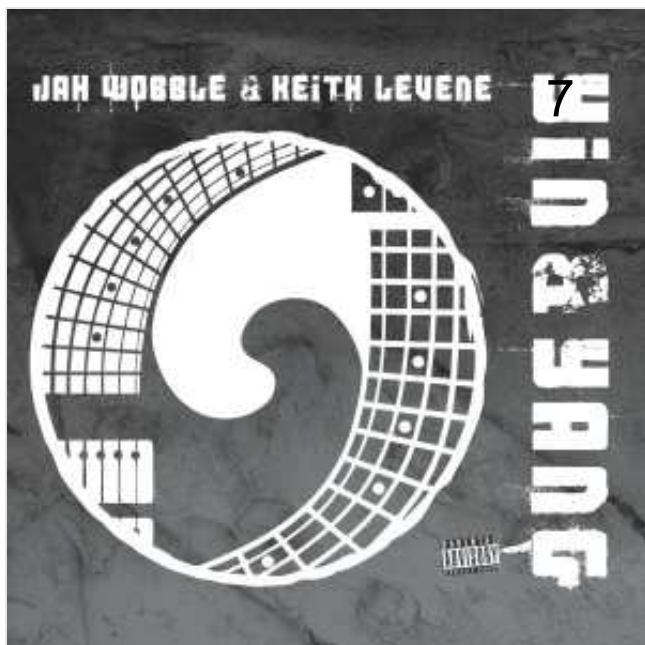


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# Jah Wobble & Keith Levene 'Yin & Yang'



**CRITICAL MASS**

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Received wisdom suggests post-punk was all about anarchy kids discovering synthesizers and gloom, but the real breakthrough involved punk's first line of defense admitting that their record collections were actually dominated by dub and prog, the latter defined loosely enough to include krautrock and electric Miles Davis. Luckily, punks drew the right conclusions from both: Namely, that rhythm contextualizes dissonance into something approaching pleasure. And no outfit exemplified such tendencies better than John Lydon's post-Sex Pistols project, Public Image Ltd., thanks less to the ostensible leader's mannerisms than his world-class rhythm section, particularly Keith Levene (guitar) and Jah Wobble (bass), who were Yes and Robbie Shakespeare fans intent on synthesizing their interests into a groove band that could contort pop/rock's dialectic. And contort it they did.

In the three decades since PiL's epochal *Metal Box*, Levene and Wobble have shared neither stage nor studio, the guitarist cherry-picking low-profile projects as the bassist turned ever more prolific (a conservative estimate of solo releases hovers around 30, and his collaborations would likely triple that number, with *Radioaxiom: A Dub Transmission*, 2001's meeting with fellow bassist Bill Laswell, standing out). But a series of *Metal Box* revisitation concerts earlier this year led to the reconstituted duo's four-song EP, now expanded into a full-length, and like the old hippies they are, Wobble

and Levene draw philosophically as much from the British psych of Hawkwind and The Deviants' *Ptooff!* as they do sonically from King Tubby and their beloved Can.

Befitting the tossed-off vibe of two '70s kids jamming with the past, they even cover the goddamn Beatles, on an anthemic 7/4-time deconstruction of George Harrison's "Within You Without You" that allows Levene to joust noisily with surging tablas against oceanic drone. And just like the more self-indulgent strains of free improv jazz (stylistically echoed in the cover art), Wobble sees the spoken word as integral to his instrumental whole, which explains the presence, if not the merits, of the grubby poetry on "Jags & Staffs" or the forced rhymes throughout "Mississippi," a brief travelogue rivaling Kafka in its American geographical confusion (although a Stepney bloke can be forgiven for misjudging the distance between Mississippi and Cincinnati).

Still, former associates of John Lydon shouldn't bother much with vocals on a project like this, not when both musicians seem at the top of their respective avant-groove games. Levene remains the guitar terrorist that 1978's "Theme" unleashed upon the world: He screams, crunches, plinks, chimes, drones, hums, and slides, while Wobble's steady hand guides each successful number with his inimitable low-end walk. "Strut" and "Back on the Block" muscle around in vaguely murky riddims, jazz-funk standout "Fluid" benefits from the presence of trumpeter Sean Corby and Jack DeJohnette-channeling drummer Marc Layton-Bennett, and the reggae dance-punk of "Understand" is followed immediately by an appropriately wiggled-out dub version, the latter preferable to the original inasmuch as it buries the vocals of Nathan "Johnny Rotter" Maverick beneath layers of echo.

Therein lies a lesson. Should these two musicians choose to continue their professional reengagement (and here's hoping they do), jettisoning the vocalists and second-rate John Cooper Clarke monologues in favor of the noisy anti-pop skank they helped invent might yet yield wondrous results. Less talk, more skronk.