

Burundian-born soul singer JP Bimeni doesn't see the world through rose colored glasses, but he exudes optimism in his second album, *Give Me Hope*. A royal refugee who escaped death more than once and found his sonic calling in the UK, Bimeni's latest channels prime Otis Redding while meditating on ambition, community and love.

*Give Me Hope* grooves between classic '60s Motown and Stax-inspired soul, psychedelia and Afro-funk. Inspired by leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. and James Stern (the namesake of an empowering funky track) and propelled by the wisdom of prolific creators like Lee Scratch Perry, Bimeni's deep consciousness and vulnerability is on full display without losing pop sensibility.

"I've been trying to see in terms of the journey I'm on as an expressive artist: what I've overcome, what's ahead and where I am now. It feels like I have a lot of cleansing to do," Bimeni says. "It's an emotional process. Your individual status can change, but you still can identify a lot of your stages and understand how you deal with that internally."

A descendant of the Burundian royal family whose parents held opposing political views, Bimeni escaped his country aged 15 during the 1993 civil war and genocide. Following multiple attempts on his life, including being poisoned by doctors in hospital, he was given refugee status and fled to Wales. Soon after Bimeni's arrival at Trinity College in Wales -- a school for children who have escaped conflict, where he received a United Nations organised scholarship -- Bimeni was taken record shopping for his birthday. He immediately gravitated toward the music of Ray Charles, Bob Marley, Marvin Gaye and his idol, Otis Redding.

"Music is my great escape. My first album, *Free Me*, was me finally doing what I wanted to do and feeling like music is my freedom," he says, adding that his frame of mind evolved while recording *Give Me Hope*. "You realize that you have a platform that is much larger than you expected, so you have to question yourself: What am I trying to express? Who am I?"

JP Bimeni showcases himself as resilient and conscientious, conjuring a deep spirituality and pain to demand hope. After experiencing unimaginable tumult as a young man, Bimeni's belief that love is our collective future remains steadfast. Where his critically acclaimed debut was a joyous, super funky celebration of achievement – *Give Me Hope* is a deeper contemplation on the need for unity and a sense of global community.

Much like Otis Redding, Bimeni is a master of both the forlorn and ecstatic. *Give Me Hope* opens with a cover of Eddie Holman's 1969 string-laced midtempo burner "Four Walls," in which Bimeni aches with regret of losing a love he once took for granted. On "Not In My Name," a unique pop-soul message song, Bimeni encourages a reciprocity of our communal existence. He uses the album's ballads as metaphors for loving thy neighbor, folding hints of

gospel and Sam Cooke sweetness into songs such as "Find That Love" and "When Everything Is Wrong."

*Give Me Hope* also deals in complex internal themes, and Bimani imbues "Guilty & Blessed" with his personal history of trauma and war. Hundreds of thousands of people died in Burundi's 1994 genocide, including some of Bimani's young friends. The singer was shot and read his last rites, poisoned by doctors and put on life support – and yet Bimani managed to survive, thriving as his passion for music unfolded. Yet despite his successes, Bimani is often wracked with survivor's guilt.

"I know people who probably deserve more than I do, but they didn't have that chance," Bimani says. "I feel blessed to have survived and keep moving. But sometimes I feel guilty. This music is an exploration of my emotional journey to self-discovery and healing."

Uplifting the album are the supremely funky title track and "Mathematics," in which stabbing horns and heavy bassline conjure both Sharon Jones and The Dap-Kings and Fela Kuti. Bimani honors his heroes on "James Stern," a slightly psychedelic tale of the Black activist who destroyed an American neo-Nazi group, adding to the album's themes of self-empowerment. The horn-forward swing of "Precious Girl" erupts as soul dancefloor crusher, buoyed by Bimani's incredible vocal depth.

Much like JP Bimani's belief in the need for global cohesion, *Give Me Hope* is the result of a collaborative effort. His six-piece band, The Black Belts – Rodrigo Díaz "Niño" (drum & percussion), Pablo "Bassman" Cano, Fernando Vasco "Two Guns" (guitar), Ricardo Martínez (trumpet), Rafael Díaz (sax) and Alex Larraga (Keyboards) – contribute their diverse musical backgrounds to the breadth of soul stylings on *Give Me Hope*. The Black Belts shine throughout but are given space to breath on the cinematic instrumental "Ghost City."

The creating of *Give Me Hope* was complex -- from processing trauma to managing during the pandemic. "People are so confined in their houses and the war is financial, for survival. There's this heaviness of not knowing what's next." Bimani recalled beginning to think that his musical success was a fluke: "But I realized that I'm in the same state with everybody else, which is quite profound. Reflecting on what gave me hope was the right sort of sentiment for this record."