: errand boy, security guard, talent scout, uncredited songwriter, and -- eventually -- singer. Perry made his first recording, "Chicken Scratch", in 1961. While it was a drop in Coxsone's sound system bucket, it did provide the young Perry with his famous and lasting nickname. When Coxsone established the famous Studio One in 1963, Perry spent more time behind the microphone, cutting rude and raucous ska numbers such as "Roast Duck", "Doctor Dick" and "Wishes Of The Wicked".

In 1966, after more than five years with Coxsone, Perry left in a flash of lightning, pissed off at the producer for not giving him enough money or recognition over the years. He crossed the street and joined forces with greenhorn producer Joe Gibbs, cutting his first signature tune, the sinister "I Am The Upsetter", as a warning to Coxsone and anyone else who might try to underestimate him. Gibbs wasn't really a producer at first, just a hustler with a lot of cash and an ear for music. He quickly realized that Perry had the groove, so in 1967 he hired Perry to run his new Amalgamated label for him. Perry wasted no time, and produced a string of hits for Gibbs, including The Pioneers' "Long Shot", which was the first song to use a new rhythm in Jamaican music -- it didn't

have a name at the time, but a year later someone christened the beat "reggae". "Long Shot" and other Perry works from this time are therefore evidence for those who claim that he actually *invented* reggae.

Perry's productions mashed up the place, but since Gibbs wanted a "silent" partner, he was asking for trouble when he decided to put Perry on the elbow list. Furious once again for being slighted, he split from Amalgamated with a mighty roar and retaliated with "People Funny Boy", which was another "screw you" song aimed straight to Gibbs' head. Ironic, since Perry's big hit for Gibbs had been "Upsetter", which was aimed straight to Coxsone's head.

By 1968, Perry decided that since he couldn't work with any of Jamaica's producers without being jerked around, he would do it himself. His first move was to get the best hired guns he could find to help him make some waves. He found such a crew in Gladdy's All Stars, a set of session musicians who were as hot as sugar cane fields in July. Perry named his new band after his current nickname and his new record label: The Upsetters.

Under Perry's leadership, The Upsetters cut rowdy, wiggled out instrumentals like "Drugs And Poison", "The Vampire", "Dig Your Grave", and what became their signature tune, "Return Of Django". Alongside the Upsetters instrumentals, Perry scored hits with soulful numbers from some of Jamaica's top vocalists, such as David Isaacs, The Silvertones, and Slim Smith. When "Return Of Django" became a hit in England, Perry and his crew were invited on a six week tour of Britain - a first for a reggae band. However, in a spectacular case of bad timing, the original Upsetters couldn't make the trip, so Perry had to hustle together a new crew. A young group named the Hippy Boys became the new Upsetters.

Riding a wave, the ambitious Perry opened up his own store, the Upsetter Record Shop, located at 36 Charles Street, premises once owned by his buddy Prince Buster. The shop not only sold the latest and kinkiest Upsetter records, but acted as Perry's base of operations -- not to mention rehearsal room, bar, and herb counter. The Upsetter Shop played an important role in waking the town and telling the people about the Upsetter's sound, which was becoming more distinct with each release. The popularity of Perry's productions also enabled him to sponsor a weekly program on the JBC, where the latest Upsetter records were spun by enthusiastic jive-talking DJs. While most of these early singles were straightforward, soul inspired reggae, occasionally Perry would throw people for a loop with a bizarre B-side or strange vocal effects. The Upsetter was beginning to upset.

One day a young roughneck named Bob Marley came to visit the Upsetter Record Shop. His band The Wailers had been very successful a few years earlier with Coxsone, but at the moment they were struggling. The Wailers needed to jump start their sound or die trying. Young producers like Perry were creating new and exciting sounds that would pull the rug out from under the feet of the "old men" of the Jamaican music scene. Bob Marley and his friends Peter Tosh and Bunny Wailer were amazed that The Upsetters had been so popular overseas. The Upsetters, however, were not as impressed. Once they returned from Britain, they were rather vex with Perry, who -- ironically, given his past dealings with Coxsone and Gibbs -- apparently had taken the lion's share of the cash from the tour. Before long, Bob Marley realized that a collaboration between them and The Wailers could be an unstoppable combo. After a few rehearsals and jam sessions together, Marley talked The Upsetters into abandoning Perry's ship and joining The Wailers.

