

SKINNY PELEMBE BIOGRAPHY 2022

“I never considered myself a singer before now,” says Skinny Pelembe. Viewing his 2019 debut *Dreaming Is Dead Now* from a comfortable distance, the Iggy Pop and Grace Jones-approved one-man band recognises its enigmatically murky production as a sort of auditory “squid ink”, aiming to disguise a lack of vocal confidence and to obscure the man behind the music. On the sure-footed follow-up, he makes no such concessions.

Visceral yet inherently soulful, *Hardly The Same Snake* is the sound of the Johannesburg-born, Doncaster-raised artist finally finding his voice – both literally and figuratively. In practical terms, that involved finding the courage to foreground his gravelly baritone in these gloriously genre-agnostic productions. But it also meant branching out beyond the safety net of his former label – Gilles’ Peterson’s Brownswood Recordings – to figure out the artist he truly wanted to be. As Skinny puts it today, in his soft South Yorkshire drawl, “This album is what I would have created first time round had I rated my own voice.”

Gaining that confidence has been an incremental process, stretching back to childhood. Though from a long line of music lovers, there was never any precedent in his family for a career in songwriting – he forged that path alone. One of Skinny’s very earliest musical memories is hiding in his older brother’s laundry basket so as to eavesdrop on an after school listening session. “Him and his mates were playing GZA’s *Liquid Swords* and I remember falling in love with ‘4th Chamber’,” Skinny recalls fondly, adding self-deprecatingly, “I feel like everything I’ve ever done since is just try to match that sound.”

While Wu Tang Clan and Onyx formed one half of Skinny’s formative musical education, the other half was provided by his father, who passed on a love of country singers like Marty Robbins and Johnny Cash. By his mid-teens Skinny was dividing his time between playing in garage bands and experimenting with production at a local studio run by a friend of his guitar teacher.

It was while living in Essex and working as a photographer’s assistant and live-in carer that Skinny’s musical career took off. A self-professed “Gilles Peterson fanboy”, he responded to an open call for demos as part of the DJ’s talent development scheme Future Bubblers. Skinny was subsequently selected to join the 2017 cohort, winning the opportunity to cut a record, stage a gig and receive hands-on mentoring. Part-way through the programme, Skinny self-released his debut EP – *Seven Year Curse* – before signing with Brownswood and sharing the dreamy boom-bap of breakout single ‘I’ll Be On Your Mind’.

It was Brownswood that released his debut LP. Proffering an utterly original mix of jazz, soul, dub and post-rock, *Dreaming Is Dead Now* won glowing reviews, praising Skinny’s imaginative, sample-led approach and his ability to own themes as far-ranging as xenophobia and grief. So, with a winning formula already in place, Skinny’s decision to flip the script entirely for album number two seemed reckless at best.

“I was bricking it but I felt like I needed to remove that safety net,” says Skinny, recalling the period immediately after amicably parting ways with Brownswood, and prior to his signing with Partisan Records. There were moments too when he questioned his choice, particularly when a dissatisfaction with early experiments led him to re-recording *Hardly The Same Snake* twice. Determined that the collection shouldn’t sound like a band record, but equally musn’t feel “too button push-y”, Skinny assembled songs by sampling instrumentation originally recorded live, including chopped and looped versions of the brilliantly complex beats played by Malcolm Catto of The Heliocentrics. It was a painstaking process that paid off, resulting in an album fathoms ahead of its promising predecessor, and one that honestly reflects Skinny’s creative evolution.

The idea of forging your own path – and shedding skin, so to speak – is integral to *Hardly The Same Snake*. Begun pre-pandemic and completed in the spring of 2021, it's a defiantly outward-looking record contemplating family, religion and major life milestones, from parenthood to death. Where previously Skinny relied on dream diaries as his primary lyrical resource, this time he took notes at design exhibitions, using these unfiltered observations as a jumping off point for songs.

You can hear this collage-like approach in the ominous stream of consciousness powering 'Same Eye Colour'. Propelled by a clattering, jungle-inspired rhythm, the song considers the respectable face of corruption – from Florsheim-clad hustlers operating in the name of organised religion to the politicians that betrayed the Windrush generation. 'Deadman' is weighed down by ideas of legacy, hinting at the fleeting nature of life via its laundry list of professions. Similarly, the central image in the title track was inspired by a triptych of paintings by Lucy Calder, and sees Skinny scrutinising the ageing process and pondering his own life course over a suitably serpentine groove.

During the low-slung indie-rock of 'Don't Be Another' he grapples with ideas of familial responsibility, while 'Like A Heart Won't Beat' sets contemplations on mortality to frenetic, saloon-style piano and furiously frazzled guitars. By contrast, 'Oh, Silly George' examines the feelings of isolation that can arise while living in a foreign land, with the song's disorienting snapshots accentuated by an arresting, Afrobeat-meets-8-bit riff.

The album culminates in a choral dedication to Skinny's childhood hiding place, performed by Doncaster choir Rainbow Connections. Listen closely enough and you'll even find a secret code to crack. A rare moment of tranquillity, for its author the song provides a vital space to reflect on the lives he's lived and the artist he's evolving into. Because if this superb second album proves anything, it's that it doesn't matter how much Skinny errs on the side of self-deprecation – he remains one of the UK's most fearlessly original voices.

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