

REVIEW

Music Review: Xavier Rudd - *Dark Shades Of Blue*

Written by [Richard Marcus](#)
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Normally it's a pretty simple process to write a critique or review of somebody's work. I listen to, read, or watch whatever the item is, and try to judge it on its own merits as objectively as possible. That usually means trying to place the item in a context that will allow me to judge it based on how it stacks up against others of a similar ilk. It sounds pretty good in theory, and I like to think that I'm able to carry it out in practice more often than not. Of course I've also got in the habit of not reviewing anything that I know I wouldn't be able to stomach - so I've never really had to test the limits of my objectivity in that way.

Where it all falls apart though are the occasions where the work touches me personally in some manner or another. When something strikes an emotional chord that resonates deep inside me I find it extremely hard to hold onto any semblance of critical detachment. How do you write a review about something when all that comes to mind when listening to or reading it is, "Holy fuck, that's great!" The obvious thing to — trying to itemize all the reasons why I think it's so great — seems next to impossible as each time I go back to the piece my critical faculties seem to desert me. I just can't seem to get beyond the awe that I felt the first time, no matter how many times I watch, read, or listen. So, I apologize in advance for any and all gushing, and the decided lack of critical detachment in the following review - you can turn back now before it's too late, or take your chances and read on, but don't say I didn't warn you.

The first time I listened to the Australian musician [Xavier Rudd](#) I was impressed not only with his musical virtuosity — at the time he was nearly a one-man band playing guitar, kick drums, and didgeridoo — but his abilities as a songwriter. He could not only write songs about the state of the world, but he could look inside and write a song about the way his children made him feel that was so unsentimental that even a childless person like me could appreciate the emotion. Underlying all his music was this strange but wonderful combination of a deeply felt spiritual connection to the planet and the laid back attitude of a surfer boy.

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Musically he'd been playing a reggae influenced world beat style when I first heard him, but flavoured with some really sharp lap slide guitar. That sound has gradually been evolving, and on his 2007 release, [*White Moth*](#), it began to change from something that was identifiable as any particular genre, into music that was an extension of what he was feeling at a particular moment in time. *White Moth* contained everything from traditional indigenous music from Australia and North America, hard rock, and simple yet eloquent acoustic music. As he was singing about coming out of the cocoon to be in the world around you, he was also spreading his wings musically.



Now, on his forthcoming disc, [*Dark Shades Of Blue*](#), being released on August 19, 2008 on the [Anti](#) record label, he takes the next step in synthesizing the elements that have made his work so distinctive in the past and continues his evolution as a musician and a songwriter. While initially, compared to his earlier work, the temptation is to say this is a dark, almost brooding recording, calling it introspective would probably be closer to the point. However, unlike others who turn their gaze inwards, Xavier doesn't become self-involved, and the material on *Dark Shades Of Blue* is as universally applicable as any of his previous recordings.

The difference here is the emotional commitment to the material has come from someplace deeper inside of him than before and he's broadened his means of expression. This is his first recording where he has used obvious effects on his voice and the music has taken a few giant steps away from the easygoing reggae groove that used to distinguish it. There's a hard, almost brittle edge to the sound that interestingly enough gives it an air of fragility rather than the toughness normally associated with hard electric guitars.

For those who know Xavier Rudd's earlier work, the opening instrumental track, "Black Water", is your first clue that things on this recording are going to be different. Jagged guitar riffs churn and bounce over an almost un-syncopated beat, through which the low throb of the didgeridoo moans and wanders. This opening segues into the title track "Dark Shades Of Blue" which seems to be a commentary on the way the state of the world affects people. When he sings "You paint dark shades of blue" in the chorus, he appears to be talking about how the anxiety in the world is reflected in our attitudes and the ways we respond to what we see around us.

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The cover art for the disc is taken from a painting by his wife Marci Lutken-Rudd entitled "Blackwater". I mention this because the piece is indicative of the album in that at first glance it appears to be rather dark, monotone, and brooding. But if you look closely at the painting you'll see layers of texture and delicate nuances of colour within what appears to be a solid block of greyish blue. There's also a bright snake-like swirl of yellow in the centre that pulls the eye to it immediately. It's as if the painter wanted to remind us that whatever else we think we see, there's always a spark of something else waiting to be discovered.

On *Dark Shades Of Blue* Xavier Rudd's songs offer us an alternative way of reacting to the things in the world that upset us. It's easy to get angry about the injustices we see around us, the pollution that's destroying the environment, and any other issue that attacks our emotions. What's hard is to find a positive reaction; that streak of yellow, the spark of joy that the world can still inspire in us. He doesn't deny the problems in the world, and they anger and upset him as much as anyone, but if we forget the pleasures to be had, what exactly are we fighting to preserve?

Dark Shades Of Blue is going to surprise a lot of people, and I think some people will be disappointed, or at least disconcerted, as it's nowhere near as accessible as any of Xavier Rudd's previous releases. This is an album of complex songs highly appropriate to the complexity of the world that we live in today. Oh, and, holy fuck, it's great.

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Richard Marcus is a long-haired Canadian iconoclast who writes reviews and opines on the world as he sees it at [Leap In The Dark](#) and [Epic India Magazine](#).

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