When Perry found out that Marley had stolen his crack musicians from him, he was understandably furious. He actually threatened to kill Bob. The two of them met one day to have it out, and judging from the volume of their voices, everyone around thought that it would end up with furniture being broken. Instead, they emerged from behind closed doors hours later, all smiles and slapping each other on the back. The Upsetters were still joining The Wailers, but their exclusive producer was to be -- of course -- Lee Perry.

Perry pounded his fist at the mixing desk, and a musical alchemy turned the two bands into pure gold. The Upsetters laid down unstoppable rhythms and The Wailers sang like never before. The mix of Bob Marley's streetwise sensibilities, combined with Perry's sense of adventure and mysticism, proved to be a turning point not only in their careers but in the history of reggae. The chemistry between Perry and Marley proved to be phenomenal. Together, they produced classic songs like "Small Axe", "Duppy Conqueror", "400 Years", and many others that changed the course of reggae and laid the foundation for Bob Marley's subsequent success. Many of the songs were re-recorded later on in Marley's career, but the magic of the Perry sessions has never been surpassed. By 1971, however, The Wailers / Upsetters' honeymoon was over. With the Upsetters' rhythm section in tow, The Wailers formed a new band, and, after signing to Island Records in 1973, became reggae superstars. The band went their separate ways, but Perry kept the name to refer to the floating band of killer musicians that played for him over the years.

Perry began to expand on many of the musical experiments that he had introduced to Jamaican music while still working with other producers. Twenty years before anyone had ever used the term "alternative" music, Perry shot pistols, broke glass, ran tapes backwards, and used samples of crying babies, falling rain, and animal sounds in his unique productions. With wild songs such as "Cow Thief Skank", "Space Flight", and "Jungle Lion", the Upsetter was certainly living up to his nickname.

By 1973, Perry began to feel the squeeze of having to rely on commercial studios for his unique work. Most of his work had been recorded at Randy's Studio 17 or Dynamic Sound, and having to keep an eye on the clock while working his musical voodoo was a definite distraction. A few years earlier, he and his family had moved into Washington Gardens, a posh Kingston suburb, and while napping under a tree in his backyard, Perry had a dream where he heard music. When he awoke, he took the dream as a sign and began building his own studio on the exact spot. When it was completed in late 1973, he painted the words *BLACK ARK* above the door, for it was here that Perry reckoned that he would lay down the Ten Commandments of reggae. For any other producer this would be an eccentric boast; in retrospective, Perry was being modest. The music that was recorded at the Black Ark over the next five years was absolute magic from one of reggae's most radical sorcerers.

In command of his own studio now, Perry began to take his formidable skills to a new level, and worked his mixing board like an instrument. The wild experiments of the past few years gave way to more intricate and earthy sounds. As reggae historian Steve Barrow comments, "the sound of the Black Ark was like the signature of an artist on his canvas". The aura of the Black Ark began to attract Jamaica's greatest performers, from veterans like The Heptones to newcomers such as Jah Lion. Such was his passion for producing that he routinely gave unknowns a first try and gave has-beens a shot in the arm. Even prodigal son Bob Marley returned to Scratch and recorded several songs at the Black Ark. While other studios had performers punching a clock, Perry was only too happy to spend as long as it took to get the right groove. A recording session at the Black Ark took on the feel of a party as Perry kept the doors to the concrete studio open for people to wander in and out while he danced around, clapped his hands, and shouted out his approval from the mixing board. Perry used eccentric methods such as cleaning the tape heads with his t-shirt and blowing ganja smoke onto the master tapes as they rolled, ensuring that the music recorded in the Black Ark would have a dirty, magical quality to it that would never be surpassed.

Using fairly simple equipment, Perry was able to take four tracks and make them sound like eight or more by mixing down several tracks onto one and then repeating the process. With less than state of the art technology, Perry managed to create a huge bag of tricks that many producers still puzzle over today. "It was only four tracks on the machine," Perry explains cryptically, "but I was picking up twenty from the extra terrestrial squad." Dazzling and dread albums from Max Romeo (*War In A Babylon*), The Upsetters (*Super Ape*), Junior Murvin (*Police And Thieves*), The Heptones (*Party Time*), and The Congos (*Heart Of The Congos*), along with hundreds of heavy singles flowed from the Black Ark between 1974 and 1979. It represented a pinnacle in Jamaican music, reggae at its highest heights and greatest power.

