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Revolutionary Snake Ensemble

Forked Tongue

(Cuneiform)
US release date: 13 May 2008
UK release date: 19 May 2008

by **Brendon Griffin**

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There aren't many jazz ensembles whose interpretive reach extends to Ornette Coleman and Billy Idol; then again, there just aren't many jazz ensembles whose reach extends to Billy Idol, period. Warpainted like a motley cross between Arthur Brown, Sun Ra, and the Magic Band, New Orleans's Revolutionary Snake Ensemble are one such aggregate. They aren't all that revolutionary, truth be told, at least not in the sense that Coleman was revolutionary, but they can play, they know their music, and they don't take themselves too seriously. And as missionaries for the super-kinetic shuffle and second line fever of New Orleans, they take the gospel to places it probably never wanted to go; it kicks and drags its heels but they good humouredly escort it along anyway, snares thrumming and horns raised to the heavens.



AMAZON

If the Meters played funk as a natural extension of New Orleans, Field and company—hailing from Boston, but surely hailing from the Crescent City in another life—do New Orleans as a natural extension of funk and jazz, bringing it back down South with its cool climate edge intact. As a man with a sterling list of avant-garde and screen compositional credits behind him, and having originally founded the band around Boston's improv scene, Field is obviously *au fait* with the benefits of tearing up the script, or simply not having one. So it was that his band spontaneously mutated into a roving, Mardi-Gras medusa of an ensemble, operating a revolving door policy for assorted alumni of the Boston scene and taking his concept of a post-modern marching band to the streets.

Once hailed as one of the best unsigned acts in the U.S., they're now onto their second album, and apart from the surprisingly easy going accommodation of improv and organisation, what's striking is this record's duality, echoing the funeral-dirge/second line hedonism of an original New Orleans parade, but turning it on its head. For all their fun loving, tribal-ecstatic chic and neat line in cover versions, these serpentine guerillas are at their most lacerating when they're re-imagining baptismal celebration as minor key lament: if the wailing vigil of "Down By the Riverside" doesn't rake your spine, chances are you don't have one. Not only is this version far enough removed in time from the Civil Rights era to grapple with a contemporary definition of what it means to be anti-war, but it also functions as a de facto elegy for a post-Katrina city. It's quite possibly the most convincing treatment of New Orleans by a non-native since Hugh Masakela's "Goin' Back to New Orleans", and as the only track with vocals—credited to Gabrielle Agachiko, a lady with a larynx to, yes, die and have your own funeral for—maybe its weight will convince Field to employ a singer full-time.

There are as many other trad re-inventions as you'd expect (opener "Just a Closer Walk", "Give Me Jesus", and a burbling "Little Liza Jane" among them), but—mesh of improvisatory curlicues aside—they don't deviate too much from their historical intent. Not so the legacy of William Broad. For all its novelty value, the exercise of covering "White Wedding"—forked tongue planted firmly in cheek, and bequeathing '80s rock the kind of aggro-lounge treatment it escaped first time round—actually has an extended ripple effect on Field's writing: with its long, low brass sustain and ruthless syncopation, "Minor Vee" sounds like a mutant reprise. And if he's not re-arranging some holy chestnut, he's dreaming up freaky, wind-jamming floor monsters like "The Large S"; think an abstract, instrumental edit of Dr John's "Big Chief", cast at the most awkwardly appealing angles yet cranked out in perfect symmetry, popping and hissing like a disembodied chunk of scrap mechanics from a Monty Python animation.

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And if closer "Under the Skin" comes on like a Coleman loft date transplanted to New Orleans, Coleman's own "Chippie" breaks in like a samba gone to the wrong carnival on the wrong continent, but sounding like it's having a ball anyway. Even "Que Sera Sera" gives itself up to the Delta and the kind of percussive itch its composers just couldn't have scratched. The revolution likely never will be televised, but it might just go better with a blast of thinking man's marching music.

Multiple songs MySpace

RATING: 7

— 18 August 2008

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