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**Rasheed Ali's** album and DVD *1968: Soul Power!* Is one of the year's freshest and funkier finds, says Chris Wells.

**The world of independently made and released soul music has a happy habit of taking us by surprise. It did it again a couple of weeks back when an out-of-the-blue message via Facebook from Rasheed Ali in Los Angeles alerted me to his very fine funk album/DVD *1968: Soul Power!***

Available on iTunes and streamable online on his Youtube channel, it's a veritable street party of a project that links 18 tracks of newly laid [but convincingly vintage sounding] JB and Curtis-style grooves to an equivalent number of videos which capture the essence of the late sixties and very early seventies for African Americans. It's a remarkable and ambitious piece of work, pretty much put together by Rasheed on his own, and instantly tells us that we're dealing with no ordinary musician here.

For one thing, the guy has a considerable history, although not one that's too widely known. A few Echoes readers may remember, for instance, a 1973 jazz-funk album by a New York group Natural Essence, entitled *In Search Of Happiness*, recorded for Fantasy and produced by an impressive combination of Cannonball Adderley and Nat Adderley Snr. Rasheed was a co-writer and flautist on the project, in amongst a team that included Buddy Williams on drums, Nat Adderley Jnr on piano, Francisco Centena on bass and Rasheed's brother, Ramon Rivera on

percussion. [It was reissued in Japan on CD in 2012.] Natural Essence used to practice in the basement of the Apollo Theatre, thanks to the generosity of venue manager Peter Long, and got to open for such as Isaac Hayes, share stages with Donnie Hathaway and Roberta Flack, and travel all over the place as part of Jesse Jackson's PUSH and Bread Basket community programmes. The group went through a few changes when Ashford & Simpson came and took away Adderley Jnr, Centena and Williams for their own show, but replacements like Onaje Allen Gumbs and bassist Alex Blake, and the arrival of TS Monk, son of Thelonius, helped them to an ill-fated Atlantic deal before they finally broke up.

Thereafter, until the mid-nineties, Rasheed was mostly a sideman for a number of artists, at one point writing arrangements for several Broadway artists including Eartha Kitt, doing the charts for Peter Tosh on his *Equal Rights* album, and touring with bluesman Mighty Mo Rodgers. A temporary relocation to California occurred, during which time Rasheed wrote the music for what should have been the first major black musical production to hit Vegas - one of his best friends was choreographer Michael Peters, who won a Tony for *Dreamgirls* and worked on Michael Jackson's videos - but when the money men pulled out at the last minute Rasheed returned to NYC empty-handed and retrained as a stockbroker. Ironically, it was a change of career that led him back to Los Angeles - at first as a banker - and to a return to music: during the nineties he set up as Rasheed Ali and Rain People, releasing a series of albums of world music, including two in Spanish, two in Portugese for the Brazilian market, and a set of African drum/voice tracks entitled *The Empty Vessel Speaks*.

So how did he come to make *1968: Soul Power!*?

"I did seven albums as Rain People, basically different kinds of world music, and I got it all out of me," explains an affable Rasheed over Skype. "I had decided to go back to school, mostly just teaching music, while I was doing those albums, so they were never required to sell big. Then I tried doing a podcast, my One Tribe Many Voices radio show, and on that I was playing mostly world music to an audience of maybe 250,000 people. I noticed that I really only played James Brown from America, and it hit me that current American music was dead to me. Then a friend said to me one day, "I love your work, but when are you going to make an

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American album? I don't speak Portugese or Spanish... ' Well, my Spanish and Portugese records were basically 'race' records, all about how life is in South America, and so my friend said, 'Why don't you do it in English too?' So that led to *1968*.

"I remember, we were moving house and I'm packing things up with my wife. I have a *lot* of stuff, all my music gear. All of a sudden I hear this music in my head - this *serious* funk. I had to get it down. My wife's mad at me because I should be packing house and suddenly I'm writing music! Anyway, we finally move and my stuff stays in boxes for a year while we sort out the new place - almost two years, actually - and when finally I make time for the music again, it still sounded great. At the same time, I'm hearing from people around me that nobody was making music for the older audience... not nostalgia, but new music to groove to. So I set about creating something that explained to the younger generation now what it was like for us when we were them, back in what was a tumultuous time."

Rather than just release an album of music, Rasheed had the notion of providing an extra visual focus by assembling a video of images from the time for each of the 18 tracks he had, all sourced from Public Domain archives.

"I realised my that my sons needed to see what this music was about. I mean, ever since the eighties, we have been used to the fact that we no longer just close our eyes and imagine our own visuals to accompany the music we listen to - the pop video changed that forever. Artists were telling us what they intended for us to see. So making the videos became something I had to do. I did hours and hours of research, scouring the Public Domain archives for each and every bit of footage I could find, and then I edited them together."

The only thing left to do was get it out to the world. Without outside help, Rasheed once again had to use a more thoughtful approach.

"My main idea for people to hear the album was to screen it as a film," he says. "So at first I gave a few people access to my Vimeo, maybe 50 people, then 100. The feedback was incredible. People wanted the music, but they also wanted the DVD... and then they wanted it as an art piece. They were telling me how they wanted to receive it and that's why we now also have a special edition DVD/CD. I must admit, it does feel like I'm jumping up and down on the streetcorner, shouting from time to time, but it's out there and people are hearing it."

So should you. Hit [1968soulpower.com](http://1968soulpower.com) and get on the good foot.

