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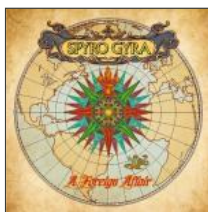
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- Home
- Music Reviews
- Music Features
- Film Reviews
- Film & TV Features
- Believe The Hype
- Staff



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Spyro Gyra A Foreign Affair

(Amherst Records)

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Spyro Gyra, with the release of **A Foreign Affair**, haven't done too much to dispel the notion that startling, inventive jazz is largely a thing of the past. In its own peculiar way, great jazz can elevate music to new, unthought heights. The inventiveness rightly associated with the historied genre accounts for major developments in all areas of pop music, and even the fusion jazz Spyro Gyra espoused in their early years has played its own part in that development.

The confrontational styles of fusion and rock music meshed particularly well, and I always have time in my listening for a little something from the '70s — some Weather Report or Return to Forever can really hit the spot. But the subsumption and branching of fusion into smooth jazz did little of value for the modern music landscape, and the continued music landscape, and the continued innovation experienced in the early era of fusion subsided under the "smooth" label. Genre in-fighting aside, the problem with **A Foreign Affair** isn't one of a wide-spread sound. You see, it's just, well, a bit boring. Essentially every track here sounds as if it probably belonged somewhere else, perhaps as a rejected cut from a moderately successful album, or perhaps as a one-off attempt at commercial viability by a respected artist. There's nothing particularly adventuresome about any one piece, and there's nothing that's likely to perk ears up in any meaningful way.

It might feel less distasteful or artificial if it wasn't all rather proficiently done. You see, there are few real problems to pinpoint technically, and the performances are skillful, and sometimes, it's hard not to tap one's foot to the music. Does that add to the album? Well, not particularly. If you're looking for proficient modern jazz that is never particularly daring, it's not exactly hard to find. If you want some interesting instruments occasionally thrown into the mix for more of a "world" feel, why, that's quite easy to find, too.

I suppose it's more a systemic problem than one you can really blame on Spyro Gyra. This stuff, while not selling in bucket loads, has a steady audience who is quite willing to pay attention to that band that released a few exciting albums in the 1980s, and they're often likely to have a bit of disposable income to throw into the coffers of a band that's still out there doing this after all these years.

Still, it's not like Spyro Gyra are out there disgracing the memory of jazz — it's just that **A Foreign Affair** perhaps suffers a bit from the weight of historic jazz as a marker. Of course, there are some moments that are rather a bit cheesy, what with the "Hotel California" structure and style on *Caribe*, the steel pan-inflected *Sweet Ole Thang*, and other choice moments — like those moments when there are any vocals at all. But when you've well and truly passed your 30th album mark, perhaps that's sort of to be expected.

20 September, 2011 - 14:17 — [Matt Montgomery](#)

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