

## **SPEARHEAD**

Chocolate Supa Highway (Capitol)

Rating: \*\*\*\*

By Bill Holdship

A recent Sunday *L.A. Times* feature profiled current Berkeley hip-hop star DJ Shadow and included a huge photo with the caption: "If everybody knows who I am, then it's no fun." Y'see, the kid prizes his "anonymity." Which, of course, is why he consented to a full-page photo in the most widely-read edition of one of the nation's most widely-read newspapers. We live in a very contrary world...

Likewise, while I'm no censorship advocate, you've gotta wonder as to why a major segment of the rap community continues to perpetuate a negative stereotype of inner-city youth. When one of the genre's biggest stars ends up dead before he hits 25, you have to wonder if this pop artform is now more part of the proverbial problem than the solution. As rap archetype/Last Poets founder Abiodun Oyewolfe said last year: "If we don't get rappers saying something positive, then what we've got is something negative that's dragging us down."

Actually, Spearhead leader Michael Franti has been using the hip-hop medium to say something positive as far back as his stint with the early '90s Bay Area sensation, Disposable Heroes Of Hip-hoprisy. Franti does address some of those aforementioned racial stereotypes in "Chocolate Supa Highway," the title track to Spearhead's sophomore effort ("One nigga, two niggas, three niggas, four/Robbing your house, the liquor store"), but he also looks at positive ways in which worldwide hip-hop communication has affected his generation.

Franti draws his influences from a litany of baby boomer sources and sounds, including Marvin Gaye and Barry White (especially on the track "Keep Me Lifted"). "The Payback" (note the James Brown-ish title) is pure Philly soul (with a touch of acoustic folk!), while "Rebel Music" channels a Bob Marley soundalike. "Why Oh Why," the LP's first single and a bitter look at the game of basketball, quotes from Grandmaster Flash's landmark "The Message," and this reviewer was absolutely blown away when Joan Baez's legendary voice came wailing out of the speakers during "Wayfaring Stranger." (Turns out that the voice actually belongs to Joan Osborne, but, hey, the effect is pretty much the same.)

Despite a continuously professed love for what they term "herb" (see the orgasmic "Ganja Babe"--hey, they toured last summer with Cypress Hill, so whaddaya want?), Spearhead's politics make so much more sense than other modern music rabble-rousers like, say, Rage Against The Machine, who preach

"communism" while recording for a billion-dollar, capitalistic, Japanese-owned conglomerate called Sony. Like I said, such a contrary world...