While things were heating up in Perry's studio, so was the political climate in Jamaica. The island's two political parties had a long tradition of settling arguments out of court on the streets of Kingston. Each party had hired gunmen who routinely went apeshit in the weeks before an election and shot at anything that moved. Anti-violence songs that foretold a coming apocalypse became the order of the day, such as Max Romeo's "War In A Babylon", Junior Murvin's "Cross Over", and Perry's own fevered plea for sanity, "City Too Hot". Never a stranger to extreme words and imagery, Perry's outer space productions seemed to mirror the current heat and confusion of Jamaica perfectly. Against this vivid backdrop, his sound was becoming internationally recognized. Perry secured a worldwide distribution deal with Island Records, and soon his productions had attracted the attention of rock and rollers such as Paul McCartney, Robert Palmer, and The Clash. Radio DJs in America were giving Perry's productions enthusiastic airplay. Journalists made trips to Jamaica to meet the man responsible for the incredible sounds. With the world beating a path to his door, Perry's backyard was becoming famous.

Despite the incredible music and the magical vibes of the Black Ark, by the late 1970s, all was not well in Perry's concrete kingdom. Freeloaders and loiterers began to get on his nerves, and making music became more and more difficult. Marathon recording sessions fuelled by ganja and alcohol began to take their toll. Island Records had deemed some of his greatest recordings as "un-releaseable". The Black Ark also became the target for local gangsters who began pressuring him for protection money. Perry's relationship with his common-law wife Pauline began to fall apart. Polite and angry requests for the "bad weeds" to get out of his garden didn't work; soon, Scratch turned to weirder methods to get rid of the unwanted dreads and rude boys. The Black Ark soon reached the boiling point, and a point of no return for Perry.

The Black Ark had ceased to function by 1979. Burned out physically, mentally, and spiritually, Perry and his studio fell apart. Unable to take the strain, Perry's common law wife Pauline walked out on him, taking the children with her. Perry was walking a tightrope between fantasy and reality, and the departure of his family seemed to push him further into chaos. A new and disturbing persona emerged, and while Perry claimed that it was all an elaborate act to clean house, to rid himself of the people he no longer wanted around him, the Upsetter's mood was clearly cause for concern. Visitors and journalists arrived at Perry's home to find him worshipping bananas, vandalizing the Black Ark, and spouting long, violent diatribes. Reels of master tapes lay strewn on the floor, and the recording equipment was next to useless due to water damage from a leaky roof. The once mighty studio was now little more than a junkyard.

In April 1979, Perry received a visit from Henk Targowski, an impresario and owner of Black Star Liner distribution, a record company based out of Holland. Targowski wanted to distribute Perry's material, but was not prepared for the madness he would encounter at the Black Ark. Along with some associates, Targowski decided to attempt a salvage operation, trying to refurbish and restore the studio to working order. Financed by Black Star Liner, construction work progressed throughout 1980, and new equipment was ordered and installed. By the spring of 1980, however, the restoration project was abandoned, and Black Star Liner's crew left Jamaica for good. What had been painstakingly rebuilt in the past year was vandalized, dismantled and destroyed by Perry.

In 1981, with his life and studio in ruins, the Upsetter left Jamaica and spent time in New York, performing live with American reggae bands. A series of high-profile performances took place, most notably supporting The Clash in New York in June 1982. Perry then returned to Jamaica, and soon after started recording an new album, *Mystic Miracle Star*. It seemed that after two years of confusion, Perry was getting back into shape. However, disaster was just around the corner.

One morning in 1983, the Black Ark was destroyed.

Fire raged through the concrete structure, the temperature inside becoming so intense that it eventually blew the roof off. The studio, the source of some of the most powerful music ever recorded, lay in smouldering ruins.

"The Black Ark was too black and too dread," Perry explained later. "Even though I am black, I have to burn it down, to save my brain. It was too black. It want to eat me up!"

The fiery destruction of the Black Ark has become a focal point in the lore surrounding Lee Perry. Although Perry has claimed many times that he burned the Ark himself in a fit of frustration, in reality the Black Ark went out not with a bang, but a series of whimpers. It is unlikely we will ever know the exact cause of the fire -- whether it was done by Perry's own hand or caused by an electrical problem -- but the destruction of the Black Ark was complete.

Perry spent three days in jail for suspected arson but was soon released. However, he had nowhere to go.

With his life in Jamaica literally lying in ruins, Perry spent the next few years in a kind of exile, most of them in England. Turning his back on producing, Perry instead concentrated on voicing his own material, of which there seemed to be an endless supply. However, during this time Perry's output was erratic; questionable collaborations and false starts were the order of the day. His already shaky relationship with Island Records crumbled when he swore that Island chief Chris Blackwell was a vampire and responsible for Bob Marley's death.

