

The Vinyl Anachronist

Friday, November 9, 2018

Shijin



I must have Japanese music on my mind, especially since this past week I've tumbled in head-first into the Haruomi Hoson reissues for my next Deep End column for *Part-Time Audiophile*. Shijin isn't Japanese music, however--it's something called "post-bop" from a quartet of gifted jazz musicians who have taken this name, part of Japanese folklore (it refers to the four guardians of west, east, north and south), to describe this adventurous journey into a strange and unique mix of fusion, free jazz and funk.

Saxophonist Jacques Schwarz-Bart, drummer Stéphane Galland, keyboardist Malcolm Braff and bassist Laurent David have specialized in mastering a more international interpretation of different jazz idioms over the years, and they are all gifted soloists, so that gives *Shijin* a wild, exploratory feel that uses unusual time signatures to strike at will. The sound is anything but disjointed, however, since the grooves are so strong and catchy. Schwartz-Bart is from Guadelope in the Caribbean, Galland is from Belgium, Braff is from Brazil and Davis is from France, and those influences are up front. Yet this quartet blends perfectly together even amid the daring solo work, and the blend is far more accessible that you'd think.



This is beefy, swinging music, esoteric and yet whimsical in its themes. "Afro Bear," for example, follows a bear's adventures in the woods, and "New Neighborhood" is based on folk melodies that are deconstructed so that each musician can adopt a unique tempo that magically converges into a completely new whole. "The Edgewater Hotel" is one of my favorites--it pays tribute to the Seattle hotel where the Beatles once played. The ideas are endlessly creative yet challenging--this is perfect for fusion jazz fans who love to solve mysteries of how and when and why.

These original compositions are beautifully recorded, which makes it easy to assemble and organize these fascinating ideas. The rhythm section is warm and welcoming, especially Galland's inventive percussion which changes moods every minute or so. Schwarz-Bart, for lack of a better term, is the leader--his passionate sax casts a beacon on the unknown whenever the band commits to an enthralling groove and plays the tune straight. He occasionally stands back and lets Braff's rolling piano provide the momentum, but for most of the way the horn is doing the talking such as in the manic but evocative "Discomania" which slides easily through the '70s. Braff lets it rip on the Rhodes in a very impressive performance, yet the sax provides the exclamation points. This is very much the work of four brave musicians, however, guardians of a horizon that is approaching quickly.

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