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McConaughey helps Cdn. reggae artist

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TORONTO - Most of Matthew McConaughey's fans probably figure the Hollywood actor is something like the characters he usually portrays in movies - good-natured, laid-back layabouts.

Those people have never seen him in the studio.

McConaughey has just helped produce his first record - Nova Scotia-based reggae artist Mishka's "Above the Bones" - and is releasing it on his own label, J.K. Livin' Productions. Mishka says McConaughey was "intense" and "meticulous" in the studio, which the actor confirms.

"We just never wanted to stop and say: 'It's good enough,'" McConaughey said in a telephone interview from his Los Angeles office.

"We agree about what's great about his music. By agreeing on that, lyrically and musically, it's very clear to me when something in the music isn't up to par with the rest of it. We just never wanted to say: 'Oh, that's passable.'"

It makes sense that McConaughey was so particular - the record is the culmination of a nine-year fixation the actor has had with Mishka's music.

It all began in 1999 when McConaughey was partying in Jamaica just before the turn of the millennium. He was on a beach with some friends when Mishka's self-titled debut album came on as part of a mix, and McConaughey immediately took notice.

"I was just sort of entranced," he recalled. "I've always liked reggae, but Mishka's got a melody. Then I got to know his lyrics. It was incredibly relaxing, and at the same time, it was fun to party to."

"It became the soundtrack of our two weeks in Jamaica."

But afterwards, the music stayed with him, and McConaughey wanted to find the singer. He called record labels, poked around online and persuaded his friends to join the search party.

Meanwhile, McConaughey estimates he handed out about 200 copies of Mishka's record to friends and people he met on his travels.

Still, he had no luck.



Nova Scotia-based reggae artist Mishka, left, and actor Matthew McConaughey. THE CANADIAN PRESS/HO-ErikVoake.com

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"A few years go by and I've still got no traction on this cat," McConaughey said. "But it's still my favourite album, three years later. I know it up and down."

Finally, someone from McConaughey's office saw Mishka opening for Sly and Robbie in L.A., and nabbed his contact information.

Over the next couple of years, McConaughey and Mishka began chatting on the phone, then hanging out and discussing music. Initially, Mishka didn't really know who McConaughey was.

"I knew that he was someone who had a liking for the music, but at that point, I'd never watched any of his movies," said Mishka, who moved to Nova Scotia's Lunenburg County, south of Halifax, last year from Nelson, B.C., but has spent much of the winter in the Caribbean. "I wasn't really aware of his work as an actor."

Meanwhile, McConaughey was stuck on one thing - he wanted more people to hear Mishka's music. So, he called his lawyer and told him he was starting up his own record label.

"Then I called Mishka back and said, 'You want to join Just Keep Livin' records? I just started it five minutes ago,'" he recalled.

So far, it's been a success. "Above the Bones" hit No. 1 on the Billboard reggae charts in the U.S. when it was released last month, and now Mishka is in the midst of a lengthy tour - which includes several dates throughout Canada - to support it.

For Mishka, whose last name is Frith, the attention is all a bit new.

He grew up under unusual circumstances. The son of a Bermudian father and Canadian mother, he spent the first 16 years of his life with his family on a boat. They would travel from island to island in the Caribbean, and sometimes to Europe, South America or Canada.

In the '90s, he was discovered by Creation Records co-founder Alan McGee, who signed Mishka and released his first record. That album didn't take off, and it was six years until he released his second record, "One Tree," which Mishka says was more a collection of demos than a proper album.

So Mishka was thrilled that McConaughey was committed to release his album, much of which was helmed by producer Daryl Thompson.

McConaughey said he wasn't familiar with some of the production lingo when he was in the studio, so he would find himself flailing his arms around to get his point across - "half the time, it was charades," he said with a laugh.

Mishka said McConaughey was a welcome - though vocal - member of the process.

"He's intense," the singer said. "Like I say, he's a very grounded person, but he can be very meticulous. Going over everything with a fine-toothed comb. He wouldn't overlook a single millisecond of recorded sound. He wanted everything to be just so.

"Sometimes that's hard as an artist. You hear things and you want them to be rough, as they were recorded."

But Mishka, currently the only musician signed to McConaughey's label, said he was always thankful for the actor's presence.

"A lot of times you work with record companies, promoters, producers, whatever, and they just look at it like a job," Mishka said. "They don't often have a lot of passion in it. It's quite refreshing to work with someone who has his heart in it."

McConaughey's work of promoting the record isn't over, but he said he already feels relieved.

"It's kind of relaxing, in a way," he said. "I feel like (Mishka's music) is getting into ears. That's what really feels great.

"Man, it feels like it's been a long time getting here."

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On the web:

www.mishka.com