Working with London studio bands, Perry began performing live, and eventually the album *Battle Of Armagideon (Millionaire Liquidator)* began to take shape in 1986. The album, full of undercurrents and surprises, sounded like the reality of Perry's situation: after years of confusion, the Upsetter was ready to upset again. The following year Perry teamed up with the brilliant English producer Adrian Sherwood and made the dark and spacious *Time Boom X De Devil Dead*. Working with Sherwood's house band Dub Syndicate (in many ways a new version of The Upsetters), *Time Boom* was a digital throwback to Perry's glory days at the Black Ark. Sherwood's heavy production style -- in some ways heavily reminiscent of Perry's -- suited the Upsetter's vibe perfectly. The strength of these two albums put the Upsetter back on his feet for good.

In 1989, Perry stopped roaming the world and moved to Switzerland with his new bride, Mireille Ruegg, a shrewd Zurich businesswoman who also became Perry's manager. Far away from dubious dreads and the chicanery of the Jamaican music scene, Perry became a happy family man. He has fathered two children with Mireille, a son named Gabriel and a daughter named Shiva. By the mid 1990s, Perry was working on a new studio for himself in the basement of his Zurich home, calling it the White Ark -- his "secret laboratory" that "no man has entered before" (well, almost: his wife's washing machine is down there).

Twenty years after the Black Ark's zenith, the reggae world saw a Lee Perry renaissance as a new wave of fans embraced the Upsetter's music. Spearheaded by the Beastie Boys' excellent retrospective in their fanzine *Grand Royal* in 1996, fans and critics alike re-discovered Perry's music and made him (in)famous once again. Record companies were not slow to react to the public interest, and a wide variety of Perry-produced collections and albums were re-released, culminating in Island's wonderful *Arkology* in 1997, a Black Ark anthology lovingly prepared by long time Perry fans Steve Barrow and David Katz. In April of that year, Perry surprised everyone by playing two delirious, sold out gigs in San Francisco -- his first American shows in more than 15 years -- and later in June played the role of elder statesman at the alternative Free Tibet concerts in New York. An extensive tour of America and Europe followed, with more world-wide performances and re-issues continuing every year for the rest of the decade and into the new century. This is the return of the return of the Super Ape...

In June of 2000, David Katz' monumental biography of Perry, *People Funny Boy: The Genius Of Lee "Scratch" Perry* was published. More than ten years in the making, it gave an unprecedented account of Perry's life and work. In the words of the Upsetter himself, "I am the half. The half that's never been told."

As we move into the 21st century, Lee Perry remains the proverbial mad scientist, sitting comfortably in his own mountaintop fortress -- a nice family home overlooking Lake Zurich with a BMW in the driveway. He may visit Earth from time to time, but he lives in his own universe, which is every bit as expansive and mysterious as the real thing. Which brings us to the question that any Lee Perry biography must ask: *is he or isn't he crazy?* My own

theory is that the Upsetter is certainly eccentric, but not genuinely insane, at least by strict psychiatric standards. His looney behaviour is designed to delight his fans and confound his enemies. "The Upsetter" is a persona that helps propagate his legend, and after years of acting out this zany dogma, he has come to truly believe it, like a director trapped inside one of his own films. In this case, Lee Perry is trapped inside one of his songs, a fate which he certainly must face with a big grin. Combined with this DIY legend (and no doubt as a result of it) is no shortage of wild acclaim, and Perry must truly feel like the giant that critics, fans -- and the Upsetter himself -- have made him out to be.

Lee Perry's musical universe is one of angels and vampires, flying saucers and scatology, mortal enemies and cartoon characters. Art may imitate life, but for Perry there's no difference between the two. He literally paints, writes on, sculpts, films, records, and sings about everything he encounters. His lyrics encompass a wide variety of references -- the Bible, astrology, Rastafari, ganja, sex, music, and magic. What (if anything) does it all mean? As compelling as it might be to decipher all of Perry's rantings, it would also spoil the fun. Lee Perry's world is one of a kind, and so when he decides to broadcast messages to Earth via the recording studio, we should just hold tight and enjoy the ride, no instruction manual necessary.

*"I am a magician. Yes! A magician should do his magic and then disappear!"* Perry sings in the autobiographical "African Hitchiker", and if any one phrase from his work can serve as his *raison d'être*, that's it. As interesting, entertaining, and fascinating as Lee Perry's life and personality is, it can almost all be forgotten and replaced with one simple idea: his music always has -- and will -- speak for itself.