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stirring ‘Coal Dust Caruso’, a reflection on working-class life in Ayrshire, and the Scottish-air-infused ‘My Love Sings Like a Lintie’, under palm trees, in tropical heat, just strides from the cerulean shallows. Nevertheless, buoyed by the honeyed harmonies of backing singer Laurel Tubman and the tenor sax and assorted whistles of Trini-Canadian Marcus Ali, the songs soon stand on their own.

Few of those seated around wooden tables or leaning against the bar would know about Wilson’s folk connections. To Dick Gaughan, a deft song interpreter who taught him the DADGAD tuning associated with Celtic music on acoustic guitar during the pandemic. To the late Swarbrick, the Fairport Convention fiddler with whom Wilson (and Ali) learned 17th-century folk songs, toured as a duo, and recorded *The Lion Rampant*, a 2014 album featuring UK folk royalty, Martin Carthy and Peggy Seeger.

“There are so many silver threads,” says Wilson. “After getting into reggae, I got into other music. There was Dave Pegg, who was in the Ian Campbell Folk Group with Dave Swarbrick. Two of Campbell’s sons were in UB40. My brother-in-law gave me

a Fairport Convention album, and I reached out to Swarb, who was the best guy ever. We fell for each other. He was my conduit to the real folk stuff.”

In 2016, Wilson began a trilogy of albums exploring the impact of place on memory, beginning with *Perennials* (focused on New York), followed by *Sumach Roots* (surveying 400 years of Toronto history) in 2019 and, finally, *Ashara* in 2023, which saw him set off in search of his Scottish roots and establish his new band and sound. The core Ashara line-up features saxophonist/flautist Marcus Ali, trumpeter Patrice Barbanchon and bassist Michael Shapinko. All are malleable enough to follow Wilson wherever the music takes them, be it reggae staples such as ‘Fire Burning’ by Bob Andy – the sort that makes guest guitar wiz Maurice Gordon lean into his Les Paul – or the Scots-meets-Jamaica-in-Canada genre that Ashara are currently forging on their own.

“There are some songs that lack the necessary pliability to be used as a reggae track,” says Wilson. “But the age I got into reggae is crucial. Learning to play reggae aged 11 means that, even when I’m doing session work for a pop or country singer that needs a piano player, I feel it in a reggae way.”

He pauses. “On the other hand, I’ve always loved to push boundaries and bring in different aspects, but sometimes I can get too experimental. I’ve gotten shit for that. Just as I was getting into jazz, Jackie Mittoo said to me, ‘If you colour anything in too much you will realise that you overdid it. Always remember to pull it back so that the reggae can be exposed again.’”

“But this place, Jamaica, has absorbed many iterations of music over hundreds of years. Reggae, rocksteady and ska artists have covered the most bizarre things, from Chopin to country, and for me that’s one of the more beautiful aspects of Jamaican reggae. It lets you build a bridge. As a white Scottish Canadian, I’ve pretty much devoted my life to it.”

Ashara win over the Courtleigh Auditorium. The crowd stays on its feet as the band move between reggae standards and Wilson’s originals, the Scottish folk influences melding almost imperceptibly. Afterwards, an older Jamaican woman comes backstage and thanks the musicians for honouring her culture. “I thought that was beautiful,” says Wilson. “She saw that I was coming from an earnest place and wasn’t trying to mimic reggae. It made me feel that, yeah, we found the balance.”

Another smile. “We’re still ourselves. We’re still playing reggae.” ♦

+ *Auld Acquaintance* is released via Wheel Records

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