

TAJ MAHAL CELEBRATES FOUR DECADES OF BLUES, ROOTS, REGGAE AND BEYOND

New Album *Maestro* Includes Guest Appearances By:
Ben Harper, Jack Johnson, Angelique Kidjo, Los Lobos, Ziggy Marley and more

Also Available On Limited Edition 40th Anniversary Collector's Double LP

The mythology of American blues is filled with images of the lone musician standing at the crossroads, caught in that gray area between light and shadow, cutting impossible deals with dark forces, offering up nothing less than his soul as collateral.

Composer and multi-instrumentalist Taj Mahal, a two-time GRAMMY® winner and one of the most influential American blues and roots artists of the past half-century, has made no Faustian deals in his long and distinguished career, but he stands at an important crossroads nonetheless. In his never-ending exploration of the complex origins and underpinnings of American music, he has forged a four-decade career by gathering and distilling countless musical traditions from a range of geographical and cultural sources: the Mississippi Delta, the Appalachian backwoods, the African continent, the Hawaiian islands, Europe, the Caribbean and so much more. Taj Mahal doesn't just stand at the crossroads. He *is* the crossroads.

On September 30, 2008, he makes his Heads Up International debut with the worldwide release of *Maestro* (HUCD 3164). This twelve-track set – his first U.S. release in five years – marks the fortieth anniversary of Taj's rich and varied recording career by mixing original material with chestnuts from vintage sources and newcomers alike. Guests on this anniversary gala include Ben Harper, Jack Johnson, Angelique Kidjo, Los Lobos, Ziggy Marley and others – many of whom have been directly influenced by Taj's music and guidance.

But *Maestro* is much more than just a tribute to past glories. It captures the same level of intensity and depth that has characterized every one of Taj's recordings since his self-titled debut album in 1968. Simply put, four decades have done nothing to dilute his energy quotient. "The one thing I've always demanded of the records I've made is that they be danceable," he says. "This record is danceable, it's listenable, it has lots of different rhythms, it's accessible, it's all right in front of you. It's a lot of fun, and it represents where I am at this particular moment in my life."

In addition to the standard CD release, *Maestro* will also be available on vinyl in a Limited Edition 40th Anniversary Collector's Double LP (HULP 8164).

The set opens with "Scratch My Back," a song made famous by soul shouter Otis Redding in the 1960s. When Taj and his early band, the Rising Sons, opened for Redding at the Whiskey A-Go-Go in Los Angeles, the up and coming bluesman was immediately hooked by Redding's fiery stage presence. "There were very few artists who grabbed me the way Otis Redding did," he says. "If anyone was an example of what I wanted to do with music, he certainly was it. His ability to take someone else's song and make it his own, and at the same time not lose the essence of the original song, was just fantastic." "Scratch My Back" is one of four tracks on *Maestro* to reunite Taj with his Phantom Blues Band, the combo that backed him on two GRAMMY® winning recordings, *Señor Blues* in 1997 and *Shoutin' in Key* in 2000.

The reggae-flavored "Never Let You Go," co-written by Taj and his daughter, Deva Mahal, features shared vocals by father and daughter against a backdrop by premier Latin rockers Los Lobos. No newcomer to her father's musical projects, Deva first recorded with Taj as a pre-teen more than 15 years ago, when he made a number of children's albums on the Music for Little People label. Los Lobos re-appears a few tracks later in the boozy and rollicking "TV Mama," a tune written by Willie Turner and delivered here in a style reminiscent of seminal electric blues guitarist Elmore James.

Ben Harper joins in on the vocals on “Dust Me Down.” Written by Harper, this jagged and gritty tune is the latest chapter in a longstanding association between these two musicians hailing from separate and distinct generations. Harper’s grandparents, proprietors of the Folk Music Center and Museum in Claremont, California, were fans of Taj who booked him to play numerous gigs at the center many years ago. “Later on, I met their grandson,” says Taj. “I coached him with his guitar playing when he was a teenager. He really had a sensitivity to the music, and over the years we’ve done some performing and recording together.”

Jack Johnson steps in to share vocals on Taj’s well-known “Further On Down the Road.” Taj’s banjo and harmonica juxtaposed against the horn riffs provided by the Phantom Blues band give the song a vibe that’s equal parts down home blues and vintage Stax.

In “Black Man, Brown Man,” Taj takes a trip to the islands with the help of Ziggy Marley and his six-piece band. “It was a tune that came to me back in the ‘70s, when we were in the midst of recording a lot of that Caribbean, African and Latin music,” Taj explains. “I thought it would be a good song for Ziggy and I to do. It not only has a nice reggae vibe, but it addresses a timely topic.” The collaboration on this track represents the third generation of Marleys with whom Taj has now been associated. Reggae icon Bob Marley, along with Jamaican bassist/keyboardist/producer Aston “Family Man” Barrett, helped record and mix Taj’s 1974 album, *Mo’ Roots* (Family Man also played piano on the *Mo’ Roots* track, “Slave Driver”). Two decades later, Taj enlisted Bob Marley’s mother, Cedella Marley-Booker – Ziggy’s grandmother – to record an album of African children’s songs on *Music for Little People* in the early ‘90s.

The exotic African ballad “Zanzibar” was co-written by Taj and Afro-European songstress Angelique Kidjo, who shares the vocals. The track also features Toumani Diabate on kora, a 21-string harp from west Africa. Taj had long been a fan of Toumani’s father, Gambian kora master Sidiki Diabate. “Toumani happened to be here in the United States, and the two of us ended up on a radio program together,” Taj explains. “We played some music on this program, and that just sealed it for both of us. We knew that some kind of musical project would be in our future.” The result was *Kulanjan*, a 1999 collaborative recording that featured Taj, Toumani and a sextet of west African instrumentalists and vocalists.

Taj pays tribute to New Orleans icon Fats Domino with “Hello Josephine.” He’s aided here by the New Orleans Social Club, the Crescent City quintet whose ranks include Ivan Neville on B3 and George Porter on bass. “I’ve been a Fats Domino fan for years,” says Taj. “He did something with the blues that made it so melodic and bouncy and danceable, in a way that was different from all the other New Orleans cats. And I loved playing with the New Orleans Social Club. They play so well together, and this tune swings really hard.”

The set closes with Taj and the Phantom Blues Band serving up a swaggering, roadhouse rendition of the Willie Dixon/Bo Diddley classic “Diddy Wah Diddy.” In the end, as in the beginning, it’s always about the blues, always about making people move.

“With his record, as with all my records, I want people to roll back the rug and go for it,” says Taj. “This record is just the beginning of another chapter, one that’s going to be open to more music and more ideas. Even at the end of forty years, in many ways my music is just getting started.”