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Sananda Maitreya Conjures His Singular, Stirring Songcraft Once Again on Expansive ‘Pandora’s PlayHouse’ | Album Review



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By Andy Healy

Whenever my friends and I gather, talk usually gets 'round to the latest music we're listening to, swapping recommendations and then heated debate about our Top 5 albums, if Radiohead is overblown or underappreciated, and the best live shows we've seen. One topic that is sure to pop up is "most underrated artist." Without fail, my answer is invariably Sananda Maitreya.

As the lovable scoundrel mischief-maker D'Arby, he burst on the music scene with the hit filled debut *Introducing the Hardline According to Terence Trent D'Arby* (1987), quickly ascending the mountain of superstardom. His follow-up albums were challenging but rewarding endeavors to those paying attention and spawned another collection of hits. Following the release of 2001's funk-rocker *Wildcard*, the artist followed his muse and fashioned his works under his new name, Sananda Maitreya. Since then, he has released a steady flow of recordings leading to his latest release and twelfth studio album, *Pandora's PlayHouse*.

As became his want, Maitreya would release albums of epic proportions with track counts extending well into the twenties with sets formed as volumes. This approach continues with the expansive 28-song offering that is *Pandora's PlayHouse*—a set that clashes concept album and self-reflection and extends the mythology of Maitreya's hefty precursor release [PROMETHEUS & PANDORA](#) (2017).

Opening with the meditative spoken word "Pandora's Plight," we embark on a musical journey that blends genres and stylistic flair to explore love, life, mortality, and fate. The freedom of being an independent artist is evident, as Maitreya goes from track to track with a fury of a man desperate to capture each expression. The powerful cover of the Rolling Stones' "Time Is On My Side" showcases Maitreya's signature rasp and soulful vocals. And his sense of humor is well on display in the jaunty "Don't Break My Balls" and the rollicking "The Ballad of Rod Steiger" which contains a retelling of a chance encounter with the famed actor.



The album unfurls with a mix of solid songcraft and a sense of intimacy with several tracks having a raw production to them that feels like as soon as they were put down, their fate was sealed. This means songs like “Mr. Skeleton,” “Yuki Suzuki” and “Glasshouse” have more of a demo feel to them than being overly labored upon, which has its benefits as well.

However, many of the songs, especially in the first volume, have an overly heavy, muddy mix which obscures Maitreya’s vocals making the tracks feel dense and occasionally impenetrable. Which is a shame on tracks like “Her Kiss” and “Mama’s Boy Blues,” which beg for a little more clarity.

In contrast, tracks like the blissful “Don’t Leave Me Here!” is a swirling soundscape that plays to all of Maitreya’s strengths as a singer-songwriter and multi-instrumentalist. His voice is smooth and inviting, the music swelling and engaging. When these elements come together so perfectly, it makes for a truly compelling listen.

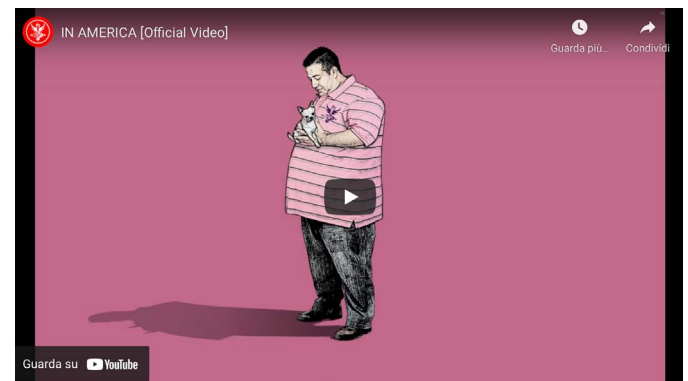


And there are many compelling moments, like the rapturous funk’n’roll moments of “Madhouse” or “The Kings of Avalon” and its electro-spun counterpart,

“The Queens of Babylon.” And Maitreya’s trademark psychedelic-tinged rock is well represented in “Life’s a Bitch” and “Excuse Me, But...” His prowess as a gifted musician is evident in the quieter moments where he presents instrumental delights in the shape of “Pandora’s PlayHouse” the meditative “Prometheus Rising,” the seductively chilled “Casa di Vetro” and the final track on the album, a beautiful piano movement dedicated to and named after “Prince!”

Maitreya also shows he’s equally at home in a more electronic inspired landscape with the groove along “Pie,” the bubbling pop-meets-social commentary “In America,” and the sublimely epic “Reflecting Light” which features Vashti Bunyan and first appeared on The Avalanches’ return to form release of last year, *We Will Always Love You*.

As a collection, *Pandora’s PlayHouse* can be a challenging listen, not for its content, but for its pure breadth of running time. Upon first listen, I found my ears becoming weary of its nearly two-hour run time. But as I gave the album repeated airings and the songs a chance to breathe, I found myself being constantly drawn back into the album.



Could it benefit from a trimming here or there, or serve more valuable as a selection of 10 tracks? Quite possibly. But part of the reason Sananda Maitreya’s career has been so rewarding for those who have stuck with him is that he doesn’t have to play by any preset rules. If the muse compels him to record and release a 28-track album, he will.

A tighter, more selective offering might be more accessible and provide a reintroduction to the audiences that wonder “whatever happened to...,” but you get the sense scaling



that mountain once more has no allure for an artist more than comfortable in his skin and in a career of his own making.

Notable Tracks: “Don’t Leave Me Here!” | “Excuse Me, But...” | “The Madhouse” | “Reflecting Light”



Pandora's PlayHouse
Sananda Maitreya

1	Pandora's Plight	2:08
2	Time Is On My Side	2:54
3	Don't Break My Balls	3:02
4	Mama's Boy Blues	4:22
5	The Ballad Of Rod Steiger	6:27
6	Don't Leave Me Here!	4:32
7	Yuki Suzuki	3:26
8	Her Kiss	5:47
9	The MadHouse	4:05
10	Life's A Bitch	5:10