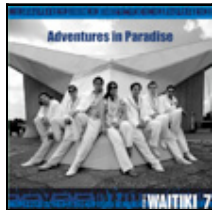


AUDIOPHILE AUDITION

The Waitiki 7 - Adventures in Paradise - Pass Out

Those who imagine the music made famous by Martin Denny and others has grown fallow or inert will think differently after sitting back and listening.



The Waitiki 7 - Adventures in Paradise - Pass Out POR 7001, 62:09 ****:

(Randy Wong - musical director, bass; Tim Mayer - alto flute, soprano sax, co-arranger; Abe Lagrimas, Jr. - drums, percussion, vibraphone, ukulele; Helen Liu - ocean drum, violin; Lopaka Colon - percussion, bird and animal calls, congas; Jim Benoit - xylophone, vibraphone; Zaccai Curtis - piano; Mike Dease - trombone, the octopus; Greg Paré - narrator (track 11))

The Waitiki 7, as the name implies, is an ensemble that was formed to breathe new life into the fifty-year-old exotica genre. Those who imagine the music made famous by Martin Denny and others has grown fallow or inert will think differently after sitting back - with a Mai Tai in hand of course - and listening to The Waitiki 7's hour-long debut, *Adventures in Paradise*.

There is more to The Waitiki 7 than bird calls and some kitsch. These are earnest musicians who, for various reasons, gravitated toward South Pacific-styled sounds and decided to re-conceive and push forward the form while retaining the exotica backbone. Co-founder Randy Wong grew up in Hawaii immersed in the exotica realm but is a determined musician as well: he is pursuing a musicology degree in New England, performs as a classical bassist, and helps edit a music education publication. Pianist Zaccai Curtis has won jazz composition awards and has supported Christian Scott, Donald Harrison, and Sean Jones. Reeds player Tim Mayer has had stints with Latin artists such as Danilo Perez. Violinist Helen Liu holds a doctorate in musical arts and has served as an assistant concertmaster. On the exotica side, percussionist and bird caller Lopaka Colon has genuine exotica credentials: he is the son of Augie Colon, who supplied percussion and bird calls for Denny. These are more than mere neo-lounge musos trying to catch a bit of tiki nostalgia.

The group members' jazz, classical and other backgrounds provide *Adventures in Paradise* a wellspring to draw from. That is illustrated by the diverse arrangements and music, from covers by Les Baxter, Denny, and Lionel Newman; to likeminded jazz renditions from Lee Morgan and Duke Ellington; and similarly inclined originals. The record opens in strict exotica territory with Baxter's "Coronation." Colon commences with bird calls and bongos, Jim Benoit then enters on vibes, and soon after Mayer brings in a high register with his soaring flute. Meanwhile, drummer Abe Lagrimas, Jr., and bassist Wong layer a light, Latin-tinged swinging rhythm. Mayer and Benoit do the honors as soloists. Benoit's warm tone, it should be noted, emanates from a vintage and rare Vibraharp Model 145, the first mallet instrument with a damper pedal and electric motor, and the textures Benoit coaxes from the hand-crafted instrument are wonderful. Anyone who knows exotica understands the vibraphone is the heart of any undertaking: it contributes harmonics and supplements the orchestral sonorities, and adds lyrical qualities to solo stretches, or textural terrain when it accompanies other musicians.

Denny later reappears when The Waitiki 7 slides through a phantomed interpretation of the noir-ish "Left Arm of Buddha" and a conventional treatment of "Manila." The charcoaled "Left Arm of Buddha" has a mysterious characteristic brought out by unsettling percussion and Liu's violin. On "Manila" Curtis takes center stage with a poignant piano introduction and the rest of

the band goes off into a creamy exotica domain highlighted by Colon's bird and animal calls, Curtis' jazzy keyboards and Lagrimas' gilded percussion. The album-closing title track is another tune tiki fans might recognize since it is Lionel Newman's theme to a television program that aired in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The tune's late-night tempo and tender mix of vibes, piano, light percussion and Liu's ocean drum create a laid-back cushion.

Even more intriguing are the renderings of jazz classics that exhibit The Waitiki 7's improvisational talents. The assemblage heightens the Latin rhythmic core and tapers the tempo on Lee Morgan's "Totem Pole" but otherwise preserves the memorable main theme. In place of Morgan's trumpet and Joe Henderson's tenor sax, Tim Mayer (on soprano sax) and guest Mike Dease (on trombone) play in unison and also deliver separate solos, while Benoit's vibes and Curtis' piano also trade fours. While it is impossible to match Morgan's version, The Waitiki 7 prove jazz and exotica have much in common. For those who may want to do a comparison and contrast, the original can be found on Morgan's Sidewinder release. Morgan stated that "Totem Pole" was inspired by a Duke Ellington number as performed by Dizzy Gillespie, and so its only appropriate the second jazz reading is Ellington's celebrated "Mood Indigo." Dease is once again a featured player while the ensemble reworks Ellington's music a good distance from the source material whilst sustaining a sophisticated sense.

One definite edge to The Waitiki 7 that bodes admirably for future endeavors is the band's songwriting. Wong's Hawaiian excursion, "Her Majesty's Pearl," is augmented with a piano/vibes duet and has an easygoing pace similar to ice slowly melting in a tropical libation. Curtis' exotica-influenced "Craving" has a mellow jazzy undertone accented by Colon's congas and Mayer's salutary and swirling sax. Mayer escalates the jazz ratio with his loping "Ouanaiao," based on the Angolan semba and the Caribbean zouk rhythm. The brightly-hued jaunt emphasizes stimulating melodic lines and chordal changes from Wong, Benoit, and Mayer. In a whimsical direction is the short "Ned's Redemption," a xylophone solo effort that was prompted by Clifford Brown and ragtime. The most modern jazz-related piece is Wong's "Octopus Menagerie," an idiosyncratic and unhindered eight-armed narrative closer in mode and configuration to Frank Zappa than Arthur Lyman.

The CD package also includes liner notes that encompass the group's history and development, commentary on the musicians and the music, as well as recipes for thirst-quenching drinks and a mouth-watering barbecue beef dish.

Adventures in Paradise is modeled upon the tranquil and relaxing exotica blueprint but The Waitiki 7 has built a different kind of tiki structure, assisted in measure by the members' disparate training, experience and education. A realization of experimentation and advancement within a precisely coded genre gives *Adventures in Paradise* a context that places it in a unique position: looking backward while moving forward.

TrackList:

1. Coronation
2. Totem Pole
3. Manila

4. Craving
5. Left Arm of Buddha
6. Her Majesty's Pearl
7. Ouanaiao
8. L'ours Chinois
9. Ned's Redemption

10. Sacha-Cha
11. Octopus Menagerie
12. Mood Indigo
13. Adventures in Paradise

-- Doug Simpson

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