

Our Man On The Coast

Elephants on Parade

The Japonize Elephants is more an ensemble than a group. There is a subtle but important difference between the two. With an ensemble the roles and evolution of creation tend to be less static, facilitating an ongoing freedom. One could almost categorize them as an orchestra except that some of the meat of the body of the ensemble encompasses ethno/world/root instruments, forgoing those of the formalized Western orchestral tradition. The ensemble's name, like their latest album *Mélodie Fantastique*, embodies a sort of chance logic akin to the word game created by Andre Breton and Paul Eluard "Exquisite Corpse".

"Eye Wrote This" has a frenzied Gitane (gypsy) & klezmer feel to it. Structurally, the song is made up of a series of fast runs carried out but several smaller groups within the group. A bolero beat makes an appearance before the vocalese chorus that ends the song. There is the urge to drink and then dance like an inelegant bird unsure of whether it wants to fly. To some extent this song may serve as the ensemble's calling card in that it seamlessly melds several genres' music utilizing a full, unique sonic palette to do so. There is some definite quirk to this group but never to the point of distraction nor as any kind of crutch. I am all for humor in music whether in its execution or composition but too often it lapses into gimmick or novelty. The 'Elephants completely sidestep such dangers with top notch musicianship and compositions which embrace the occasional quirk but never rely upon it.

"Melodie Fantastique" initially has the slurred tongue of the violin which a song earlier had been urging on some kind of dance, playing over a sort of pulsed beat. It takes on a nasal-mid eastern cadence, the temptation of Faust as embodied by the hypnotic gyrations of a belly dancer. Then with the entry of banjo the song morphs; it is an Appalachian get together or the fireside entertainment of a roving band of travelers. The song again morphs (2:30) becoming the sort of aural fanfare that could have been birthed from the head of Nino Rota. Plucked strings singing out as a diverse cast of characters each most likely speaking a different language, cross their arms over each other each hand clasping that of the person on either side of them, the long line snaking out the door of the nightclub heading down the cobblestone street in black and white as the band is left playing to itself and a lone balloon which has fallen at the foot of the stage. The various percussion and vocalese propel the piece forward; the song gets softer, hushed plucked strings and spoons as the line moves further down the street and out of sight.

If Esquivel had been asked to score a Connery era James Bond film it would sound like “End Times, The Theme From Bat Boy”. Vibraphone lays down that cooler than cool pattern over which muted horns pop up before another central figure is introduced by a trebled guitar, the frenzy of someone making love to one of Leo Fender’s Strats. There is not a care in the world as he will get the girl, and dispatch the baddies with a terrible pun. All while being indifferent to the fact that his number, red thirteen, has come up on the wheel.

“Breusters” changes things up with country twang and vocals. The ensemble are all actually very good musicians and on some of the slower more acoustic pieces this really rises to the fore. There is a beautiful lap steel solo in the middle of the song. The vocals are well done; there is that lone star desolation in the two entwined voices that manages to be beautifully blue. It is Tom Joad now a member of a live in the van indie band witnessing a vanishing Americana of honky tonk bars where hipsters are not allowed to order mixed drinks or check their iPhones and every midnight is the start of a new day.

Being a short but sweet track; “An Evening With A thumbtack” is a lone piano murmuring a bluesy minor chord cakewalk which ends with the sound of libations being poured out and sipped. One could almost imagine a small stage with the rest of the band about to take a quick five or return to continue the show. The sound throughout the album is pristine. On the tracks with vocals, when one listens with headphones there is a sonic intimacy as if the artists are standing in the same room.

I highly recommend this CD it is fun; it is art; it is an orgy of sound.

I am in my cranberry colored bathrobe, the sleeve bleached a bubblegum pink from the time I helped Chili dye her hair, I am painting in the garage in an olive green jump suit like Picasso wore during his Ripolin phase, I draw three concentric circles at the bottom of the paper then let all the extra words burn off in the atmosphere. There is a fecundity of ideas to be found in this album, a lopsided joy carried out via excellent musicianship. Three circles upon the paper, through an open window one could almost imagine hearing the Japonize Elephants music playing as they parade down the street, stumping for the circus come to town that escaped E.E Cummings condemnation*.

<http://www.thejaponizeelephants.com/>

*“Damn everything except the circus.” E.E Cummings

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